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Filmmaker seeks answers in Simone Weil

Jamie Manson | Mar. 13, 2012 Grace on the Margins

"What response does seeing human suffering demand of us?"

This question, which opens the new documentary *An Encounter with Simone Weil*, couldn't be timelier. From the unfathomable violence in Syria and Afghanistan to the epidemics of disease and famine in the global South, the suffering in our world is so overwhelming it is difficult to conceive of any response, let alone an adequate one.

Filmmaker Julia Haslett believes that an answer can be found by delving into the life and thought of Simone Weil, an early 20th century French philosopher and mystic.

Haslett first encountered Weil in a quotation: "Attention is the highest and purest form of generosity." The idea touched her so deeply that she sought out a biography of Weil. As she ventured to read Weil's work, which totals almost 16 volumes, she found herself increasingly obsessed with the thinker.

But it may have been the nature of Weil's death more than the story of her life that captured Haslett.

Weil died in 1943 at the age of 34. Although she had tuberculosis, her cause of death was ruled a suicide, since she refused to eat more than the rations given to French soldiers who were fighting in WWII. Rest and overeating were the only known treatments for consumption at the time. Weil likely would have survived if she'd followed doctor's orders.

The specter of suicide looms in Haslett's own life. Her father took his life when she was 17 and her brother, Tim, suffers from depression and anxiety that threatens to consume him as well.

"My father's death taught me that if I don't pay attention, someone might die," Haslett tells the audience.

The intensity of Haslett's need to understand Weil benefits the first half of the film. She travels to France to interview the few remaining survivors who knew Weil: one of her philosophy students, her niece and her cousin.

They all agree that Weil was exceptionally intelligent. Her philosophy student recalls that Weil would not allow her students to purchase any textbooks because she preferred to translate the texts herself from the original ancient Greek, Latin, German and English.

One of Weil's lessons in particular remains with the student: "When you have to decide to do something, always do what will cost you the most."

Weil's relatives are less enamored of her legacy.

"I admire her, but I would never want to imitate her," her niece, Sylvie, admits.

Weil's cousin, Raymonde, is less charitable. When asked if Weil felt guilty about her privileged childhood, Raymonde barks, "Yes, but it doesn't explain it. Why this guilt?! ... I didn't feel this guilt, yet I was born in this same milieu."

Weil's "guilt" was evidenced in her deep desire to experience the sufferings of workers, soldiers and the poor. She left her teaching job to work in the Renault factory. She insisted on only eating what workers could afford. Likewise, in times of war, Weil would not heat her home so she could experience the cold that soldiers suffered while sleeping on the battlefield.

"Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed to feel with them, one cannot understand," she wrote. It was this radical immersion into suffering that led Weil to develop the idea of "affliction" as a suffering that encompasses "physical pain, distress of the soul, and social degradation, all at the same time." She believed that we needed to attune over vision to understand and unite with the afflicted.

Weil was driven in part by her radical commitment to Marxist philosophy. Initially a pacifist and a great champion of workers' rights, she spent most of her 20s writing political philosophy, teaching workers and leading marches.

Haslett's presentation of Weil the activist is the strongest part of the film, perhaps because the filmmaker herself has a deep interest in political action and spent her filmmaking career documenting human suffering and the horrors of war.

But the film begins to falter when Haslett moves into the religious phase of Weil's life. Haslett admits that she is not a religious person and feels "betrayed by Weil's turn towards God." Ultimately, Haslett determines that Weil was forced to turn to religion because "there wasn't anywhere else for her to go."

Haslett's unwillingness to engage in Weil's theological thought deprives both the audience and Weil herself.

Although Weil was Jewish, in her late 20s she began to visit the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in France. She suffered from terrible migraines and found that the smell of incense and sounds of chants helped to separate her spirit from the pains of her body.

Although she never received the sacraments and spent most of her time in the abbey when it was empty and quiet, Weil had three mystical experiences. In the final experience, she writes that Christ inhabited her soul and allowed her to see through his eyes.

Weil saw Jesus as the perfect model of affliction. She understood the love of God as so great that it journeyed across space and time to draw us closer to God. And if we refused God's love, Weil says, "God comes back again and again like a beggar." Weil believed that God's love becomes incarnate in us when we pay attention to others. This requires emptying ourselves of our own our interests and projections in order to be truly present to another person.

If Haslett had allowed herself to absorb Weil's idea of attention in its fullness, the second half of her film would have been as successful as the first half. Unfortunately, Haslett's reservations about God and her compulsion to find answers to her questions prevent her from opening herself to the entirety of Weil's person.

Haslett's need to resurrect Weil becomes so overwhelming she actually hires an actress to read Weil's work and then dress like Weil. In a bizarre sequence in the film, Haslett interviews the actress as if she were Weil.

Although the actress does her best to articulate Weil's thoughts, the neediness behind Haslett's questions forces

her to come out of character at one point. "I feel like sometimes you're pushing me into an answer you want to hear," she finally says to Haslett. It is perhaps one of the best insights in the film.

But Haslett refuses to accept the actress's argument, and insists that she simply loved Weil so much that she doesn't want her to die. This only begs the question of whether Haslett is seeking an understanding of Weil's life or an explanation for her father's death. Haslett projects her father's suicide on to Weil's so strongly that she begins to demand of Weil answers that only her father could give.

The connection Haslett wants to establish between Weil's death and her father's suicide is more tenuous than perhaps she can see. Although Haslett tells us little about her father, we know that his suicide was likely the result of years struggling with the despair that comes with depression and anxiety.

Weil lived a life of self-imposed isolation and seemed to despair of the violence and desolation of the world, but there is not evidence that her death was the direct result of depression. It could be argued that Weil assumed the mantle of many women mystics before her. Catherine of Siena, like Weil, was known to starve herself. Her extreme fasts resulted in her death at the age of 33. Some of the Beguines, like Weil, longed to be one with Christ's suffering and even harmed their own bodies to heighten the experience.

Weil, like most mystics, led an extreme life with a radical commitment to her beliefs. Throughout the film, Haslett often evokes Weil's quote: "There should not be the slightest discrepancy between one's thoughts and one's way of life." Given Weil?s absolutism, obsession with suffering and glorification of self-emptying love, it seems that her life could only find fulfillment in a sacrificial death.

With all of my reservations about the film, I still recommend it for its valuable introduction to Weil's life, her political action and her writing. Haslett has the depth and courage to devote herself to a subject that no other documentarian has taken on before.

But any viewing should be supplemented by a reading of Weil's spiritual autobiography *Waiting for God*, particularly her essay "The Love of God and Affliction." Not to read it would be to deny Weil the fullness of attention that she believed everyone deserved.

An Encounter with Simone Weil is currently playing on the film festival circuit and will be available for purchase on DVD next month. For further information, visit linestreet.net [1].

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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