On Suffering and Sexuality:

Reflections on Passionate Living

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For the last several years I have taught a course on the theology of suffering in which I have asked my students to read the journal of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew who lived in Amsterdam during World War II and suffered under the persecutions of the Nazis, ultimately dying at Auschwitz. Remarkably, Hillesum rejected attempts by friends to spirit her out of Amsterdam in the face of growing restrictions on the activities of Jews. When she and her family were finally sent to the transit camp at Westerbork, a stopping off site for Jews eventually to be sent on to the death camps, she attempted to secure the freedom of her family while eschewing such freedom for herself. Her writings provide moving testimony to her vocation to stand in solidarity with the suffering of the world.

While most of my students are moved by Hillesum's writing, there are always a few who are put off by her. Their difficulty generally lies not with her profound reflections on the nature of human suffering but on the incongruity they see between her spiritual depth and what they judge to be an immoral lifestyle. Throughout the journal she writes of her sexual prowess. She is equally frank in describing her affair with an older man, her therapist and teacher. She also admits, with barely a trace of contrition, of being sexually involved at the same time with a second man who owned the house in which she lived as a boarder. Indeed, early in her journal she confesses that "my

immediate reaction on meeting a man is invariably to gauge his sexual possibilities."[1] Elsewhere she admits that "I am...erotically receptive in all directions..."[2] How can a woman of such spiritual depth, my students ask, be so blind to the immorality of her lifestyle? Yet, without in anyway condoning Hillesum's lifestyle, I will suggest that she offers us a unique insight into a spirituality of suffering grounded in "passionate living."

Reflections on "Passion"

Let us consider the word "passion." We often use it in reference to a deep longing or desire as when we speak, somewhat trivially, of "a passion for chocolate" or, more profoundly, of a "passion for justice." In this usage "passion" connotes a sense of life and vitality. Our use of the word in connection with sexuality and the erotic (e.g., "passionate lovemaking," the throes of passion") is closely tied to this sense of desire or longing. This "passion" also suggests a certain vulnerability, for when we allow ourselves to experience longing there is always the possibility that we will not be satiated. In short, we risk failure. This may explain the application of "passion" to sexuality, for is not sexuality one of the most powerful experiences of both desire and human vulnerability?

It is among other places, in the Hebrew scriptures that we find the "passion" of sexuality rooted in human vulnerability and powerlessness. Consider the creation stories found in Genesis 1-3. There we find the first humans created for partnership with one another. The biblical account tells us that, prior to the first sin, "they were naked and not ashamed." "Nakedness" was a common biblical metaphor connoting innocence and

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[1] Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Holt, 1983), 37.

[2] Ibid., 104.

vulnerability. The creation story suggests to us that we were made for human partnerships characterized by a kind of interpersonal transparency and vulnerability before one another. Yet the creation stories continue to recount the first sin, the human repudiation of their created partnership with God in favor of "becoming gods" themselves. And with this sin all changes. Having rejected vulnerable and transparent partnership in favor of power and autonomy, the humans no longer view each other in the same way. Their human partnership is now tainted and faced with their nakedness they seek to clothe themselves—vulnerability and powerlessness in relationship now become a threat.

Now let us consider a second meaning of the word passion. This meaning is usually rooted in a sense of suffering. In the Christian tradition we speak of the "passion of Jesus Christ." Here passion derives from its root in the late Latin usage of *passio* which in turn was a translation of the Greek *pathos.* Yet this kind of "passion" also entails a sense of vulnerability—a willingness to undergo pain and loss. The only way to avoid suffering is to cease to feel, to anesthetize oneself. After all, it is from *pathos* that we get the Greek word *apatheia,* "apathy" in English, which is literally the absence of feeling or suffering. Apathy is, in some sense, a lack of passion.

Apathy or the lack of passion is a peculiarly modern problem. Apathy is present wherever in our culture there are people so obsessed with avoiding inconvenience, pain or rejection that they end up avoiding all human relationships which require risk and vulnerability. It is an attitude which has become almost institutionalized in our society. We cede to professionals ancient familial responsibilities: care for those who are emotionally wounded (the therapeutic professions), care for the dying (professional

nurses) care for the preparation of our deceased loved ones for burial (funeral directors and morticians). We are tempted to quarantine ourselves from all contact with pain, suffering and death. Yet to live passionately is to embrace contact, it is to allow oneself to be vulnerable and be drawn into both our own pain and that of others.

Hillseum's "Passionate Living"

This long digression finally brings us back to the writing of Etty Hillesum. Her journal presents the reader with a flawed woman who nevertheless embodied "passionate living" in both of its senses: erotic passion, and the willingness to suffer. Moreover, her writing suggests that these two capacities may flow from the same wellspring, a willingness to risk powerlessness and vulnerability.

As Hillesum matured in the face of the increasing Jewish persecution in Amsterdam by the occupying forces she writes:

> It is possible to suffer with dignity and without. I mean: most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred and despair…. I shall no longer flirt with words, for words merely evoke misunderstandings: I have come to terms with life…. By 'coming to terms with life' I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death..., by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.[3]

At the end of her journal she would close by observing that "[w]e should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds."[4] It is my contention that this remarkable capacity to

[3] Ibid., 152.

[4] Ibid., 231.

embrace suffering and death for the sake of others is related to Hillesum's willingness to explore the erotic and sensual dimensions of her being. For both sexual intimacy and suffering demand the embrace of powerlessness and vulnerability which lie at the heart of passionate living.

Hillesum's highly developed sensuality, I believe, also led her to cultivate a spirituality which attended to our embodied existence. This embodied spirituality is evident in one of the themes running throughout Hillesum's journal, that is, the fanciful book she wished to write about "the girl who could not kneel."[5] The prayer posture of kneeling was, for Hillesum, a physical expression of intimacy and vulnerability. Yet the journal recounts her growing to embrace this prayer posture in her own spirituality. She frequently compares the spiritual intimacy of such embodied postures of prayer with sexual intimacy. She would observe about her having learned "to kneel" that "such things are often more intimate even than sex."[6] And again later she writes:

> Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees in the middle of this large room, between the steel chairs and the matting. Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself. Some time ago I said to myself, "I am a kneeler in training." I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet.[7]

And returning still again to the theme of kneeling:

> It has become a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed from time to time….When I write these things down, I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were writing about the most intimate of intimate matters.

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[5] Ibid., 58.

[6] Ibid., 60-1.

[7] Ibid., 74.

> Much more bashful than if I had written about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate as man's (sic) relationship to God?[8]

One is struck by her reference to kneeling as a "gesture embedded in my body." Hillesum's sense of embodiment, even in its erotic dimensions, often funded her spiritual imagination. Let me give a last example. At one point in her journal, Hillesum speaks tenderly of a moment with her mentor/lover in which he lightly caressed her breast and remarked lovingly on its softness and gentleness.[9] Several pages later she would draw on the sensual imagery of the breast to articulate her spiritual connection with life itself:

> I went to bed early last night, and from my bed I stared out through the large open window. And it was once more as if life with all its mysteries was close to me, as if I could touch it. I had the feeling that I was resting *against the naked breast of life*, and could feel her gentle and regular heartbeat. I felt safe and protected. And I thought, How strange. It is wartime. There are concentration camps. I can say of so many of the houses I pass: here the son has been thrown into prison, there the father has been taken hostage, and an eighteen-year-old boy in that house over there has been sentenced to death….And yet—at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly *lie against the naked breast of life*, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop. That is also my attitude to life, and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able to change it.[10]

Once again, Hillesum's sensuality does not simply move in tandem with her spirituality, it informs and enhances it. A spirituality which embraces powerless and vulnerability must be mediated through our bodies.

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[8] Ibid., 105.

[9] Ibid., 133.

Concluding Reflections

I do not wish to lionize Hillesum. Early in her journal there is every indication that we are reading the musings of a terribly self-absorbed young woman. Clearly, judged by the standards of Christian morality, her continued intimate sexual relationship with two men outside the bounds of marriage is a flawed exercise of the gift of sexuality. Yet this aspect of her life cannot simply be ignored or overlooked when considering her spiritual development. What sets her journey apart from that of many of the saints in Christianity is that as she progresses on her spiritual journey, we do not find a dramatic break from an objectively immoral past. She does not renounce the world but rather embraces it without reserve. Neither does she renounce her sexual relations with men and become celibate in the tradition of Augustine. However we judge it, her fierce sensuality cannot be excised from her spiritual witness.

What I have tried to suggest in this article is that there is something important to learn in the life of this young Jewish woman regarding the liberating and transformative character of the erotic, sexual dimensions of human existence. One key to understanding this, I have maintained, is found in the notion of human passion, which provocatively holds together a shared vulnerability present in the way we give ourselves to another in sexual relations, and in our capacity to suffer and embrace the suffering of others. However much Hillesum fumbled with these in ways that we, from our privileged position, deem inappropriate, she has taught us much. Her writings suggest that this sometimes reckless exploration of human sexuality, while fraught with danger, may indeed activate that mysterious capacity latent within all of us to be vulnerable not just to our intimates but before the world. A passionate life will not always be lived within the

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[10] Ibid., 135-6.

clear boundaries which our religious and moral traditions set for us. To live with passion may well mean loving "sloppily," but such *passion*, whether realized through human sexual intimacy, or the arts or in any number of other directions, can give rise to *compassion*, a capacity to suffer in solidarity with others. And for we Christians, such compassionate living is trafficking in the divine.