

Mother Julian called contemplation a ‘condition of complete simplicity’



A few miles away is the anchorhold of Mother Julian of Norwich where her solitude, friendly and open to all, burned bright in the medieval church. Here, at Noggs Barn, the Norfolk summer day is playing light and shade over the lawns and through the branches of the trees. Seen through the sitting room window, a cat prowls its territory and birds descend safely on the high feeder that they know will be full for them. Sitting on the sofa, Anne holds a glass of water in a Guinness pint glass and tells me with a twinkle about the pheasant that visits regularly with his four wives. In the kitchen Mark, her one husband, is clattering peacefully, preparing lunch.

Some years ago, before her illness was diagnosed, I came here for the first time for the opening of Noggs Barn, a piggery converted into a meditation centre. It is a lovely, light room that has now become a spiritual centre for many in the area. It is said that the electric force field of the heart is five thousand times stronger than that of the brain and can be felt as a real force between those in close proximity to each other. It sounds a bit of new-agey science but also rings quite true and may explain why we visit friends and why people make the effort to travel simply to meditate together. The barn seems to have accumulated this energy of peace and to be ready to share it with anyone who enters. It is a place very close to Anne's heart and to her sense of purpose in the world.

My coffee and biscuits arrive. Mark is training to be a counsellor, wholly content to be retired to care and spend more time with Anne. The first year after they learned she had myeloma was a very turbulent one with as many alterations of light and shade as is happening in the garden, beneath the blue sky and billowy clouds. Together, and with their grown children, they have found a full degree of peace and happiness that some might even envy and perhaps should. But it is a kind of fulfilment that they feel is entirely unconditional, natural and obvious. It is simply there, though finding it comes at a price.

We talk of the illness and the chemo-cocktails that her medical helpers are devising and which will be necessary for as long as she can take it. The body, we agree, is a strange thing. It produces unstoppable cancer cells but is smart enough to adapt and reject the very stuff that would cure them. Ultimately there can only be acceptance but with that, Anne says, a door opened and she discovered a new dimension in life. She struggles a little for the words to describe it. The key word is simplicity. She thinks she is not thinking so clearly because she is recovering from recent infections but to me she is being very lucid. Mother Julian called contemplation a “condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything”.

Out there, beyond Noggs Barn, there is much discussion about this condition that is radiant and joyful in all circumstances of life, even (or especially) while living with a conscious deadline. But there is a world of difference between all this as an idea, an opinion, quoted and commented upon endlessly, as it has been, and the state in itself that these words describe. There are volumes on the history of mysticism and professors argue about various definitions of it, and there are courses on spirituality and even competition among prayer practices. Anne, however, only speaks, and can speak, freshly from experience, which is so rare in any communication we have with anyone. She is not trying to prove anything.

Having felt this door swing open for her (and Mark), she found the healing powers inherent in all the relationships that make up life. Health has new and richer meanings. In the same process, the mystery of happiness shines out like a long sunny patch. She does not use much religious language but it feels as if the true meaning of religion has blossomed too.

A few days later, talking with a medical group about meditation, I share Anne’s discoveries with them. They hear her speak about the meaning of medical “success”. And, when I ask her what she would like to gift to her medical helpers, she says it is to “let them off the hook of feeling they have to be successful”. It is a dance they are all in together, she says. The doctors and nurses are paying total attention to this most interesting patient.

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