

Julian of Norwich

AND THE AWAKENING OF THE SOUL IN THE 21ST CENTURY



Four talks given by
Fr Gregory Fruehwirth OJN
during Lent 2009

Awakening to Real Presence

Awakening to Authentic Compassion

Awakening Within our Bodies

Authentic Community and
Committed Life Purpose

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AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY
AND COMMITTED LIFE PURPOSE

The following texts were presented by Fr. Gregory Fruehwirth OJN over four consecutive Tuesdays at Granary Court, Bishop's House, Norwich, during Lent 2009. The programme was hosted by the *Friends of Julian of Norwich* at the invitation of the Bishop of Norwich, in association with the *Norwich Christian Meditation Centre* and the *Norwich Contemplative Forum*.

Further copies of this booklet, as well as audio recordings of the talks and a wide range of other Julian-related publications are available from the Julian Centre or by mail order via the website.

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FOREWORD

During the months of February and March 2009, Fr. Gregory was ‘on sabbatical’ from the monastic community of the Order of Julian of Norwich and staying as a guest at All Hallows House, adjacent to the Julian Centre. Each day during this period, he was able to spend time in prayer and meditation in Julian’s cell.

During March, on successive Tuesday evenings, Fr. Gregory conducted four ninety-minute sessions at Granary Court, Bishop’s House, at the invitation of the Bishop of Norwich, on the overarching theme of *Julian of Norwich and the Awakening of the Soul in the 21st Century*. Each session included an address and these addresses form the content of this booklet, which the Friends of Julian of Norwich have much joy in offering now to a wider public.

Each evening, over one hundred participants had the privilege of sharing with Fr Gregory the fruits of his own spiritual journey in the company of Mother Julian. The impact of these evenings on those present was immense and touched the minds and hearts of Christians of all denominations as well as members of the Buddhist community and others committed to the practice of contemplation in our secular society.

It is my hope that this publication will prove to be a similar inspiration to those who read it and, for those who were present, a powerful reminder of the transformational moments they experienced in Fr. Gregory’s presence.

*Professor Brian Thorne
Chair, Friends of Julian of Norwich
Easter tide, 2009*

AWAKENING TO REAL PRESENCE

Introduction

It is an honour and a joy to be here with you. I am grateful to Bishop Graham and his staff for offering us the use of this beautiful space, and indeed for their eagerness to make this series of evenings happen. I am also grateful to Brian Thorne and the Friends of Julian and Liz Day for all the work they have done to publicize these evenings and to organize registrations. Even if we are a bit close in this room, I am glad that we have a full house.

Just being in Norwich is, for me, an experience of stepping onto holy ground. Walking down narrow Julian's Alley towards the church is for me, paradoxically, like walking into a wide-open, almost limitless space where there is only one reality: God's joyful desire for me, a prospect almost frightening in its clarity. It is a great honour to be asked to speak so close to the Cathedral and Blessed Julian's Shrine and especially to the flat at 80A King Street where Fr. Robert Llewelyn used to live, feeding everyone who came to his door with pound cake and inviting us always into silence and prayer. Thank you for sharing this time with me.

The theme we have chosen for all four of our evenings is Julian of Norwich and the Awakening of the Soul in the 21st Century. And our souls are in fact awakening, forced to do so by a great deal of interior and exterior suffering and by a secret, inward prompting of grace. We catch glimpses every now and then of a whole new way of being alive, a way in which we are free from the terrible burden of ourselves and the drama we think of as life, a way of lucidity, obviousness and peace. It is also a way of self-offering, which is to say love — love no longer as a moral burden, but as a joyful release of ourselves for the good of others.

During the course of the next four evenings we are going to reflect on this awakening, and each evening will have a similar structure. First, I will begin

with a short passage from Julian that has been especially challenging to me, that has pushed me to a point of insight and new awareness. I will offer some reflections on what this passage means for me. Following this, we will have time for what I am calling a ‘practicum’. Originally I felt that this might be some kind of small group discussion, but as the presentations evolved, I have realized that the activity that would lead most directly into the heart of the soul’s awakening would in fact be the simplest of all exercises — mindful breathing — which I will invite you to enjoy with me (yes, enjoy!) for twenty minutes each night. Finally, we will have time for discussion, and I will conclude each evening with a brief reflection that shows the connection between the thoughts in my original presentation with the mystery of the Christian Faith.

Before we begin, I need to sound just one warning very clearly. In the course of my formal reflections, I am going to be offering precious little to actually *think* about, very few ideas or thoughts or new paradigms. I am certainly not going to be offering traditional lectures on Julian. I feel that the purpose I have in mind for these talks would be defeated if all that you and I came away with was a collection of new ideas, or new thoughts about Julian’s Revelations of Divine Love. Rather, my aim in these talks is something a little more elusive and a little riskier: *to elicit and encourage the awakening of the soul itself*, so that each of us may, at least for a moment, step out from the narrow demands of the old self and into the felt reality of a new way of being alive.

As we will see, a good part of this awakening involves a relinquishment of the primacy of our analytic self (which is always trying to figure things out and is always eager to acquire more clever ideas and judgments). To put this in other words, I am interested not in *thinking new things*, but in that place of openness, awareness, and light of presence and compassion and self-less action that is on the other side of thought. Julian of Norwich was herself led

into this awareness and her Revelations are filled with signs or pointers to its reality. Our aim is thus not to analyze Julian, or to get new ideas from her, but to follow the pointers she leaves for us to experience for ourselves what she was talking about.

About Julian of Norwich

For those of you who are not familiar with Julian of Norwich, I should share a little about her before bringing forward the first passage to reflect on. This will be quite brief. Julian lived from around 1343 to around 1415. When she was around thirty years old, she suffered a near-death illness, in the midst of which she received a series of sixteen spiritual visions and mystical experiences which opened her heart and mind to the mystery of God's love and God's all-pervading joy in us. Sometime after this, she became an anchorite - a vowed religious living, not in community, but alone, in a small one or two room anchorhold attached to a parish church. In Julian's case, the parish was St. Julian's Church, from which she took her name, located in an alley off King Street. After over twenty years of reflection on her experience, Julian re-wrote an earlier autobiographical account of her mystical experience and created what we now know as *The Revelations of Divine Love*, a wonderful combination of mystical autobiography and theological reflection. We actually know very little about Julian herself, which is just as she would have it.

Revelation Two: Experiencing God Continuously

Very near the start of the Revelations, in the second of sixteen showings — each showing being a discrete set of experiences of God — Julian has a dark and obscure vision of the suffering of Christ as he dies on the Cross. She naturally wants to see him more clearly, but is not given the grace to do so, and this leads her into an extended reflection on our seeking and finding of

God, as well as on how God's beauty is hidden within Jesus' suffering and disfigurement. As she says,

I saw with bodily sight on the face of the crucifix which hung before me ... a part of His Passion: contempt, and spitting and defiling and smiting and many distressing pains—more than I can count, and frequent changing of colour... This I saw physically, sorrowfully and obscurely, and I desired more physical light in order to have seen more clearly. But I was answered in my reason: "If God wishes to show thee more, He shall be thy light..." For I saw Him and still sought Him, for we are now so blind and so unwise that we never seek God until he of His goodness shows Himself to us; and when we see anything of Him by grace, then are we moved by the same grace to try with great desire to see Him more perfectly.... [Lesson of Love. Ch.10.]

Many of us are perhaps familiar with the experience of seeing a little of God or being granted an inward knowledge of Christ or the Dharma, and wanting to be more intimate with this and to know it more deeply. It is a vision that claims us deeply, and that spurs us on to deeper commitment and inflames our desire. I want, however, to focus on a single passage that occurs a little later in this same showing. Contrary to our human experience of sometimes experiencing God, and sometimes not, Julian offers us a higher truth. She says that God

... wills that we believe that we experience Him constantly (although we imagine that it is but little) and by this belief He causes us evermore to gain grace, because He wishes to be seen and He wishes to be sought, He wishes to be awaited and He wishes to be trusted. [Lesson of Love. Ch.10.]

‘God wills that we believe that we experience Him constantly (although we imagine that it is but little) and by this belief He causes us evermore to gain grace.’ I would like us to sit with this truth and see what it reveals to us. It is amazing to me that I diligently and prayerfully read Julian’s Revelations for sixteen years before this passage ever jumped out at me. It contains the whole mystery and reality of the soul’s awakening. For the soul to awaken is for the soul to become aware that in some way it is, in fact, experiencing God constantly; to know that *experience itself* is always, already, an experience of God. This is the life of God brilliantly alive in us.

Our Reality Shaped by Assumptions

If there is one thing we can be grateful to postmodernity and pluralism in society for, it is the awareness of how deeply our assumptions shape, and limit, what kind of reality we experience. All of us know this in a very simple way in our own lives. One day, we wake up in a grumpy mood and everything in life seems dark and wrong and painful. But the next day we wake up in a good mood and even the clouds and rain are beautiful and a piece of garbage blowing down the street takes on a kind of evocative poignancy. The assumptions we bring to an experience very nearly define the experience we have; all the more so because we normally move through our daily experience in a self-reinforcing feedback loop: gloomy emotional assumptions make for gloomy experiences and draw out the gloominess in others. This makes for even more gloominess in ourselves and so forth. But this cycle works just the same with joy, or optimism, or peacefulness.

Taking on Board Experiencing God as an Assumption

If we take this postmodern awareness to our short passage from Julian, we will be able to see something very clearly. In the second showing, Julian does not simply say to us, ‘We experience God constantly,’ which would be a

straightforward philosophical assertion about human cognition. Rather, she says, that ‘God wills that we believe that we experience God constantly.’ In other words, she says that God wants us to take on board, as an assumption to frame our everyday experience, the *belief* that we experience God constantly. Julian is thus not challenging us with a statement objectively to agree or disagree with, an idea to hold at arm’s length and argue about. She is not presenting us with a bit of philosophy to debate. Rather, in a more pastoral way, she is saying that it would be helpful to us, and a means of grace, if we were simply to take on board, prior to all thought and as a background to all experience, the belief that *we are already experiencing God constantly*. The idea is that we can only experience reality truly if we take this as our lens through which to experience things. To put this in modern terms: it is unskilful, spiritually, to go about believing that we experience God now and then, in some godly moments but not in others. Julian would say that it is unskilful and unhelpful to believe that our experience of God is found only in what we think of as good or godly moments. Rather, the skilful belief, helpful for our desire to grow in grace (which is to say, to grow in God’s life in us) is to engage reality from within the assumption that we are already experiencing God constantly. Julian is bidding us to roll out of bed in the morning and take our first steps of awareness from within this assumption, that Now, this moment as every moment, is an experience of God.

Our Natural Resistance to This

If we step back for a moment, and pause on our own experience, I think we will see that we do not live or experience reality from within this assumption. In fact, insofar as our souls are still asleep, or perhaps just drowsy, we will not want to engage reality in this way. It might seem profoundly unsafe for us to do so. Because of all kinds of inner wounding which all of us have suffered, we have a felt need to differentiate between our experiences, clinging to some

and calling them good, and hating others. We are attached to the old assumption that some experiences are of God, others are not, and being on the spiritual way means trying to get to a place where I can have as many godly experiences as possible. In general, we like this idea of ourselves as having a kind of personal drama or narrative in which we are painstakingly making our way to the experience of God. We also like being able to condemn some experiences, wiping them clean off the slate of our consciousness, getting rid of them, hating them.

What I am proposing to you tonight is that this cluster of phenomena — of needing to feel ourselves in control by condemning some experiences and valuing others, and of needing to feel we are making progress towards better or more godly experiences — are really both functions of the false self and a sign of the unawakened soul. It is the ego in charge of our lives. And even the knee-jerk reaction to argue with Julian (or really with God's own pastoral advice to us through Julian) about why we aren't experiencing God constantly is really, in the end, largely a tactic of the false self to keep its view of the world and itself in place. It is self-protective.

Conversely, for the soul to awaken, is for us to step out of the narrative drama we make for ourselves, even for our spiritual life, and for us to become aware that this moment, like every moment, has an eternal depth to it, and in that eternal depth, there is a singing, and in that singing there is joyfulness, and light. And once we experience this in one moment, we are aware that it can only be true of every moment; that there is no moment, no matter how apparently ghastly, that does not have this eternal depth of song and light at its core. This leads to something like the spirituality of Jean Pierre de Caussade, and his Sacrament of the Present Moment. It leads us to recognize that our resistance to this moment, our refusal to accept the present moment as an experience already full of God, is actually deadly and destructive to the soul, separating it from grace.

Autobiographical Note

What got me on the spiritual path was that I had, for reasons good and bad, experiences where some kind of eternal depth was opened up within the most mundane or apparently awful moments, and this made it impossible for me to go back completely to the old way of life invested in the self's drama and the search for ever-greater self-aggrandizement and security. I think this is true for us all. Each of us have had moments, sometimes quite elusive or puzzling, when our souls have been momentarily awakened and we see for ourselves this eternal light, and this makes it impossible for us to invest ourselves totally in the world's way of meaning and happiness. Often such experiences lead, as they did in my case, to a kind of profound discontent with our society's whole way of structuring reality and offering happiness. This led, for me, to a monastic vocation in a rather desperate, half-conscious attempt to be true to what I know as deepest reality within myself.

Of course, such experiences do not last, and it is impossible to try to claw our way back to them, as if we could force our way into the Kingdom of God by sheer will power. Every spiritual tradition recognizes this. The best that we can do is to so structure our lives and to take up certain spiritual practices that will allow the soul to awaken and fully emerge into its own reality, not in momentary bursts of destabilizing insight, like the ones I just mentioned, but in a holistic, stable, emergent form that is the maintained truth of one's being. A lightning flash is a lightning flash, but our job after that is to prepare ourselves and order our lives so that the dawn can happen in us.

Conclusion: Practical Direction

So what are we to do? It is as if, lost in our sleepy dreams, we can recall, briefly, that we once were awakened. Julian's advice, or God's advice through Julian in the second showing, is that we make some effort to take on board

the assumption that we are experiencing God constantly.

In my monastery we do this in two different ways, one positive and one negative. The positive way is to remind ourselves with readings and classes about this basic truth of the soul — that we are, all of us, already living in God and each experience is already an experience of God. Reminding ourselves of this is, however, just the easy part. The negative practice is to be aware in ourselves of the level of resistance we are feeling to this present moment, whether it be a background hum of discontent or outright anger, to remember that such negativity and opposition is ultimately unhelpful, and to breathe deeply and offer such resistance to God.

The same two ways — positive and negative — will hold for anyone trying to live in this reality. We all need a daily spiritual practice like meditation and a community of support around us to remind ourselves that this is, in fact, the truth of our being. And we can read such authors as Jean Pierre de Caussade with his *Sacrament of the Present Moment* and Thich Nhat Hanh with his wonderful training in mindfulness as the full revelation of the Buddha, to keep the reality of the present moment clear and crisp and clean within us.

When we try to frame our daily life by this assumption, what we actually experience are all the voices in ourselves that are opposed to this: voices of complaint, of murmuring, of depression, of condemnation. And this really is the whole point of spiritual disciplines, simply to make us aware, by the light shed from spiritual truths, of the dark and negative forces in ourselves. We don't have to do anything with these — although it may be helpful to talk about them with a spiritual mentor. It is enough simply to be aware of them.

In my experience, what happens with our spiritual practice is that we become really awake, and then fall back asleep into the world of self-drama and argument and condemning, and then we wake up a little more, and this encourages us to be more diligent in our spiritual practice. But then we fall

asleep again, and awake again, and so it goes, but there can be an overall emergence of our souls, with much sliding back over time (even to know you are backsliding is a sign you are becoming aware). The end of this process is to dwell in the only truth there is — *that this moment and every moment is an experience of God*. Because this is already the truth of who we are: it is not a discrete experience set over against other, ungodly types of experience, but it is, rather, an experiencing of awakening and emerging into the reality that is always, already here.

Extemporaneous Remarks

At the end of the first session, Fr Gregory offered some further reflections on the theme based on his own Christian faith and experience, and these closing remarks have been transcribed from the audio recordings and appended to the text.

I want to briefly tie in what I've said here to my experience of the Christian faith. When I went to the monastery my contemplative intuition was already very well developed while my connection with the actual content of the Christian faith was less solid or defined. My time in the community has been an eighteen-year journey of, on the one hand, trying to be responsive and authentic with my contemplative intuition, while at the same time growing more deeply into the content of the Christian Faith. As part of this process, I've been through many different traditions and methods of doing contemplative prayer. In my community we sit in silence, an exercise in awareness and presence, for at least an hour a day, and there are times when we do it for two or three hours a day. When I'm stressed or distracted I make time just for mindful breathing as well.

A few years ago what really cracked open my world in a big way was having a friend come over to show me Zazen (the meditation practice from the Soto Zen tradition of Buddhism). Through this I found all my years of working with Christian Meditation (and so on) came into razor sharp clarity.

Before I knew it, I was looking at the wall in my cell for a couple of hours a day on my little cushion. I found immense clarity, and the truth of myself, in that practice - beyond anything I can really talk about.

The best way I can describe it is to compare it to reading a book such as *Lord of the Rings* and becoming so immersed in it that I become Frodo for a little while, and I'm carrying the ring with Frodo and worrying about the Orcs. And then I snap out of it and realize, 'no, I'm actually Gregory, and I have to go and do some things now', and I get back to my usual self. The analogous thing became very real for me in my experience of Zazen, except it was my *Gregory* self that became the fiction or analogue of Frodo. My Gregory self, with my plans and desires and my worries and fears, was something I could set aside. Just as I set aside Frodo to become Gregory, I could set aside Gregory to sit and look at the wall (in Soto Zen you simply look at the wall for a while). It was immensely clarifying – a huge gift to me.

In the past year, I have, however, connected with a spiritual director who is very Ignatian and she had me meditating with the gospels and entering into relationship directly with the person of Christ. And my whole life began to be drawn into a sense of responsive intimacy with this One, this person - it was a kind of renaissance or a rebirthing of my Christian faith. I went through a long tortuous discernment about whether I should stop doing Zazen and eventually I did turn my cushion to face the icon again and to meditate with scripture. It felt like I was abandoning my soul but at the same time I felt that I had to do it, because I was being drawn to do it – love was drawing me in, in a kind of affective, urgent way. I felt I was saying goodbye to all I loved, *for love*. Somehow the process of turning away from the icon in the first place had been essential to my ability to come back to it, and there happened to be someone there in my life at the right time to open this path up for me.

The beautiful gift that came out of this was that as I began to place myself in a position of affective dependency on the person of Christ. I found that he

could, as it were, poetically open his heart, and in that heart was the whole mystery of the Godhead, that same joyful light of the absolute blank wall that I had received in Zazen. Then I began to see that the old Christian idea (and I love this bit) of there being two natures and one person in Christ, is really a way of saying that, in the heart of Christ — at the centre of his personhood — human consciousness, intelligence, love and self-awareness pass completely into union with divine, uncreated, conscious awareness and self-presence, and that Christ wishes to share that with me, so that his heart, the centre of his personhood, becomes a place where my human self-awareness and knowing and loving could let themselves go into the divine, into God's loving and knowing self-presence. I began to understand that little cragged bit of Chalcedonian Christology as profoundly significant and descriptive of my own experience.

What I've been talking about tonight — stepping into the present and allowing the soul to unfold — is, for me as a Christian, the experience of the heart of Christ where the human and the divine are completely united yet, as they say, *not confused*. That's not to say that Buddhism is not a profound way and the way for many into the same thing. I just know this is the way I have been asked to walk.

AWAKENING TO AUTHENTIC COMPASSION

Introduction

Welcome to our second evening of reflections on Blessed Julian of Norwich and the Awakening of the Soul in the Twenty First Century. For those of you who were not here last week, my name is Fr. Gregory Fruehwirth; I am a brother in a Religious Order, The Order of Julian of Norwich, located in the United States. It was a joy to be with you last week, and I expect that this evening will be similarly challenging and enriching for all of us. Those of you who were here last week will notice a continuation and development of our conversation; but those of you who are here for the first time do not need to worry about having to catch up. Each evening has its own integrity and stands well enough on its own.

Perhaps I should begin with a reminder of the aim of these evenings of spiritual reflections and experiences. In slightly different words, I said last week that my purpose in talking with you is adamantly not to give you something new to think about! Instead, I intend to create a setting where we can leave the anxious, fretful, analytic self behind and step out experientially and feel a new way of engaging reality, a new, *felt* way of being alive. This is the awakening of the soul into the present moment, an unfolding of our anxious and bitter and demanding selves into a felt embodiment of Being — and the joy of being — in which tremendous wholeness and strength and compassion is found.

I'm not going to be lecturing in a traditional way about Julian of Norwich, but using brief, intense moments from her text as windows into a different sort of conscious awareness, and I will be inviting you to experience this for yourself. I want us to taste this, and having tasted it, to make an experiment with our lives, seeing for ourselves what it would be like to live in

this new way. My talks are not about the theology of the Revelations as such, but the awakening of our spirit, using the mystical experiences that Julian shared with us to show us what this looks like and to challenge us to leave our old selves behind.

The plan for this evening will be similar to last week's. I will begin by offering an address for thirty minutes or so, after which we will engage in a practicum that will be a kind of experiment, spiritually, of what I have been talking about. Like last week, we will have the chance to enjoy mindful breathing together, with a slight addition to fit our theme for tonight. I will follow this with a very brief reflection, connecting what I have said back to a central element of the Christian Faith, and we will end the evening with discussion.

I want to share my deep thanks for those following the Buddhist path for speaking and sharing with us, and just for coming. Although I am deeply committed to the person of Jesus and the mysteries of the faith, such as Incarnation and Resurrection and the Sacramental Presence of Jesus, I have always felt that those walking the Buddhist way carry for me some spark of my essential self (or better, the essential emptiness of my form and the form of my emptiness) and I am deeply grateful for your tradition and your faithfulness to that tradition. Just by walking the Buddhist path, you are like mothers and fathers to what is most true in me, even though the centre of my life is love for Jesus.

In my last address, I reflected on Julian's saying that 'God wants us to believe that we are experiencing God constantly.' We approached this not as a theological or anthropological statement to debate, but as an assumption to take on board and experience life through. What does life look like if we engage it from this assumption that we are already experiencing God, now? That being here, now, is an implicit experience of God and that this moment bears the full potential for human spiritual consciousness? If this is, right

now, just as good as it gets? If we are already there?! Religion and spirituality are then no longer a matter of achieving anything, or of getting somewhere else — witness the Egyptian Desert Father, Abba Poemen, telling his brothers hundreds of years ago that they must renounce any concern at all about their spiritual progress and regard themselves as the least of all. When the room is truly empty and filled with nothing but light, we will see nothing at all. In this way, the spiritual life becomes a practice of letting ourselves go — exhaling — in a gesture of surrender, and so into an enjoyment of what I would describe as *poised transparency* where there is nothing left to see. John of the Cross says that the only reason we see spiritual light when it ‘lances into the room of consciousness’ is because we have other stuff in the room.

Suffering and Compassion, a First Reflection

In this address I would like to head straight into the question begged by this kind of experience, and this is the question of suffering and the fact of real evil in our world. In the face of so much suffering, anguish and darkness, interior to us and exterior, and encountered in the present moment, how can we say that the present moment is an experience of God, or Enlightenment, or Salvation, when it feels just the opposite? How can we sit here in the present as the House of God, when so much suffering and anguish and wrong seem to be inflicted on others and ourselves in this present?

I ask this not because I intend tonight to answer the so-called ‘problem of evil or suffering’ head on. I am not going to explain why there is evil in the world. Nor am I going to argue about the validity or sanity of living from a posture of surrender and presence in an awakened spirit in the face of great suffering in the world. Awakened presence needs no argument. Once we step into the experience of the truly awakened self, we find that this reality is so totally self-validating, empowering, joyful and healing that it makes all

argument more or less beside the point. We step into what IS, and all solutions flow completely from that point.

Rather, I want to reflect on suffering, or our experience of and response to it, because the experience of suffering, in ourselves and in the world, is a decisive moment in our spiritual awakening, one we usually have to revisit dozens — perhaps hundreds — of times before we pass through it successfully. Usually the suffering drives us back into an unconscious life of fear and pusillanimity and a shrill and bitter meanness of spirit.

But the experience of suffering — miracle of all miracles! — can in fact be for us an occasion of profound and intense advancement on the spiritual way. If we stay relaxed in the face of it (and by relaxed I mean open and yielded to this moment as the full revelation of God), if we stay in our breathing and in the open, unfolded spirit in the blessed and holy *now*, we can become truly awake, ‘sharers in God’s life’ as my tradition describes it. If the suffering is our own, we discover a peace and clarity at the centre of it; if the suffering is another’s, we discover the power of authentic compassion.

To begin our reflections, I want to turn now to a passage on Julian that I reflected on with many of you before when I spoke in 2007 here in Norwich, but I want to do it this time more carefully, because I think there is in this passage a revelatory challenge to the normal, slumbering way of being in the world.

The Third Showing: Enjoy it Now with Me!

In what she called her third showing, Julian sees God ‘in a point,’ which means she sees God in pure, direct metaphysical insight, as present in all things as the doer of all that is done. Furthermore, she sees God as a life of joy and light penetrating all things and all history and all of creation. Every molecule of being, every second and crumb of history sings with this divine blissfulness. In this showing, God then tests Julian by inviting her to let go of

her own judgments about what is good or bad, trivial or important so that she can step in, release herself to this joy and share the divine blissfulness with Him. I will read a foreshortened version of this showing:

And after this, [Julian says] I saw God in a point by which vision I understood that He is in all things...A man looks upon some deeds as well done and some deeds as evil, but our Lord does not look upon them so; for just as all that has being in nature is of God's creating, so everything that is done is in the character of God's doing... And all this He showed most blessedly, meaning this: "See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything. See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end. See, I lead everything to the end I ordained for it from without beginning by the same Power, Wisdom, and Love with which I made it. How would anything be amiss?" Thus powerfully, wisely, and lovingly was the soul tested in this vision. [Lesson of Love. Ch 11.]

'See, I am God. See, I am in everything. See, I do everything...how could anything be amiss?' Well, we might say, looking at our world or our own souls, a great deal *is* amiss. (I can't help but think we are very close here to something like the divine wisdom communicated between Krishna and Arjuna in the Gita — a sense of the overflowing play of divine bliss in all things that is death to the ego). But just as we are tested by this vision, Julian was tested. Later in the Revelations, Julian in fact argues with God for thirteen Chapters about how all things could possibly really be well; but at this point in her experience, she says 'I saw truthfully that it was appropriate that I needs must assent with great reverence, rejoicing in God.' So Julian leaves behind the human judgment that sees some things as noble and others as base, some things as good and others as bad, and surrenders herself to the

unconditioned play of divine joy in all things just as they already are. She releases her discriminating, judging faculty to play in God's own life.

Clarifying the Experiment

So here we are, given a truth about God by Julian, that God's joy envelops and inebriates the being and doing of all reality. The question is: what are we going to do with it? Most people respond by wanting to argue about it, which is really a way of fighting off the divine revelation and keeping us safe in our false selves.

But instead of arguing about it — and I really have no valid, rational argument for how God can transfuse the suffering or evil of this world with joy — I would like to invite us instead to make an experiment with our own consciousness. An experiment is an interesting thing. It begins with what might be called an act of faith. You take on board a hypothesis, an assumption, and then you see how living according to this assumption changes your felt experience of reality and the quality of your engagement with life.

I would like to ask us then to step imaginatively into the state of surrender that this showing suggests, and to feel with great sensitivity and care what happens in the felt reality of ourselves as we encounter suffering. What does it feel like when we stop saying how bad we are, or how bad other people are, or our life-situation, or how bad the world's situation is? And how does this change affect our capacity to act for the good? If you make this internal, spiritual experiment with me — which we can do equally no matter what faith we follow — I think you will discover with me a wonderful surprise: what compassion really is, and a new capacity to act in utter purity of spirit.

My Experience of the Cessation of Judgment

In my own imaginative entry into this experiment I notice a progression of

feelings and perceptions, about which I am going to be as concrete as possible.

First, I picture before myself an example of the evil and suffering we find in our world: a parent's recurrent alcoholism for example (something I have had to deal with) or a picture of the kind we have all seen in the news in the past year — the site of a terrorist bomb or government missile strike, with the inevitable blood and chaos and ruin. We can make the effort in our mind's eye to see the blood on the concrete, and the black, twisted metal, and a strangely pink sandal left in the middle of the road. We have the picture before us.

My initial reaction to this kind of thing is fear. My gut begins to tighten. My brow furrows. If I can't do anything about the situation, usually I distract myself with pleasure or work. In other words, I usually just do my best to forget about the horrible image, even if it haunts my dreams. Instead of distracting myself, I can also obsess about the image, talk about it to others, not with any constructive purpose, but just to build up with others an anger and disgust about it. As this continues I begin to feel despair, sadness, and even hatred. If the situation is a personal one, I may feel a kind of envy for those who don't have to deal with this reality. I then begin really to hate this awful reality, to push it away. I want to get rid of it, be separate from it, and deny its reality. I hate it, I want it to go away. Following on this visceral response, my adult mind then engages and casts its judgment on the situation. 'This is wrong,' I say. 'This is bad. This is evil.' We all know this internal litany. 'Whoever does this is sick and wrong and bad and has to be stopped.' To sum up: we encounter suffering or evil of some sort, feel threatened in our bodies and a whole range of emotions explode from that as our bodies tighten in fear, revulsion, and hatred, and we start casting judgments.

And if we look at this even more closely, we will discover something else: the casting of judgments against things, and emotions of hatred and anger, serve an inner function of appearing to separate us, holding at arm's length the threatening thing. Basically, it is a function of fear, an action in which we are seeking to distance ourselves from the threatening object, and to distance ourselves from it so that we can eliminate it from our felt reality and our sense of ourselves. But — and here is the really revolutionary thing to see — such judging as an attempt at distancing ourselves, *does not work*. Rather, if we are honest what we see is that the more we condemn something, the more we are intertwined with it, and the more we are being controlled, co-opted and colonized by it. Paradoxically, then, even as we make judgments for the sake of separation and a feeling of safe remove from the evil, such judgments actually represent the fact that the evil has in fact already colonized our interior state, our felt reality, making us tense, fearful, angry, greedy, envious and hateful. Such judgments, which are almost completely unconscious in us, are not in fact a witness that we have risen to a higher spiritual state above those who might plan a car bomb or some other terrible thing. The judgmental thoughts are rather a sign, paradoxically, that we have now been infected with the evil that has jumped from the evil of the car bomb into our own souls. The darkness is already in us and we are defined by it. Somebody else planted the car bomb. We see the pictures. We become afraid, judgmental, condemning, and despairing, and so the evil of the car bomb has jumped into us and is defining our interior world. Evil has done its hidden work of infecting us, spreading into our hearts, creating fear, sadness, and anger, and leading us into the inward violence of condemnation. *The more we condemn, the more we have become a part of the problem.*

Skilful Engagement

My belief is that Julian's third showing reveals to us a clear way of engaging

suffering and the experience of evil in a different way that allows us to break the cycle of suffering and evil in our lives and so to begin to break it in the world.

It's true that most of us are not mystics like Julian. We generally don't walk around with a clear, immediate vision of God's joyful light transfusing all things, as Julian saw in the third showing. And I am certainly not suggesting that we try to clench our fists and squint our eyes just so, in order to have this experience. Rather, just as Julian was invited (and challenged!) in the third showing to set aside her human faculty of judging things in order to join in God's vision of all-pervading light and bliss, so we can make an experiment with skilful engagement with suffering and evil that begins with setting aside our fearful, negative judgments. We don't directly see God's bliss in all things with Julian's mystical sight, but we can take this on as an experimental hypothesis and see how it changes our experience of what seems most ungodly.

Here I can only share my experience of this. As I set the judging faculty aside when I am in the presence of some deep wrong, some terrible suffering or evil, I feel again in my body the grip of fear — dread even — with which the experience began. But instead of following that bodily experience of fear and letting it roll forward into a litany of judgmental thoughts about how bad this is, I stay deep in myself, deep in my awareness of my own being, deep in my own breathing. I want to emphasise very clearly that I am not at all forcing myself to think about anything. I am not forcing myself to think about how good God is or telling myself 'OK, Gregory, remember that God's bliss is transfusing all things. Squint hard to see this.' I have rather accepted my total incomprehension of evil and suffering; I have accepted, too, that I can't see or understand how any of this is of God. I have simply let those concerns go. Instead, I am just there with the evil and suffering with the

whole of my being, and with whatever feelings of fear and anxiety it is stirring up in me, letting them run around my body.

There are three things that emerged for me in this experiment. The first is a deep sense of presence and connection with the people or animals or plants in their suffering. I want to be absolutely clear here that I am not saying I feel all kinds of suffering with them. I am not flooded by a wave of their agony and lost in it. Rather, I am just totally there with it, and in a strange way, there is no boundary between me and the suffering, but, because I am holding a high frequency of presence, the suffering does not wash into me and control me. The second thing, following on from this, is that I begin to feel myself uniquely empowered — and I emphasise the word empowered — I feel myself to be strong, whole and present and able, in strength, not only to take the suffering consciously into myself, as in inhaling, but then to begin to wrap and penetrate it with an inflow of my own joy.

This is compassionate action. It is also what Christians call intercession and what the Buddhist Pema Chodron calls *tonglen*. It is holding a frequency of light and presence in ourselves — and because we have not snapped into the knee-jerk faculty of judgment and condemnation — we are able to remain deeply connected, grounded in peace, and able to breathe our joy into the suffering, like light into the darkness.

Practical Application

The practical application extends into every aspect of life. I would say that if you cannot do this when you watch the evening news or browse the web and see videos of terrible violence, then you should not, spiritually, be doing those things because you are not yet mature or strong enough spiritually for them, in which case you are being co-opted by the evil because you are simply using it for your enjoyment and the strengthening of your own false self's need to condemn things. Most of us, myself included, are not ready for

the evening news.

The skilful thing is to begin where you can, at however small or petty a level. Has a friend just expressed to you their anger because the bus is late? You love this friend — that makes it easier. But do you respond by joining them in their condemnation of bus schedules, the driver's union, Gordon Brown, corrupt bankers, and everyone else who is so clearly bad and responsible? You could instead breathe deeply in yourself, and in the strength of that centring just be there with your friend's distress. And you could send them joy.

That is a simple example, but if the world really is full of evil and suffering, this means you can literally spend all day doing this, one moment to another. It is profoundly helpful in our most intimate and demanding relationships, and whenever we are hurt by another person. Do we sling the hurt back with inner condemnation (or worse)? Or do we take the hurt inflicted on us as an opportunity to bring an end to one of the small eddies of agony and evil in our world, not by being pathetic martyrs or victims, but by standing strong in our conscious presence and awareness, refusing to act in retaliatory violence, and eventually, offering joy and peace to that person? We will discover, too, as we go along, that such a practice enables and empowers us to break out of abusive relationships far more effectively than just hating and condemning the other person, which in fact keeps us enmeshed in the abuse and controlled by the evil of it.

If we engage the world in this way, beginning with the small meaningless hurts of daily life, the pinpricks of death as St Therese said, and progressing to the greater agonies and evils that we and others suffer, standing strong and empowered in our presence, we will be people who actually begin to roll back the threatening darkness and agony of the world. We will become people of light and our being will be compassion. We will also be able to discern from

that place of strength and light, the best avenues for creative protest and restorative action.

Extemporaneous Remarks

Again, at the end of this session, Fr Gregory offered some further reflections on the theme and these have been transcribed from the audio recordings and appended to the text.

The question is: what are we going to do with the experience of evil and suffering in our world? Are we going to use it as entertainment, as more food for the false-self's need to condemn? Are we going to be sucked in by it and made obsessive and dark and angry? Are we going to distract ourselves or ignore it? Or can we begin the work of real redemption, beginning with full presence, refusing our judgment of it and sending out love and peace and seeing how to engage in creative action in response to the suffering? It's no good hating and condemning the car bomb that went off in the Middle East: it does no good to the situation at all. However, if we stand and look clearly and deeply into it, in the strength of our own presence, we will not only know ourselves as very much present with it, but will begin to see possibilities for creative action to begin some sort of restorative justice in the situation.

As a Christian I experience all of this in terms of my relationship with Jesus Christ. I want to reflect a bit to show the connection between how disengaging the judging faculty, as in Julian's third showing, and compassionate presence in the face of suffering, ties in with the key mystery of the Christian faith, that is: Christ's crucifixion. In the first address I talked about the doctrine of the incarnation and how in Jesus we are able to move through human consciousness into divine consciousness; that in his personhood the human and divine are so totally and intimately united that we can move through human consciousness and experience, in his gift of himself, the divine consciousness, and our own humanity flowing into it.

For this address I'm talking about the crucifixion. When I was originally preparing for a class on Julian's third showing in the monastery, I was reading this text about God's blissfulness in all things and a little voice inside me said, 'Gregory: why don't you try it, give it a shot, let's see what it feels like to release that faculty of judging.' And so, in my own meditation I carried out this experiment of letting go of my faculty of judging and looking at how that changes my experience of felt evil or tragic suffering in our world.

What I discovered was an immediate structural identity between my experience and Christ's death on the cross. Christ did not condemn the evil that was done to him; he even asked his Father to forgive those who were crucifying him. His words, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' reveal a complete darkness of soul. But he was not spiritually overwhelmed by the evil and violence he was subjected to, he did not become condemning or hateful of those around him; rather he maintained his own identity as obedient to the Father, even unto death, a son giving his life to the Father. For us that 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' expresses a total incomprehension of how evil can be here in this world.

When we step into Julian's third showing in which God is saying 'look at my blissfulness flowing through all things' it's true we cannot see how this is. To renounce the desire to understand how this could be, or how God's joy could be in all things, to renounce our judging faculty, is to step into total darkness of mind before the reality of this world, total incomprehension — Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? — a sense of being forsaken by the divine light. We walk then in darkness. But we discover that if we maintain our integrity and are not spiritually overwhelmed by our suffering, in other words we don't turn into evil ourselves by hatred, anger, fear and condemnation, we then discover the possibility, as in Christ's death, of breaking some of the cycles of violence and suffering on which our world depends. We begin to end the

endemic violence of our own wrathful selves, in our hatred of others we begin to discover forgiveness, we experience repentance and the outflowing of our own lives. Just as Jesus' blood and water flowed out from the cross, we too are able to begin to give our lives consciously, intentionally and creatively for the good of others. And in so doing we discover a new identity, a new sense of ourselves in Jesus.

When I did this experiment with myself I found that, in setting my judging faculty aside, I was, in a way, becoming one with Christ on the cross, living in total incomprehension but total honesty before the suffering and tragic evil of our world. In refusing to judge I was, in a sense, refusing to be overcome by it — I was maintaining my own integrity, clarity and strength, my faith in the goodness of the Father, in the goodness of creation and in the goodness of this world, even though I could not see how that could be. As Jesus poured his life out, so I can pour my own life out, no longer living in a reactive, wrathful violence against things, or caught up in distraction or entertainment or novelty, or cut-off in a bubble of plain ignorance; but seeing what is really there, refusing to be colonized by that evil and choosing consciously how I was going to respond to it, for the good of others.

For Christians the whole reality of this gesture as an interior movement, before action or as action, is what we call intercessory prayer. It's not just telling God about how bad things are, but it's offering up that transparent consciousness as a place where the suffering of this world has access to God and to the light and the joy and the bliss of the divine being. This then opens up a new way of being and walking and relating to our world, a world which is, in fact, suffering but which is, in fact, redeemed. Blessed may God be.

AWAKENING WITHIN OUR BODIES

Introduction and Recapitulation

I would like to begin this evening by welcoming all of you to our third night of discussion and reflection. I hope that my presentations and our experience and discussions are so far meeting the expectations of the Bishop and his staff, the Norwich Contemplative Forum, and The Friends of Julian, whose combined interest have made these evenings possible! To those of you who have attended the previous two evenings: welcome back. To those of you who are attending for the first time: do not worry about trying to catch up. Every evening stands on its own, even as they all fit together.

Running the risk of too much repetition, I would like to very briefly recall where we have been on our journey thus far. In our first class we started from Julian's assertion that 'God wants us to believe that we experience God constantly.' From this we talked about surrendering our resistance to living in this present moment, as already containing the fullness of all that we can desire. Such unfolding of our consciousness into the Now is really the source of all joy and, beyond that, our greatest hope as a species for the future. Buddhists have called this the miracle of mindfulness, Christian monastics have called it purity of heart, 'prayer without ceasing', and recollection.

In our second class, we deepened this original insight by facing the fact of suffering and evil in our world. We took as our point of departure Julian's experience of 'God in a point,' — that is, God transfusing all created reality with divine, celebratory joy, and then inviting Julian to release her own human way of judging in order to join God in God's happiness in what is. This led into an extended exploration on what it feels like to step out before the fact of great tragedy or evil, renouncing any desire to try to understand it, and renouncing as well our instinctive need to hatefully condemn it — to

push it away from ourselves and get rid of it. This led, I hope, to a new kind of experience for us, one in which we felt ourselves at once totally present to the tragedy and suffering in our world, totally one with it, and yet not overwhelmed by it or colonized by its negativity. Rather, standing whole in the light of presence, we discover a capacity to give ourselves and to act in the face of great suffering that is truly creative and compassionate. The Buddhist nun Pema Chodron calls this ‘tonglen’. Christians generally call it intercession.

Clarifying the Basic Phenomena of Awakening

In both of these evenings, I have been inviting us to make an experiment with our lives, our consciousness and our way of engaging the world. I have been assuming that we are coming to these talks, myself included, still partially banging around in a nightmarish world of mental and volitional obsessions, emotional drama, and anxious and guilty self-concern that we call the false self. Such unawakened life is all about us. Even as we walk through the pastures of paradise on the way to work, we can be lost in an angry litany of resentment against our co-workers in our heads. Even as we stand smack in the middle of this most glorious cathedral — that is, in this infinitely vaulted, light-filled, sacramentally intense moment of the Now — we can be utterly lost and consumed in a mental world defined by a late-arriving milk truck or a truculent friend.

Here is one thing that I have come to see and would most like to share — that such a loss of awareness, a slipping away from reality into our own, nightmarish, private and narrow world of fear and bitterness, which a Christian would call the effect of evil, is like an infection. This infection seeks to spread from person to person in society to create ever-thicker webs of darkness and pain and confusion. And what’s even scarier, we usually welcome this darkness whole-heartedly into ourselves. My monastic training

and my experience of being stunned and challenged by Julian, has been nothing if not the insistent demand that I *wake up*, and learn how to stand strong, upright, and whole in the birthright of awareness and joy so that I can bring healing and hope and light into this world. And as I emphasised last week, this is something that each of us here is able to do and to be — ambassadors of light in a human, societal world which is mixed in with a mental delusion of darkness.

For me as a Christian, this happens in the context of loving, mutual relationship with Jesus of Nazareth who I believe has drawn me to love him in an intimacy that demands the unconditional surrender of my life and being to Him, and which leads into the play of light and joy and compassion that is the Holy Trinity. But for all of us, however it happens, it means stepping, beautifully, in all simplicity, into the Now.

Our Theme Tonight: Body Awareness

For tonight, our theme is body awareness, or what I might call the inner feeling we have of ourselves as bodies, and how this very simple return to our body's feeling of itself, enables presence and awakening in a unique and stunning way. As such, this address is the heart of all the others, because I have come to believe that living from within the body's feeling of itself is the most direct and simple and obvious way to (a) wake up from our nightmare of self-centred mental obsessions; (b) engage life as an experience of God; and (c) discover a razor sharp strength, effulgent clarity and inner authority in ourselves so that we can send compassion out from us into experiences of evil or suffering. As in our other evenings, I will begin tonight with a brief passage from Julian, and after reflecting on engaging life from within its perspective, I will ask you to join me in mindful breathing. Following this, I will talk a little bit about my experience of body awareness specifically as a Christian. We will then conclude the evening with time for discussion.

Julian's 'Purse Full Fair'

Although she is famous for saying that 'all shall be well,' Julian should also be known for insisting that something as homely as the voiding of bodily waste can be an experience of God's loving care. She says,

A [person] goes upright and the food of his body is sealed as in a purse full fair; and when it is time of his necessity, it is opened and sealed again full honestly. And that it is [God] who does this is shown where He says that He comes down to us to the lowest part of our need. [Lesson of Love. Ch. 6]

This passage alone should make us aware that Julian is not a prim pietist. Unlike so many male writers for whom the life in intimacy with God is correlated largely with an abstraction of self or mind from bodily or temporal matters — a flight of the spirit from anything material or changing — Julian is at home enough in her physicality to be fully present in her experience of the elimination of waste as an experience of God's loving care. Here too she finds, if I can say so, a sacrament of God's loving delight in her. I am unsure about how Julian came to this kind of total acceptance of her physical being as the place of God's loving ministry, but I would guess it was through her experience of the divine love being hidden within human disfigurement and suffering in Jesus. Thus even what we think of as physical impurity — let alone disease, suffering, and death — can be for her the medium in which a loving exchange of herself with God, in great intimacy and sharing, is achieved.

Julian's Fleshliness As God's Home

Following on from this, the passage on which I want to centre our reflections comes from a section much later in the Revelations where Julian is developing her sense of how God is with us in this life. I am afraid this

passage will need a little explanatory introduction because it is thick with technical, medieval terminology.

Julian begins with the typical medieval idea of our soul having two parts. First, she says, there is an ‘essence’ of the soul that is always active in a kind of blissful, unitive contemplation of God. This is the centre of human reality which simply is, already and always, one with God in uncreated, unconditioned, divine blissfulness. This is the absolute centre of who we are and it is unchanged by anything we do with our lives. The infinite is there, the Joy that is Being.

Secondly, there is for Julian what she calls our ‘fleshliness’ or ‘sensuality’ which designates the whole of our physical and historical experience. It is our everyday consciousness, the consciousness we now have as we sit in this room, you listening and I talking. It is bodily, sensual, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual. It is the normal realm of human being in the world.

At other presentations on Julian, I have drawn out just how close Julian was edging to medieval heresy in suggesting that no matter how much we sinned in this life, God maintained our essence in us, that blissful union and light in the Joy of Being. Typically, Christians have not said this, but Julian, from her direct experience of it in herself even when she was, in her outward self, sinning, knows that this essence is the utterly true core of our being, unchanged by history.

However, what amazes me most at this point in my life, is Julian’s refusal to prioritize the more spiritual, inward essence over fleshly, historical, experiential selves. It is easy to imagine, as countless spiritual seekers in every single religious tradition have done for millennia, that Julian might say that since we have this essence in us, what we have to do is escape from, or eradicate as much as possible, any connection with our fleshliness, such that we can reside in our eternal being. But Julian does not say this. In fact, based

on her experience of the Incarnation of God in Jesus, she contradicts it. She says,

For I saw most certainly that our essence is in God, and also I saw that God is in our fleshliness, for at the self-same moment that our soul is made fleshly, at the same moment is the City of God established in our soul from without beginning. Into that City [God] comes and never shall remove it, for God is never out of the soul in which He dwells blissfully without end...
[Lesson of Love. Ch. 55]

Regarding our essence, it can rightly be called our soul, and regarding our fleshliness, it, too, can rightly be called our soul (and that is because of the one-ing that it has in God)...The Honourable City that our Lord Jesus sits in, it is our fleshliness in which He is enclosed... [Lesson of Love. Ch. 56]

'God is in our fleshliness' and 'The Honourable City that our Lord Jesus sits in, it is our fleshliness in which He is enclosed.' Our fleshliness, the bodily feeling we have of ourselves, even though subject to change, suffering, and waves of confusing emotions, has God at its absolute centre. God is there, God dwells there, in the fleshly feeling we have ourselves, now, in our bodies.

The Feeling We Have for Our Being in Our Bodies

Now, apart from any ghosts who might be among us tonight — and English castles and cathedrals are now permanently linked with the world opened up by Harry Potter — all of us sitting here right now not only have, but are, a 'fleshliness.' We all are bodies. Moreover, all of us live every moment of our conscious lives with a kind of background awareness, or inchoate feeling or sense of our bodily being from inside such that I feel and know in an underlying way that I am this body here, rather than over there. Our bodies

have an underlying feeling of themselves. Unlike my sense for this lectern as I touch it, or my feeling for you when we shake hands, I have a feeling for my bodily self from within. It is like a radiance or a field of energy that I know I am, in myself. I am struggling for words here, but I believe that what Julian was trying to communicate from her experience of Jesus is that God dwells at the very centre of this most fundamental, feeling of ourselves in our bodies, that God is fully here, that if we want to rest in God it will mean largely coming to rest in this feeling of ourselves in our bodily being.

Ironically enough, all this has led me to completely reinterpret the traditional core aim of Christian monasticism, which, drawing on St. Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonika, has been to 'pray without ceasing.' Far from meaning any kind of ecstatic flight of the spirit away from all bodily reality so that it could be permanently with God, or an obsessive habit of trying to pray a lot, or any rather cruel method, once practised in monasteries, of denying the validity of anything sensual and earthly, it has become for me a very simple, loving, and joyful invitation to be here in my body, in the feeling my body has of itself and, in that feeling of my fleshliness, to know God as the absolute centre.

Autobiographical Note: My Exile and Return to the Body

When I arrived at the monastery I lived from the very tip-top of the tip-top of my head, from the eyebrows up, in a kind of perpetual fear and agony about life. From this anxious cranial realm I had enormous power to analyze and condemn just about anything! So it was, for a while, a safe place, and the intellectual inquiry that it drove pushed me through reams of systematic and mystical theology, philosophy, and linguistic and anthropological studies that, for the rest of my life, will give me a capacity to relate and explore different experiences of life and cultures with more sensitivity and balanced care. However, such a life of anxiety-driven mental obsession made

relationship impossible and, alienated from others, drove me into a state of continual panic in which I felt my very self was being utterly dismembered, and a final destination of anguished depression. It fits in with what Christians call hell.

My journey out is a long story: love shown to me in community, the discovery that I loved plants and they loved me, a re-grounding of myself in bodily energy through music, and learning about relationships through literature — all these were very helpful.

Two influences were, however, the most critical. The first was an unexpected experience of Christ's bodily resurrection. This was not a mental belief or credal proposition to think about. As I will mention later it was an increasingly nuptial experience in which I felt that Christ in his resurrected body was making himself present to me, seeping into my life, and that I could surrender my bodily being to him to be filled with his being.

The second key gift was Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, in which Tolle spends a good deal of time describing inner-body awareness as the gateway into Being and the Joy of the Now. Along with a practice of zazen and other Ch'an Buddhist practices (such as being mindful of the sole of my advancing foot as I walked to get the mail, or learning how to sleep in a particular way), it's as if the gate at my throat, kept locked shut and guarded by the dragon of anxiety, finally just swung open, and my conscious awareness, locked so long in my head and in my anxious, self-protective thinking, flooded out from my mental world into the unified and joyful whole of my body. I learned that I could be here, be now, without having to think about it. That it was safe to be. That it was OK.

Getting at What Inner-Body Awareness is: Tolle

But what exactly is this inner-body awareness? I think I need to take just a little time to describe this more carefully, because often when I talk about it,

people give me that strange look and sometimes begin to edge slowly away! Church people get suspicious when I mention yoga and *The Power of Now*; non-Church people step back when I mention the Resurrected Body of Jesus. Eckhart Tolle is much better at describing this than I am. I would like to quote from a passage from *The Power of Now* in which he guides us into this kind of body awareness. He writes:

Direct your attention into the body. Feel it from within. Is it alive? Is there life in your hands, arms, legs, and feet – in your abdomen, your chest? Can you feel the subtle energy field that pervades the entire body and gives vibrant life to every organ and every cell? Can you feel it simultaneously in all parts of the body as a single field of energy? Keep focusing on the feeling of your inner body for a few moments. Do not start to think about it. The more attention you give it, the clearer and stronger this feeling will become. It will feel as if every cell is becoming more alive. [Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1997). p, 93.]

I have experimented with this for some years now, and I think he has tapped into something profoundly true and holy, something which women mystics have perhaps discovered all the more easily because they are women and generally live closer to their bodies than men.

Many of us are familiar with Thich Nhat Hanh's description of washing dishes not in order to get them done, but just to wash dishes. We find similar advice in the 14th century German mystic Meister Eckhart, who says that wise persons do not do things to get them done, but just to do them. I have reflected on this advice and experimented with it for a long time. As I stand there washing dishes after an exhausting day, or sorting broccoli in a nasty rain, or collating leaflets in a cold chapel for a liturgy I personally don't care about, what does it mean not to do these things in order to get them done,

but just to do them? Of course, in one sense, we are doing them to get them done. But what is the shift of attitude that is being described? In part, it is an utter renunciation of a desire to be anywhere else or, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, renouncing the desire to be enjoying dessert instead. This is key. We experience God constantly. But there is also a key element of not being there in my head, thinking about ten million things, or pushing myself urgently through the task. Rather, I am to be there fully in the bodily feeling I have of myself, and discover, even in the cold rain or in sorting broccoli, the joy that my physical being IS.

Joy is not something we get from outside ourselves or from a specific kind of experience. It is the underlying reality of being. And, as Julian would say, it dwells enthroned at the very centre of our fleshliness, at our body's awareness of itself from within.

Showing my Hand

All of my addresses so far, and our practice of mindful breathing together in silence, have been my way of simply inviting you to experience this reality for yourselves, to taste it, to know it, and to know it as, in a way, your greatest good and only joy.

So in a way, I am showing you my hand tonight, laying down my cards, showing you what I have been about (rather cleverly, I think) since I started these talks. Originally I was invited to talk about Julian of Norwich and the spiritual life. But all along what I have been about has been trying to create an ambience, a feeling, an environment, where each of us could feel safe enough to simply let go of all the concerns we have for ourselves and our spiritual lives so that our energy might flow back out into our bodies! This is what our mindful breathing and silence has been about.

But this apparent abandoning of self concern, even for our spiritual lives, and this growing friendship with the feeling we have of ourselves in our

bodies, and so a friendship with the present moment where we actually are, is not in fact a loss of our spiritual lives. Rather, we can take it on trust from Julian's own mystical experience that such a re-incarnation (if you will) of ourselves in our own bodily being, this spreading out of our conscious awareness from mental anxiety into the feeling of physical presence is, paradoxically, the awakening of the soul itself.

I saw that God is in our fleshliness, for at the self-same moment that our soul is made fleshly, at the same moment is the City of God established in our soul from without beginning ... The Honourable City that our Lord Jesus sits in, it is our fleshliness in which He is enclosed. [Lesson of Love. Ch. 55, 56]

Conclusion: Our Anxious World and the Interfaith Response

In our world today, it is frightening to see how many people are led to live the majority of their lives in a sphere which has almost no reality at all. This is the sphere in which all our actions and desires are driven by anxiety, false pretence, and a desperate desire to escape from ourselves into entertainment, novelty, violence, and narcotic dullness. There is enormous suffering in our developed world because of this, and the suffering only drives the cycles of anger and fear, distraction and fragmentation to an ever greater pitch, leading to an ever greater need for violent action and greater self-hurt and destruction.

But look, just look at what we have at last begun to discover, whether we are Christian, or Buddhist, Sufi or Hindu, Jewish or simply approaching life through a kind of wide open authenticity like Eckhart Tolle. The spiritual mystics and writers of our day are all saying the same thing: *it is time to awaken*. And awakening is not a hard slog of hating all the things you formerly liked. It is a release, a death of sorts, an exhalation of the tight self-obsession in which we have previously lived. It is a discovery of presence, and

from that a capacity of presence and ability to act with complete disregard for our usual selves, and an engagement with life as a gift. There is a joyfulness right here in this room, and a clarity, and a light and a connectedness with each other in which we are already profoundly one.

Many different spiritual paths are converging on this awareness, and we are discovering in processes such as meditation, mindful breathing, yoga, contemplative worship, and, for Christians, the Eucharist and a bodily loving of our Lord, that in the deepest sense of being a body, of being here, we are already open to God. We don't have to abstract a spiritual self out of all that is physical or changing in order to find God and to be One. We don't have to fly off and be happy ghosts. Rather, by releasing our anxious self-concern, by re-grounding our sense of presence and self in our physical bodies, I think that's the easiest, most natural and simplest way of being in this moment, where that union is realized.

AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY AND COMMITTED LIFE-PURPOSE

Introduction

My sisters and brothers, this is our last evening together. I would like to begin by saying how grateful I am to you for joining me for this time of spiritual reflection, embodied spiritual sense and feeling, and presence. I am grateful because you have given me something – a little part of yourselves, a part of your life, just by attending these evenings and offering your listening hearts to me. We have not been together, I think, as a speaker and a group of attendees, but as people, all of whom, in different ways, have known and felt the truth of ourselves in the light and joy of Being. Moments like these can be amazingly significant in our individual lives and communal commitment.

Whether or not we have talked directly or gotten to know each other in some more outward way, I cannot but feel affection for you. My heart warms to be with you, and my eyes, if I may say so, delight in your eyes, as I have come to know you over the past weeks. Our silence together has been a great joy.

A Digression on Brambles and Suffering

This past week, apart from other duties, I have been glad to help Sr. Pamela in clearing away a mass of vegetation that was threatening to climb a wall and invade her garden. This was not light gardening for the faint of heart: a rather blunt hand-axe was my tool of choice, and I should have been wearing a leather apron.

As I did this work, I discovered a relatively demonic plant which we don't have back home, and which you call 'the bramble.' And I have realized that,

even though we have talked about how the awakened soul can stand before the tragic violence of our world, we have *not* talked about how an awakened soul deals properly with bramble!

More seriously, as I hacked away at the roots of this thorny stuff, and its friend the nettle found its way up my pant leg and began to announce itself to my lower calf, I realized something that touches on a great many of the questions we have discussed so far. And it's this: while bramble is indeed a very real problem for the gardener, suffering is in itself not a problem for us on the spiritual way.

If you are a gardener, and you want to grow vegetables, you absolutely have got to get rid of the bramble. You can't tend your snap peas in the midst of that devilish thing. But as we desire to live into lives fully awakened, we do not have to get rid of the suffering that we find in every one of our lives. Suffering is not the enemy or a problem that blocks our desire to practise deeply and to live a fully awakened spiritual life. We don't have to get suffering out of the way first before we can walk in the way of presence and compassion. To say that would be to endorse a kind of 'Marks and Spencer' spirituality, a spirituality for those who had the money and power to shape life as they wanted. I would say instead that for most of us our journey into true self-knowledge and our feeling for the sharp, joyful, intense poignancy of being happen *through* suffering.

This is not in any way to eliminate the need for us to roll up our sleeves and get to work to relieve the suffering and injustice of our world. We cannot be human, let alone walking on the way of the awakened soul, if we do not engage in this work to relieve the suffering in the world. It is a universal fact of spiritual experience that those who experience God truly inevitably find themselves caring for the poor.

But, as Julian says so clearly in Chapter 77 of her *Revelations*, 'Whatsoever thou doest, thou shalt have woe.' Whatever we do, we are going to suffer. It

is unavoidable. The question is how we respond to the suffering that is already here, and we really have two choices. We can harden our hearts against the suffering, hate it and try to repel it as something evil. Or, we can lay down our arms and let the suffering unfold the truth of its being in us. We can let it be there in our awareness.

And this way, this second way, is a way that leads to healing. People who are far beyond me on the spiritual path tell me this again and again. They say to me, ‘Gregory, in so far as you can yield yourself to the agony of your own heart, you will find richness and strength. And even happiness. A great richness of being is found there with special force and poignancy.’ And I think, from my own experience of this (which is really quite limited) these spiritual guides have been speaking truth.

Our Theme Tonight

Our theme tonight is not, however, how to eradicate the bramble from your garden, or even suffering. In fact, it is just the opposite: the rose, I might say, as the traditional symbol for the beatific vision of an organically whole but differentiated community in heaven. Beginning with Julian’s vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary in heaven, I want to open for you a vision of authentic community on earth as providing a stabilizing context, like supporting wings, for the awakened life as we have explored it in the past three sessions: present in the now; compassionate, and fully embodied.

Before I begin with my reflection, I thought I would try something a little risky. I would like us to start the evening off with our mindful breathing, our silent contemplation, our meditation in empty presence. In doing this, I am saying, ‘Look, words from me are secondary! Each of us already contains in ourselves the fullness of heaven, the beatific life, the budding, spreading, and flowering rose.’ I don’t mean to rub any of you the wrong way if you came eager to hear me speak, but why don’t we begin with the mindful breathing,

and in the context that creates, allow me to reflect a little, and then enjoy some discussion together.

Transition out of the Meditation: Why Words?

After that, one can reasonably ask, ‘What else is there to say? What else could one say?’ All through these addresses I have been mindful of the example of the older Wittgenstein who, on being asked to speak on language and philosophy to a group of academics, turned his chair to the black board and recited Sufi love poetry instead. Once you have begun to know the reach and hold of silence, to know presence in the joy of being, a reality known in your own body’s feeling for itself, you have begun to taste, I think, a little of heaven. Words are then inessential, and the journey we thought we were on seems to disappear into the simplicity of being One.

Assuming, then, that we have in fact begun to taste for ourselves this mystery of Being, and have begun to learn how to follow its leading and how to care for its nurturance and clarity in our lives (and what is spirituality of any sort but just the traditional methods and prudent skills for nurturing and clarifying our inner being?) I would like in this last reflection to look at Julian’s vision of heaven and see how it provides a paradigm of authentic community. And community — and the sense of personal meaning and purpose in life as we commit ourselves to each other in community — is essential as the natural, stabilizing, purifying context for the spirit’s awakened life.

It’s not so much that, awakening spiritually, we then have to get involved with community, but that awakening spiritually intrinsically means an awakening to the community we are already in, all the way down from the community of the cosmos to our most intimate and personal relationships. This awareness itself then shifts to how we relate to each other and to community, and it allows for authentic commitment and creativity in the

communities we are in. The awakened life is awakening not only to presence and compassion and our embodied feeling, but awakening in gratitude and love for the community that we are already in, which leads to our own purposeful commitment to the well-being of all things, to nurture all beings into happiness.

Julian's Eleventh Showing

Our jumping off place will be a passage from Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love*, from the eleventh showing, in which she experiences a vision of Christ's joy in the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is part of a section of the *Revelations* where Julian's mind is being opened to the bliss of heaven. Julian says:

With this same expression of mirth and joy, our good Lord looked down on His right side and brought to my mind where Our Lady stood at the time of His Passion; and He said, "Dost thou wish to see her?... Because of thy love I made her so exalted, so noble, and so worthy; and this pleases me, and so I wish that it pleases thee." For after Himself, she is the most blessed sight... Jesus in that word showed me a spiritual sight of her (in the same way as I had seen her before—little and simple—so He showed her now exalted and noble and glorious and pleasing to Him above all created beings). And so [God] wishes that it be known that all those that delight in Him should delight in her and in the delight that He has in her and she in Him. [*Lesson of Love*. Ch. 25]

Now, given all the wrangling about the Blessed Virgin among Christians, I hasten to say here that I am not about to launch into thirty minutes of devotional excess about Our Lady, as close as we are to the Shrine at Walsingham. [I want to confess that in my first trip to England, I enjoyed exciting the wildest passions in the Church of England by asking people, 'So,

hmm, what do you make of Walsingham?] What interests me in this passage is not the Marian devotion per se, though this is wonderful, but the medieval and mystical vision of heaven, and so of authentic community, that it contains. I need to warn you that the idea I find here is so radically un-American, and un-modern, that it may raise a little resistance in you. It raised huge resistance in me when I first saw what this text meant, underneath its devotion to Mary.

In her vision of Mary, Julian sees the Blessed Virgin as ‘so exalted, so noble, so worthy...after [Jesus] himself, she is the most blessed sight...exalted and noble and glorious and pleasing to God above all created things.’ The absolutely staggering idea behind this vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary is easy to miss, but it’s this: in Julian’s vision of heaven, some creatures are more blessed than others. To put it bluntly: some are closer to God than others, some are more glorious and pleasing to others. In other words, in this vision of heavenly community, we are not all equal. There is not only a horizontal differentiation between us because of different gifts, but a *vertical* dimension in which some are, putting it fairly crassly, *higher up* the chain of beatitude than others. God’s love, light, and life, floods over all in unconditioned totality, but God has freely chosen to create some of us as *more able* to receive that divine glory, and so more able to pass it on and give it to others. Moreover, being in heaven, for Julian, is not a matter of my soul being happy with God in a kind of naked awareness or dissolution of myself. It is rather a matter of discovering oneself as held within in a great communion in bliss and glory of all creatures, extending from the most glorious creature, Jesus in his humanity, and then Mary, down to the lowliest bit of matter.

But there is one more essential thing to grasp in this medieval vision of heavenly, authentic community. Those who have been created by God as more able to receive the divine glory, who are, as it were, higher up, pour

themselves out in a joyful abundance of self-sacrificial care and love and cherishing of all those beneath them in the chain. This is a theme that runs through all spiritual teaching of any tradition, and courses through Julian's *Revelations* and her sense of Jesus. In a marvellous passage, she sees Christ not ruling in heaven from a remote throne of power and glory, but like a host who goes about his household, bringing joy to his friends in his humility and emptying of himself.

I saw the Lord take no special high-ranked seat in his own household, but I saw him royally reign throughout his house, and he filled it full of joy and mirth himself, in order endlessly to cheer and comfort his dearworthy friends most plainly and most graciously, with marvellous melody of endless love in his own fair blessed face... [Lesson of Love. Ch. 14]

Because of a lack of time, I am being a little blunt with this, but the idea is that each of us, in our place in the differentiated order of glory, receives our life and joy and truth not just directly from God, but also from every other creature who has been created as more glorious than we are. We receive ourselves from others and through the cherishing care which they give to us. Such cherishing care then is like warmth and moisture to a seed, it awakens our souls in turn, and makes it natural for us to sprout, spread out our green, waving, tender leaves of presence and compassion. And then, likewise, we find ourselves giving everything away — utterly everything — in loving solicitude and care and cherishing of those who are placed under us, within our care by the divine freedom.

My Experience of Being Cherished

Thus I, in my meditation on the eleventh showing (and assuming that I am not in heaven, after the Blessed Virgin!) discover myself not offended that God has chosen to create billions of creatures eternally more glorious than me

(as un-American as that is of God) but immensely grateful for this massively interdependent flow of loving care, enfolding love and delighted cherishing, which I not only receive but then pass on to others.

Our Experience of True Community

Now, whether or not you buy into my Christian beliefs in a loving Creator and a heavenly afterlife (and still less whether you visit Walsingham), even if you are of a different faith, I think that you will agree with me that this picture of community, as found in Julian's eleventh showing, is a picture of what true community looks like in a fully awakened life. Or put better: the interdependent cherishing of all beings for each other and a great cascading of glory, in which some creatures are, in fact, more awakened and more delightful than others, each creature pouring itself out in utterly selfless love for all others, is a reality that is already here, already in fact happening in life, and which we awaken to as we awaken in the spiritual life.

For example, I know that whatever slight reality I actually have as an awakened person has been a result of other's love for me. To awaken, to be aware, to be present — these are all ways of saying: to have accepted one's self, warts and all. But we can't make ourselves accept ourselves. Rather, when we enter the *field* of someone else who has achieved some level of self-acceptance, and so presence, awareness, and compassion, we experience this field as a kind of radiance, a life and warmth that enters into our very being, and then we begin to feel in some inchoate way in our inner selves that we are marvellously wanted, marvellously cherished, incredibly loved. We find ourselves within someone else's presence and awareness, where it is suddenly OK to let ourselves unfold and be.

This inner feeling of the soul, a soul-feeling which we cannot make for ourselves, but which can only be given to us by other persons who are further along on the way, gives us a glimpse, a feeling, a sense of our own awakening.

And so, for a moment, we are able to accept just a little more of ourselves. We are freed, just a little, from the tyranny of rejecting what we are and always wanting something different. We are able to let our mental anxiety go in a release of energy that fills our bodies, and standing there in that marvellous field of cherishing, as we are able to *be*, we awaken.

The corollary of this is that, in so far as we are awakened, we serve the same function for others. We are able to extend this same cherishing presence to others, no matter how caught up and blindly violent they have become in their lack of awareness and their rejection of themselves and reality.

I'd like to make this as concrete as I can. I know that any reality I have as a person has been given to me by others, in an offering of love on which I am totally dependent for my spiritual awakening, but which I am powerless to summon. It has been a gift freely given to me. I thus become aware, and I invite each of you now to become aware with me of all the luminaries and glorious beings who have been over us in life, and who, in their gifts of presence, have enabled whatever authentic being we actually already have: parents, teachers, mentors, saints, strangers met on the train. I think of my father and mother, my clarinet teacher, my track coach, a handful of friends. We all have these remarkable instances and gifts of love coming down to us from above, from people who are for a moment at least more glorious in heaven than we are and so are able to give us an authentic inner feeling and to guide into our own awakening.

Likewise, going the other direction, I am aware that there are many people in my life who are, in terms of the cosmic chain, under my enfolding care. When I am with them, I may feel very keenly their twisting and turning in their rejection of themselves, how this causes them to hurt others, perhaps myself included. But like a parent with a child, while I cannot cause any spiritual awakening in them (the idea is ridiculous) I can offer my cherishing presence to them even if they, in their agony, try to do violence to do this.

This, I know, is true of your lives as well. We all have people and creatures in our lives who have less capacity for self-acceptance and so less presence, less capacity for love and glory, than we ourselves do. But everything, absolutely everything we are in so far as it is true, has been a gift from an Other. Can we blame others for not receiving the free gifts that have been given to us? Of course not. Our job is not to blame or judge or figure them out, but to offer and unfold for them whatever authenticity we ourselves have received from those above us in glory.

Not Making but Discovering the Community that Already is

All of us are called to make community, and while some of us are in fact being prompted at some point in our lives to intentionally commit ourselves to new forms of communal development, I would like to ask you tonight not to commit to a new programme or any idea for a new community.

Instead I would like to invite you again to release to the self's anxious fighting to get more life for itself, and in that surrender of your own story, your own drama and fight, to look around in your life at the community you are now actually already in. Become aware of this vast community that already is, that already has given you being — a community that begins from the earth which has given you minerals and sugars that make your bodily being, to the spiritual mothers and fathers who have shared with you a radiance and warmth of self-acceptance and cherishing which has given you, freely, every last atom of any true personal reality that you actually are.

And look around too at the people who are blind, ignorant, confused, and hurting. Our job is *not* to straighten them out, not to teach them anything, and not to shame them into some other idea of life. In so far as any of us actually has real being, our job is to be there for them and allow them to be within the gentle, radiant field of our own self-awareness. This may mean

setting boundaries of course, and saying ‘no’ to abusive behaviour, but it doesn’t necessarily mean any demand that they change.

Each human soul is a seed, often stuck in cold, rocky soil, choked by bramble and stinging herbs. But look what happens if that soul experiences itself in the radiant field of someone else’s being, if we pass on to them whatever love we have received: a daisy, a wallflower, maybe even a rose will emerge.

Conclusion

Presence — that glorious opening of ourselves into the *now* in the Joy of Being — is like a piece of glass. Compassion, a flow of warmth and light into ourselves and then from ourselves into the world, is like the sun’s light and warmth flowing through that glass. But we can’t just grab the glass. If we do, we cut ourselves and shatter the glass. And this is the mistake of so many spiritual seekers. We experience a good thing, and we try to seize it for ourselves.

Part of becoming aware in authentic presence is becoming aware of the authentic community that has brought us, as presence, to birth, aware of the love that has made it possible for us to be. Becoming aware of this, our hands are stretched upwards in gratitude to those who have loved us, and our hands are stretched outwards in an enfolding and offering of ourselves to those who live in a greater degree of self-rejection, distraction, and suffering than we do. And it’s this opening of our spiritual sensibility into an interdependent community, where every being is giving themselves away for every other that the experience of presence and being is stabilized in our lives. Our conscious gratitude to the community that has given us life, and a commitment to the nurturing of authentic Being in the community in which we are, puts a frame around that glass and makes it stable, solid, and secure. Life purpose, as a specific expression of our intention for the good of all creatures focused into

some particular action and commitment, and as the opening awareness to our fundamentally communal reality, in touch with all beings, is spiritual awakening.

And here is a final truth I'd like to share with you: authentic spiritual life is not something I have, but it is something that others have given to me, and which I then give to others. We don't *have* spiritual lives, we receive them and we give them away.

I'd like to close with a Buddhist text, from the Bodhicharyavatara, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. I typed this up and made it into a card for myself, and I have kept it in my cell for years. A Christian would feel this to be a prayer.

May I be a guard for those without protection;
A guide for those who journey on the road;
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a refuge.

May I be an island for those who yearn for landfall
And a lamp for those who long for light;
For those who need a resting place, a bed;
For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power, and the supreme remedy.
May I be the tree of miracles,
And for every being, the abundant cow.

Like the great earth and the other elements,
Enduring as the sky itself endures,
For the boundless multitude of living beings,
May I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives,
In number like the boundless reaches of the sky,

May I be their sustenance and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

Here is our truth, my brothers and sisters. Here for me, also, is Jesus. Here is the possibility of joy. Our awakening to this and our surrender to this blissful flow is what Blessed Mother Julian herself became aware of in her *Revelations* and which she gave herself to, after much wondering, with totally selfless joy. May we, in God's grace, become the wishing jewel and the abundant cow for every being, just as every being has been this for us. Blessed may God be.

Appendix: Mindful Breathing

Each evening of the Granary Court Presentations included a period of mindful breathing. Some participants said this was the most meaningful part of the experience! Although very simple, the practice of setting aside time each day to be aware of what is happening with our breath and so in our bodies can be transformative. I felt that this practice was especially appropriate in these presentations because it is a way of entering directly into what I was trying to share, the felt reality of presence and compassion in our bodies, and an awareness of community with others. What follows below is simply the instructions for mindful breathing offered on the first night.

I would like to introduce you to a very simple spiritual exercise that is a practical way of stepping out of the false self-consciousness and into the reality of this moment as an experience of God. For twenty minutes, I am going to invite you to breathe! Although it sounds amazingly simple, I will suggest to you that if you learn mindful breathing, you have learned 98% of whatever is required in the spiritual life. It is the revolutionary centre from which everything else can shift and grow.

We will be talking about this a great deal more in our third evening, understanding why a shifting of awareness to our breathing and so to our bodies is a nearly miraculous way of short-circuiting the vicious feedback loop of anxiety and resentment between body and mind and allowing for a new kind of energy, whole and simple, to emerge. The soul aware of its own breathing is already an awakened soul.

For this practicum, let's all find a good place to sit, upright, putting aside our papers and pens. Once we have done this, we will lay our hands simply on our lap in whatever way is least self-conscious for us. Then, after a few seconds of getting comfortable, we direct our attention to our breathing. Breathing in, the diaphragm expands and we fill with wonderful air. Breathing out, the diaphragm contracts and we expel carbon dioxide.

In this exercise, we are not in the least trying to change how we breathe. We are trying to change nothing, nothing at all. We are simply going to spend fifteen or twenty minutes noticing what our breathing is like. That's it. My slogan for this is: *bad breathing is good breathing*. That is to say, if you can be aware of how badly you are breathing, anxiously, high up in your chest, or whatever, and you don't try to change it: that's wonderful! You are learning simply how to notice what *is* without trying to change it and get somewhere else. You are thus learning to befriend yourself as you already are. The exercise is just to be aware of whatever breathing is happening at the moment.

Of course, distractions will arise. You might be annoyed by a neighbour. Your mind might say, 'This is stupid! I can't believe I am doing this!' It can be funny when the thinking self responds in this way. Or the usual distractions of life might come to the fore. Whenever you notice yourself thus entangled, you don't have to argue with your thoughts, but smile at them, and gently, ever so gently, return your consciousness to whatever it is your breath is doing. This may be pleasant, it may be tedious, it may even be a little painful. The idea is to be aware of your present reality, whatever this is, centred right now on the miracle of breathing.

I am guessing that many of us already have meditation techniques, but from personal experience I am all too aware how these techniques can get co-opted by the false self. Thus I'd invite you to let go of your technique for twenty minutes and do something different, which is just to breathe.



Fr Gregory Freuhwirth is an experienced retreat leader, a published poet and the author of ‘Words for Silence’ (SPCK, 2009). He has been a member of the Order of Julian of Norwich, a community of monks and nuns based in Wisconsin USA, for eighteen years and currently serves as its Guardian.

In these talks, Fr Gregory explores key themes in Julian’s text, opening doorways into Julian’s mystical awareness and inviting us to awaken to the ongoing revelation of the divine.

“Nothing is more natural, nothing more simple or humble than the authentic contemplative life that breathes in and out with God’s Spirit through the trials and joys of a very ordinary day. Reaching such a state of complete naturalness and open joy in God does not require specialised learning or exalted spiritual experiences or a life in a monastery. It requires only a willingness to walk into daily life with the intention of living surrendered to God.”

— **Fr Gregory Fruehwirth OJN**

“Fr Gregory [helps us see] that our real home is God, our natural environment the divine. We begin to sense that the theophanic should be as natural for us as water for the fish and air for the bird: the sacred could erupt anywhere at any time.” —**Archbishop Desmond Tutu**



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