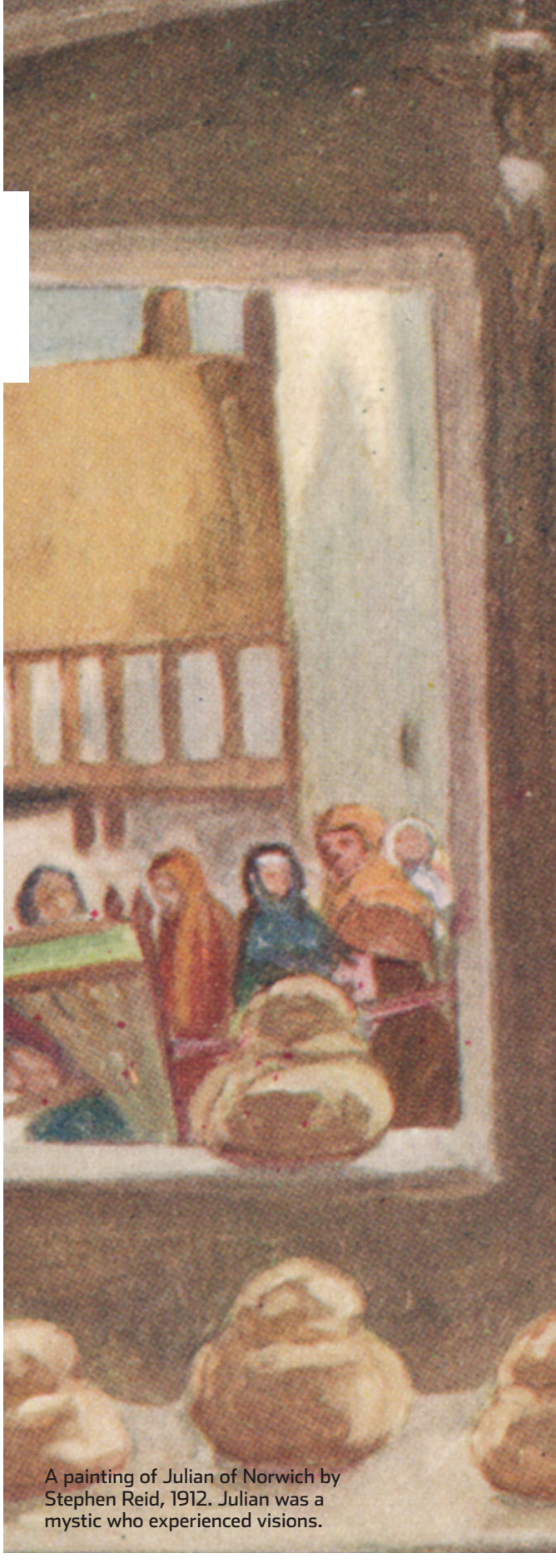
WHY WE BECAME MYSTICS

What Julian of Norwich can teach us about oneness with God

By Kaya Oakes

A woman is walled into a small room, which is attached to the side of a church. In that room, there is not much she can do other than contemplate and pray. There are two small holes carved into the walls. One faces the outside, and people approach it to ask her for advice and prayers; the other faces inside, into the church. Through this window she can receive blessings and the Eucharist. She will never leave this room until she dies. Its bricks were laid to seal her in—to make her an anchoress, or a kind of religious hermit.

We do not know much about how she passes her days except for the writing she leaves behind. Wildly imaginative and sometimes hallucinatory, her recollection of the visions she had had during an illness in her previous life, titled *Revelations of Divine Love*, will survive the medieval era as the oldest extant book written by a woman in English. We do not know her real name or how she came to be named for the church to which her cell was attached and the city in which that church stood. We do not know why she chose that cell, except that women had few choices about their lives in her era. To us, she is known as Julian of Norwich, a solitary seeker of God, living through an era of sickness and fear. She is also a key to understanding the mystical experiences



A painting of Julian of Norwich by Stephen Reid, 1912. Julian was a mystic who experienced visions.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many people have experienced during our own era of sickness and fear.

Mysticism, broadly defined, is the transcendent experience of an encounter with God. For Catholic mystics like Julian, Hildegard von Bingen, St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, it takes the form of a vision. For others, it is akin to the "still, small voice," a moment of encounter with the ineffable that becomes transformational to their spiritual lives.

Since Covid-19 stripped away many of the distractions with which we would normally fill our days and forced us to slow down, a renewed interest in contemplative practice has meant that more people have time to be open to mystical experiences. These experiences can include a new appreciation for encounters with nature, hearing favorite music in new ways, and deeper and more honest conversations with beloveds. In these moments, we sometimes experience what Celtic Christians refer to as the feeling we are in "thin places," where the veil between our physical, earthbound lives and something greater than ourselves is momentarily pulled back.

Kevin Johnson, who co-hosts the podcast "Encountering Silence," says that mysticism is something that goes beyond a single experience and is "only a piece of the puzzle" of the lifelong practice of meditation and contemplation. For mystics like Julian, the writing that emerges from these encounters is a kind of visionary literature, an attempt to "put words on something that's ineffable." And we know mysticism is not that uncommon, since it is not confined to the Christian tradition. There are records of mystical experiences ranging from the Buddha's moment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree to the Jewish kabbalah to the poetry of Sufi Muslim mystics like Rumi. For Christians, however, our understanding of mysticism is rooted in the ascetic practices of monastics who fled society to immerse themselves in silence.

In the early church, the Desert Fathers and Mothers experienced mysticism through contemplation, the silent practice of meditation. These ammas and abbas also withdrew from society to put themselves through what my spiritual director sometimes refers to as an extended psychological experiment. What happens if a person devotes all their attention, longings and waking hours not to the material world but to God? In the Apophthegmata Patrum, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, we are told that a hermit in the 300s said contemplation and mysticism involve only a few steps. "Take care to be silent. Empty your mind. Attend to your meditation in the fear of God, whether you are resting or at work."

Evagrius, one of the first monks to record the sayings of the Desert Fathers and later a desert father himself, taught that mysticism required a threefold practice of purgation, illumination and unification. In ordinary language, this means that to have that mystical experience of encounter with God, individuals must first empty themselves of distractions, then be open to enlightenment; only then can a person achieve that elusive oneness with God or window into eternity. As Evagrius put it, "A man in chains cannot run. Nor can the mind that is enslaved to passion see the place of spiritual prayer."

For contemporary people, Mr. Johnson describes mysticism as "a whole other level of reality that opens up" when people learn to sit silently and pray. "And it was always there. It's nothing new. It's not extraordinary." Mr. Johnson says that the philosopher Martin Buber referred to this state as embodied engagement, letting the words, ideas and experiences that race through our minds drop away so we can be open to something deeper.

But one of the things we learn from Julian is that sometimes the experience of emptiness and silence comes from outside of us, not from within. Julian lived through several cycles of the plague and at one point, she writes, wished herself sick so that she might identify with the suffering Christ. But when sickness came, she also had a vision of Christ that revealed to her that suffering is not necessarily the best path to oneness with God. In Julian's vision, Christ takes up our suffering and unites his own suffering with ours to give us freedom. Oneness with God is not about suffering itself, but about accepting that God is still present in our suffering. In her vision of the world held in God's hands like a hazelnut, Julian explains that this understanding "lasts and ever shall, for God loves it." This is why she is also able to repeatedly tell us that in spite of whatever we are living through, "all will be well." The profound consola-

The Covid-19 pandemic has stripped away many of our usual distractions and, at times, opened spaces for greater contemplation.

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tion in the midst of the chaos and pain that she experienced can resonate in unexpected ways for many of us who feel increasingly isolated today.

Since the pandemic began, I have noticed how quiet my normally noisy city has become. I live one street from a freeway offramp, and on an average day, cars and trucks would have begun vibrating and honking me into awareness as early as 5 a.m. These days, the sounds are merely occasional, the whoosh of an essential worker putting their tires on the road. Some of us work at home, anchorites tethered to our Wi-Fi connections, where we peer not through windows into the outside world like Julian, but into virtual windows that lead us into other people's rooms, where they sit peering back into our rooms, monastic cells upon monastic cells, multiplying and dividing as we log on and off.

The extended psychological experiment of our own era will not end in the same way that Julian's plague years did, since science and medicine have advanced so far beyond what she could have imagined; and thus science and medicine will, we can hope, find effective treatment for the virus or a vaccine. But we are still watching the deaths pile up, dreading the long-term health effects, the economic devastation, the profound loneliness and the global mental health issues that will remain long after the virus is vanquished.

Many of us who are spiritual directors have been asked where God is in this pandemic, but we have also heard reports of God becoming manifest in unexpected ways, of people experiencing startling encounters with the divine in the absence of collective physical worship. Because the sureties of our past lives as they existed less than a year ago have been steadily stripped away, what remains is our ability to live in the present moment alone. For religiously inclined people, this means that we may be moving closer to God in the simple awareness that nothing is guaranteed.

Understanding that we are not in control is, in some

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ways, what unites us with Christ, which is what Julian eventually came to understand. "We need to fall," she tells us in her *Revelations*, "for if we did not fall, we would not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker's marvelous love so fully."

Because mysticism is so difficult to explain, its definition is constantly being debated, and thus it may be hard for some to believe that mystical experiences can even take place in the modern era. After all, much of what the mystics describe sounds like mental illness to our modern ears, and today we have effective mental health treatments available. The pragmatic American bent toward explaining everything away means religious experiences can more easily be dismissed as momentary distractions or flights of fancy. The commodification of "mindfulness" into apps and corporate-speak means that contemplation, too, is something to be bought and sold rather than experienced, and "new agey" practices like tarot cards and crystals that have recently experienced a revival of popularity can also be commodified.

But the Anglo-Catholic Edwardian mystic Evelyn Underhill, a British pacifist who lived through both World Wars, tells us that mysticism experienced in troubled times is meant to be a lived experience, not to be overanalyzed. "Where the philosopher guesses and argues," she writes in *The Complete Christian Mystic*, "the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools." This is vividly shown in Julian's *Revelations*, where the language she uses to convey the sufferings of Christ and her own suffering and illness is sometimes downright gory, but the language used to describe transcendence, love and recovery is equally vivid.

We are all finding our own ways to contemplate. Since the pandemic began, a friend of mine has started each day by looking up people who have died from Covid and praying for them by name. I have immersed myself in the narratives of doctors and patients, the deep-dive first-person accounts of life in an intensive care unit, trying to unpack what kind of suffering this virus is capable of unleashing, trying to move closer to what that suffering might be like as a way of contemplating where God might be met in that setting.

And as the pandemic overlapped with news of more deaths of Black Americans, with news of the destructiveness and horror that seem rampant and all-encompassing in our country, it was good to remember that Julian tells us that in times like this, "deeds are done which appear so evil to us and people suffer such terrible evils that it does not seem as though any good will ever come of them." But when we focus on that, "we cannot find peace in the blessed contemplation of God," whereas God is constantly nudging us back into feeling his love. "Pay attention to this now, faithfully and confidently," God says to Julian, "and at the end of time you will truly see it in the fullness of joy."

The poet and theologian David Russell Mosley has been reading mystical literature throughout the pandemic, and he recently returned to Julian's work. Mr. Mosley, who grew up in a nondenominational Christian church and became a Catholic in college, encountered the work of the mystics through studies of Celtic Christianity and felt "immediately drawn to them," he told me. His own spirituality had always included moments of "intense feeling," and discovering Christian mysticism helped him to understand that mystics "had actually codified the things I'd experienced, and gone further." The pandemic, he says, gave him a chance to take up some monastic practices at home with his family and to reframe the time at home as a period of spiritual reflection.

Julian, he says, offered an example of someone who "chose to go into herself," whereas most of us were forced into a life of contemplation because of stay-at-home orders. Mr. Mosley describes encountering Julian and being "entranced" by her vision of the world, particularly by her vision of the world being held in God's hand like a hazelnut. He calls Julian's imagery an eschatalogical vision of a better world than the one we live in at the moment, "a hope that one day Christ will return, and there'll be no more sickness, no more sadness, no more racism." In a difficult time, particularly in a pandemic, reminders of the inevitability of death can make life seem pointless; but according to Mr. Mosley, Julian's work is a reminder that even death is "not the end of the story." What reading her work gave

Continued on page 36

Continued from page 32

him, he says, is a sense of hope.

A part of Julian's vision of the world is that sense of oneness and connectedness that is common to mystical experience. "God loved us before he made us," she writes, "and his love has never diminished and never shall." Contemplation and mystical experiences, according to Mr. Johnson, are a way of discovering "an other inside of us," which is "the ground of God, and my neighbor. We are all of that same otherness."

Mystical experiences and contemplative practices, Mr. Johnson says, help us to disconnect from our egos and reconnect with the wild part of ourselves that is deeply intertwined with the natural and human world. In other words, they help us tap into the same overwhelming love that Julian experienced, even in a time of plague and war. For a mystic, that overwhelming love is what they know as God.

Because of this pandemic, so many of us have been staying home for months on end, with no end in sight. The safety of my community trumps my own freedom of movement, and I accept that as a form of love for my neighbor. I live with this isolation as the way things will be for some time to come. My fall classes will be online, the monastic cell of my tiny home office becoming a classroom and a writing lab, the Zoom windows on my laptop a portal into other people's worlds. By the time this essay is published, who knows what kind of world its readers and its writer will be living in.

That, too, is mysticism, the idea that time is elastic, that we are creating things not knowing how they will be received or who will receive them, that creating is itself the time of encounter with grace. But, like immersing ourselves in Julian's visions, that sense of not knowing can free us up to understand that we are living in God's hands, in kairos time.

"For lack of attention," Evelyn Underhill wrote, "a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day." So, too, do a thousand visions of oneness with others elude us in this time of separation, until we notice them shimmering, just on the edge of our vision.

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