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# Earth and Spirit: The homely God who holds us

Rich Heffern | Mar. 13, 2009

In May of the year 1373 the woman who would compose the first book ever written in the English language died at the tender age of 30 ... or so her bedside companions thought. In the throes of a severe respiratory infection, this English Catholic woman had what we call today a near-death experience.

We don't know her real name, but we call her Juliana, since she took the name of St. Julian's church in Norwich, where she lived as an anchorite.

In visions like those of the star traveler in Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey," she navigated the galaxies, up and down the wide corridors of the universe, crying out, "Benedicite!" in bewildered fear. Through the wounded heart of the world, she journeyed to a beautiful, shining city, which it turned out was located within her own person.

In breathless wonder, she saw there the divine mystery personified, the Holy One, whom she described as, curiously enough, a bit homely, but also most courageous and personable. "He shewed me a lytil thyng the quantite of a hasyl nott, lyeng in the pawme of the hand as it had semed, and it was as rownde as eny ball." The Divine Sustainer held the whole world, which looked to Juliana like a wrinkled hazelnut, in warm, caring hands -- bathing it in love, suffering along with it.

After reviving, Juliana moved into a small cell attached to St. Julian's and spent the rest of her life in prayer and giving spiritual direction. A contemporary of Chaucer, she recorded her visions in a book she called *Showings or Revelations of Divine Love*, written in the vernacular of her day.

Her advice to all who came to her seeking guidance and wisdom: It's going to be all right, for human existence is not absurd or meaningless. "Sin is behovely," she pronounced, "but all shall be well, and all shall be well" (she had to say it twice for the knuckleheads) "and all manner of things shall be well."

In other words: We'll often miss the mark, but in the end everything will work out. We will be troubled, belabored, disquieted. (We will be made to suffer difficult people at work and be difficult in our turn.) Though tempested and afflicted, we will not be overcome.

Such an affirmation is possible only because it wells up irrationally from within our experience.

Like St. Catherine of Siena, Juliana has little of the dualism separating body and soul that is frequent in Catholic spirituality. For her, God is in our sensuality as well as in our substance, and body and soul render mutual aid. "Either of them take help of the other till we be brought up into stature, as kind worketh."

She lays special stress upon the "homeliness" and "courtesy" of God's dealings with us. "For love maketh might and wisdom full meek to us." With this we must respond with happy confidence. "Failing of comfort" is the "most mischief" into which the soul can fall.

The term "homeliness" (homelyhede) lacked the pejorative aspect it has acquired in our time. For Juliana, it had all the emotional resonance of home itself, including friendliness, familiarity, intimacy. Nor was she reducing God to cozy sentimentality, for remember that the medieval home was literally the place where all birth, death and sex occurred, the scene of an unending, strenuous struggle against dirt, squalor, pestilence and confusion. She lived during the outbreaks of plague that decimated Europe in the Middle Ages. Norwich was hit three times while she lived.

In a desperate, chaotic time, Juliana wrote about her experience of God, which was completely different from what was being preached. She presented startlingly original religious imagery. "God almighty is our natural father, and God all-wisdom is our natural mother," she wrote. She saw Jesus Christ too as homely and motherly. "The mother can lay the child tenderly at her breast but our tender mother Jesus he can familiarly [homley] lead us into his blessed breast through his sacred open side."

Hers was an optimistic belief in God's all-encompassing love as opposed to the despairing sin/damnation consciousness of her time. When seekers asked her what they should do, she answered, "Live gladly and kindly."

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