

Going Home

“I think I will do it anyway. I’ll turn inwards for half an hour each morning before work and listen to my inner voice. Lose myself.

But it’s not so simple, that sort of quiet hour. It has to be learnt. A lot of unimportant inner litter and bits and pieces have to be swept out first. Even a small head can be piled high with irrelevant distractions. True, there may be edifying emotions and thoughts, too, but the clutter is ever present. So let this be the aim of the meditation: to turn one’s innermost being into a vast empty plain, with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view. So that something of God can enter you, and something of Love too. Not the kind of love-de-luxe that you revel in deliciously for half an hour, taking pride in how sublime you can feel, but the love you can apply to small everyday things.”

These words are from a diary entry, for 8th June 1941, by Etty Hillesum, who was a Dutch Jewish author of confessional letters and diaries which describe both her religious awakening and the persecutions of Jewish people in Amsterdam during the German occupation. In 1943, she was deported and murdered in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

She identifies some familiar themes, those that John Cassian shared with the West in the third century, sharing the rich heritage of the Eastern desert tradition of the Syrian and Egyptian monastics which have become central to the Christian contemplative tradition.

The intention of their project, of their life, is to truly see. To see the reality of oneself, loved and forgiven. To see the true self, rather than the delusions of the false one shaped by the desire of who we would be if we could.

This task takes practice, and the art is to grow in a habit of not dwelling upon what Etty calls the

‘unimportant inner litter and bits and pieces [that] have to be swept out first [...] irrelevant distractions.’ but to place our attention upon God, upon Love, using a word or phrase that roots us in this Godly, loving intention.

And part of the art is to patiently persevere, to come back from the ‘inner litter and bits and pieces’ time and time again.

And our journey is not to a God ‘over here’ or ‘over there’, but a journey towards the centre of the true self where God continues to create and form us, calling us to spend more time with him at home within.

