

Don't Miss Etty

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On April 8 and 9, there will be a one-woman play by Susan Stein performed here at this church. That play will be adapted from the words of Etty Hillesum, written in her diaries and letters between 1941 and 1943. I hope every one of you will take advantage of the opportunity to see the play. Reviewers have said that "you may never have heard of Etty Hillesum, but after this play you will never forget her."

This morning, I want to give you a brief account of how I encountered Etty, what little I know of her life and times, something about the spiritual power of her writing, and why I have been so passionate about bringing this play to Columbia.

Two years ago, I had never heard of Etty Hillesum. A friend of ours, Martin Steingesser, then the Poet Laureate of Portland, ME, emailed that he and two others were going to do a performance called "The Thinking Heart" at the Rockland Library. We went, largely because we like Martin's poetry and to support a friend. He had pulled words from Hillesum's diary and worked them into poems—powerful, moving poems that celebrated courage, honesty, resilience, gratitude, and acceptance under the most difficult imaginable circumstances. We were blown away.

I ordered the diary and letters, which had been published as *AN INTERRUPTED LIFE*, translated from the Dutch in 1996, 53 years after Etty had died at Auschwitz at the age of 28. I found the writing deeply moving and by the time I finished, I was in love with Etty Hillesum. Her writing, all in prose, was poetry leaping off the page. I found I could take almost any paragraph, break it into lines and stanzas, and without changing a word, have a poem. I'll share some of them with you in a few moments.

Life and Times

What do we know about her life and the circumstances of her diary? In some ways, not much; in others, more than we would like. Here are a few items that seem to me important context for her writing.

Esther Hillesum, who was called "Etty", was born on January 15 1914 in Middleberg, Netherlands to Julius Hillesum, a physician, and Rebecca Bernstein, a Russian Jew who had fled to the Netherlands after a pogrom. She had two siblings: Mischa, a musician of considerable talent and promise, and Jaap, who made important chemical discoveries in his teens and became a physician. Etty studied philosophy, took a degree in law, and did graduate work in Slavic languages.

When we encounter Etty in 1941, she is 27 years old, living in Amsterdam as a tutor in Russian. She aspires to be a writer and lives over the square where the Riksmuseet sits. She is a client of a Jungian "psychochirologist" named Julius Spier, who, by today's standards would be considered unethical in that he had sex with his patients, including Etty. Her work with Spier was "a catalyst setting her on a search for the essential, the truly human, in dramatic opposition to the inhumanity around her."

The Germans invaded the Netherlands, which surrendered in May, 1940. Life became difficult for Jews, who were removed from the rest of Holland and concentrated in Amsterdam. In February, 1941 the first anti-pogrom strike in Europe broke out in Amsterdam. In the spring of 1942, the Nuremberg Laws required Jews to wear a yellow star and began a process of restricting Jews from public places utilized by non-Jews, including parks, public transportation, grocery stores and the like. The diary faces these restrictions squarely.

Etty went to work as a typist with the Jewish Council on July 15, 1942, about the time Anne Frank started her diary a few miles away. The Nazis began street roundups to concentrate Jews at Westerbork, a "transit camp" just outside Amsterdam where weekly trains took Jews to Auschwitz. The Council, created by the Germans, was to select people who could be "useful" and have their deportation postponed. Etty was uncomfortable with having a job that let her live at the expense of others and volunteered to go to Westerbork, where she worked in the hospital. She wanted to be "the thinking heart of the barracks."

On September 7, 1943, Etty, her parents, and her brother, Mischa boarded a transport to Auschwitz. On November 30, 1943, the Red Cross reported her death.

In the face of all this, Etty tried to focus on the good in everyone, to find hope in hopeless situations, to celebrate the beauty of the world where beauty was hard to find. Here are her own words:

Etty's Words

[i]

9 March 1941

Here goes, then.

This is a painful and well nigh insuperable step for me: yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined paper.

The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp

And my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard.
The main difficulty, I think, is a sense of shame.
So many inhibitions, so much fear of letting go,
of allowing things to pour out of me,
and yet that is what I must do if I am ever to give my life
a reasonable and satisfactory purpose.
It is like the final, liberating scream that always sticks
Bashfully in your throat when you make love.

I am accomplished in bed, just seasoned enough
I should think to be counted among the better lovers,
and love does indeed suit me to perfection,
and yet it remains a mere trifle,
set apart from what is truly essential,
and deep inside me something is still locked away.

The rest of me is like that, too.
I am blessed enough intellectually to be able to fathom most subjects,
to express myself clearly on most things;
I seem to be a match for most of life's problems,
and yet deep down something like a tightly wound ball of twine
binds me relentlessly, and at times
I am nothing more or less than a miserable,
frightened creature despite the clarity with which I can express myself.

[1]

15 March 1941
Suddenly, a few weeks ago
I had a liberating thought
that surfaced in me
like a hesitant,
young blade of grass
thrusting its way

through a wilderness of weeds:

If there were only one
decent German,
then he should be cherished
despite that whole barbaric gang,
and because of that one
decent German
it is wrong to pour hatred
over an entire people.

[2]

19 March 1941

I was too sensual, too greedy.
I yearned physically for all I thought was beautiful,
wanted to own it.
Hence, that painful longing
that could never be satisfied,
the pining for something
I thought unattainable.

But that night, only just gone,
I reacted quite differently.
I felt that God's world was beautiful
despite everything,
but its beauty
filled me with joy.
I was just as deeply moved by that mysterious
still landscape in the dusk,
but somehow
I no longer wanted to own it.

And now that I don't want to own
anything any more
and am free,
now I suddenly own everything,
now my inner riches
are immeasurable.

[6]

13 August 1941

I don't know how to take it
with all the suffering there is,
you begin to feel ashamed
of taking yourself and your moods
so seriously.

But you must continue to take yourself
seriously, you must remain your own witness,
marking well everything that happens
in this world,
never shutting your eyes to reality.

You must come to grips
with these terrible times
and try to find answers
to the many questions they pose
and perhaps the answers
will help not only yourself
but also others.

I sometimes feel like a post in a raging sea,
lashed on all sides by waves,
but I am firmly moored, and the years
have helped to weather me.

[7]

20 August 1941

There is a really deep well inside me
and in it dwells God.
Sometimes I am there, too.
But more often stones and grit
block the well,
and God is buried beneath.
Then he must be dug out again.

[10]

25 November 1941

God, take me by your hand.
I shall follow you dutifully

and not resist too much.
I shall evade none of the tempests
life has in store for me.
I shall try to face it all
As best I can.

But now and then grant me
a short respite.
I shall never again assume
in my innocence that any peace
that comes my way
will be eternal.

I shall accept the inevitable
tumult and struggle.
I shall delight in warmth and security,
but I shall not rebel
if I have to suffer cold
should you so decree.
I shall follow wherever Your hand leads me
and shall try not to be afraid.

I shall try to spread some of my warmth,
my genuine love for others, wherever I go.
I don't want to be anything special,
I only want to try to be true to that in me
which seeks to fulfill its promise.

I sometimes imagine
that I long for the seclusion
of a nunnery, but I know
I must seek You among people,
out in the world.

Then, as the Nuremberg Laws took effect:

[11]

19 February 1942
We stood there in the cold
waiting for the tram.
Our professors are in prison,

another of Jan's friends
has been killed,
and there are so many other sorrows,
but all we said to each other was
"It is too easy to be vindictive."
That really was the bright spot of the day.

[12]

27 February 1942

Something else about this morning:
the perception, very strongly born in,
that despite all the suffering and injustice
I cannot hate others.

All the appalling things that happen
are no mysterious threats from afar,
but arise from fellow beings very close to us.
That makes these happenings more familiar,
then, and not so frightening.

The terrifying thing is that systems
grow too big for men and hold them
in a satanic grip, the builders not less
than the victims of the system.

Much as large edifices and spires
created by men's hands, tower high
above us, dominate us, yet may collapse
over our heads and bury us.

[16]

30 April 1942

...the very night on which the "yellow
star" was issued
I said, "It is probably worth quite a bit
being personally involved
in the writing of history.
You can really tell then

What the history books leave out."
That man in Beethovenstraat this afternoon
won't get a mention in them.
I looked at him as one might
at the first crocus in Spring,
with pure enchantment.
He was wearing a huge golden star,
wearing it triumphantly
on his chest. He was a procession
and a demonstration all by himself
as he cycled along so happily.
And all that yellow—
I suddenly had a poetic vision
of the sun rising above him,
so radiant and smiling did he look.

[21]

30 May 1942

I had the feeling I was resting
against the naked breast of life,
and could feel her gentle
and regular heartbeat.
I felt safe and protected,
and I thought, how strange.
It is wartime.
There are concentration camps.

I can say of so many houses I pass:
 Here the son has been thrown into prison,
 There the father has been taken hostage,
 And the 18 year old boy in that house over there
 has been sentenced to death.
And these streets and houses are all so close to my own.
I know how very nervous people are,
I know about the mounting human suffering.
I know the persecution and oppression and despotism
and the impotent fury and the terrible sadism.
I know it all.

And yet—
At unguarded moments,
when left to myself,

I suddenly lie against
the naked breast of life,
and her arms around me
are so gentle and protective
and my own heartbeat
is difficult to describe:
so slow, and so regular,
and so soft almost muffled,
but so constant
as if it would never stop.

[23]

12-13 June 1942

And now Jews may no longer
visit greengrocers' shops;
they will soon have to hand in
their bicycles;
they may no longer travel by tram,
and they must be off the streets
by eight o'clock at night. ...
I shall have to adapt myself in advance,
make incapacity part of my daily life,
of my whole self, the better to control
and then dismiss it. ...
We could be ordered at any moment
to those barracks
in Drenthe Province,
and the greengrocers have signs
in their shops saying, "No Jews."

[27]

3 July 1942

They are out to destroy
us completely;
we must accept that
and go on from there.

Today I was filled

with terrible despair,
and I shall have to come to terms
with that as well.

Even if we are consigned to hell
let us go there
as gracefully as we can.

[28]

3 July 1942

I have looked at our destruction,
our miserable end,
which has already begun
in so many small ways
in our daily life
straight in the eye
and accepted it into my life,
and my love of life
has not been diminished.
I am not bitter or rebellious,
or in any way discouraged.
I continue to grow from day to day,
even with the likelihood of destruction
staring me in the face. ...
I have come to terms with life.
Nothing can happen to me,
my personal fate is not the issue;
it really doesn't matter if it is I
who perish or another.
What matters
is that we are all
marked men.

[35]

12 July 1942

I shall promise you one thing, God,
just one very small thing:
I shall never burden my today
with cares about my tomorrow.
Each day is sufficient unto itself.

I shall try to help you, God,
to stop my strength ebbing away.

One thing is becoming increasingly clear:
that you cannot help us;
we must help you to help ourselves.
That is all we can manage these days
and also all that really matters;
that we safeguard
that little piece of you, God,
in ourselves,
and perhaps in others as well.

You cannot help us,
but we must help You
and defend your dwelling place inside us
to the last.

[46]

17 September 1942
How great are the needs
of Your creatures
on this earth, oh God.
They sit there
talking quietly and quite unsuspecting,
and suddenly their need erupts
in all its nakedness.
Then, there they are,
bundles of human misery,
desperate and unable to face life,
and that's when my task begins.
One must clear the path to You in them.

[48]

22 September 1942
Wherever I go,
won't there be the same earth
under my roving feet

and the same sky
with now the moon
and now the sun,
not to mention all the stars,
above my grateful head?
So why speak of an unknown destination.

At this point the diary ends. What we have now are letters
written from Westerbork.

[54]

18 December 1942

We have an orphanage, a synagogue,
a small mortuary
and a shoe factory under construction.
I have heard talk about a madhouse
being built, and my latest information
is that the expanding hospital barracks
complex already has a thousand beds. ...
There is mud, so much mud that somewhere
between your ribs you need to have a great deal
of inner sunshine if you don't want to become
the psychological victim of it all.

[55]

18 December 1942

And among all this
the unremitting clatter
of a battery of typewriters;
the machine-gun fire
of bureaucracy.

[57]

26 June 1943

Four hundred people from the hospital
will have to go on the next transport.
Walking through the barracks
is an act of despair. ...
I feel like running away.

It's almost beyond comprehension,
the strength with which people
whose lives are almost entirely behind them
hang on to the wretched bits of carcass that are left....
Everyone has to accept the fate allotted to him;
there is nothing else for it.

[61]

3 July 1943

The misery here is quite terrible;
and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away
into the depths behind me, I often walk
with a spring in my step
along the barbed wire.
And then time and again,
it soars from my heart—
I can't help it, that's just the way it is,
like some elemental force—the feeling
that life is glorious and magnificent,
and that one day we shall be building
a whole new world.
Against every new outrage and every fresh horror,
we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness,
drawing strength from within ourselves.
We may suffer, but we must not succumb.

The last message we have from Etty is a postcard she pushed
through the cracks on the side of the transport. It was found by
farmers, who posted it:

Opening the Bible at random I find this:
"The Lord is my high tower."
I am sitting on my rucksack
in the middle of a full freight car.
Father, Mother and Mischa are a few cars away.
In the end, the departure came without warning.
On sudden special orders from The Hague.

We left the camp singing.
Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too.
We shall be traveling for three days.

Thank you for all your kindness and care.

These fragments from her writing are but a small window into the soul of a woman who faced enormous threats to her well being and her life, who faced her situation with courage and grace. To read her writing is to encounter great spiritual depth. I know I have become more spiritually enriched by getting to know her. I am looking forward to meeting her as Susan Stein brings her to life.

Don't miss Etty.

Blessed be.