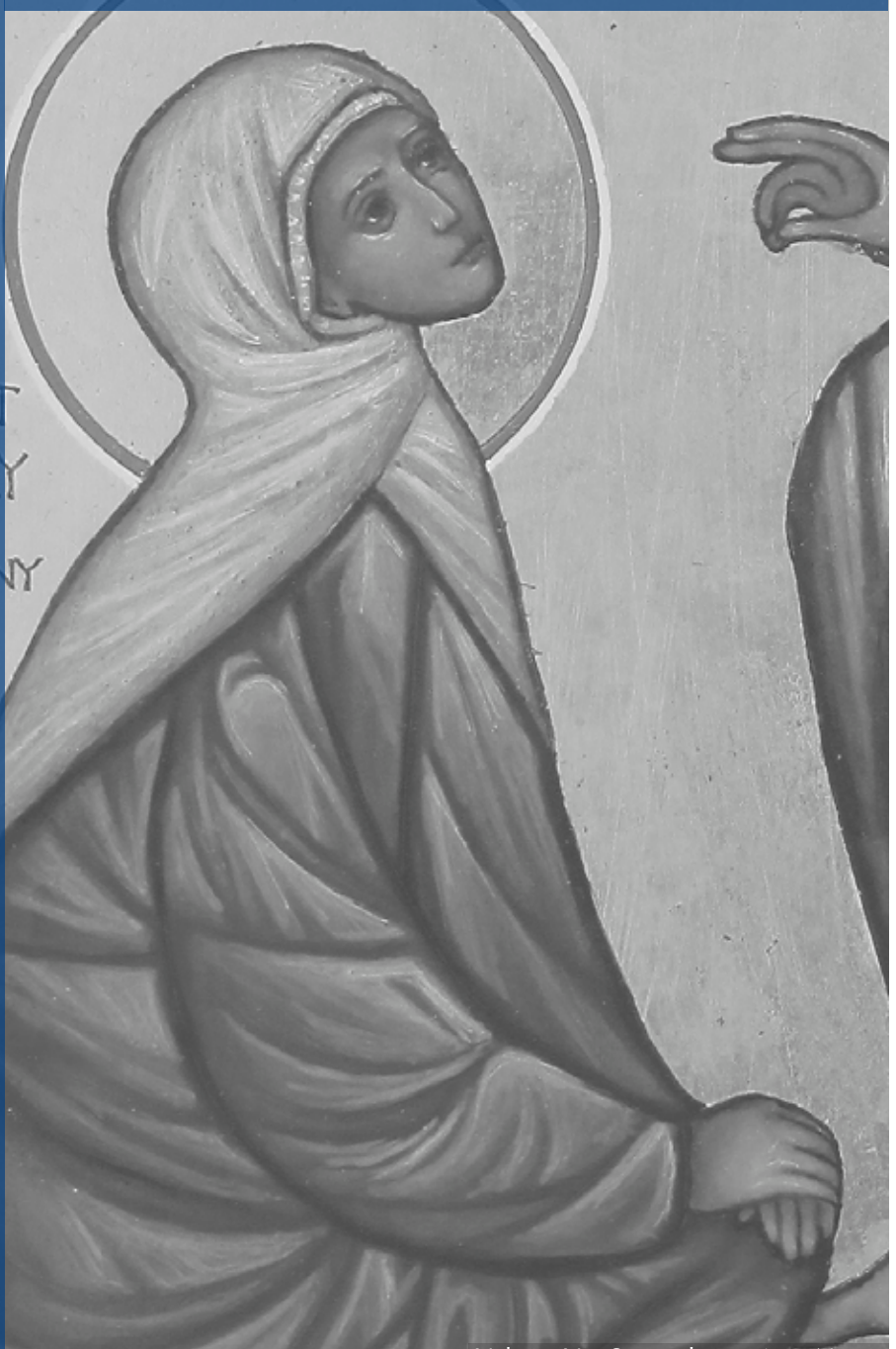
The Order of Julian of Norwich

Julian's Window

A Quarterly on Monastic and Contemplative Spirituality



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On the cover: St Mary of Bethany, from an icon by a Julian nun

The Order of Julian of Norwich

is a contemplative Order of monks and nuns in the Episcopal Church. Our aim is to renew the spiritual life of the Church in three ways: first by a renewal of the contemplative monastic tradition, second by supporting a vibrant community of affiliates who are a bridge between the monastery and parishes, and third by occasional works of mission in publishing, spiritual direction, and hospitality. For more information on the Order, please see our website at **www.orderofjulian.org,** through which we publish articles on the spiritual life and liturgical resources.

Julian's Window, also found on our website, is published quarterly. For permission to re-publish, please write to the Order:

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St Mary & the Adventure of Faith

Mthr Hilary OJN

The events of many of the great feasts we celebrate can become so familiar that they seem almost offhand, especially for those of us 'professional Christians'. Year to year they don't always touch us where we live…until they do. Then, everything about them comes alive, sharp and vibrant. And when that happens, if we have the courage to loosen our grip on our notions of what the future was supposed to look like — if we have the presence of mind and the courage to say, 'Be it unto me according to your word,' then, to God's glory we will be let into a future we had not expected or asked for, but that everything has prepared us for. If we have the courage to inhabit a space God opens up as though from nowhere, edged about as it may be with fear and uncertainty, even — as for Mary — with the threat of annihilation, then the One Who Is will be there, the One whose word makes what is not to come into being.

I wonder if, as he leaned over to fasten Mary's seatbelt into this critical movement of God's salvation, as yet slow-moving, imperceptible except to the eye of faith — I wonder if Gabriel said something like, *Please keep your hands and arms inside the car at all times. I'll be here and we'll meet again at the end of the ride*. As it is for many new mothers in uncertain circumstances, the whole thing had to be for Mary something like what Julian described:

> [God] showed a most excellent spiritual pleasure in my soul: I was completely filled with everlasting certainty, powerfully sustained without any painful fear. This feeling was so joyful and so spiritual that I was wholly in peace and in repose and there was nothing on earth that would have grieved me.
>
> This lasted only a while, and I was changed and left to myself in such sadness and weariness of my life, and annoyance with

myself that scarcely was I able to have patience to live. There was no comfort nor any ease for me except faith, hope, and love, and these I held in truth (but very little in feeling).

And immediately after this, our Blessed Lord gave me again the comfort and the rest in my soul, in delight and in security so blissful and so powerful that no fear, no sorrow, no bodily pain that could be suffered would have distressed me. And then the pain showed again to my feeling, and then the joy and the delight, and now the one and now the other…I suppose about twenty times.

God does not despise these terrifying experiences of sensory alteration, lowliness and fear, but always, always meets us at the lowest point of our need. If I may spill over the bounds of today's Gospel a bit, just so was Mary given the unlooked-for gift of reassurance from her cousin Elizabeth as soon as she entered her house, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me!?" Because of Elizabeth's perceptive gift Mary's tongue was loosed and she was able to say "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

If we can say "Be it unto me according to your word" these gifts all unlooked for will come to us and see us through the times of terror when it is easy to forget what we have seen and heard. And almost beyond hope, we also will be able to say "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Blessed are they who have believed that what the Lord has said he will do.

She Stayed

Fr John-Julian OJN

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We have Saint Gregory the Great to thank for the medieval tradition that Saint Mary Magdalen was (a) the woman taken in adultery, (b) Saint Martha's sister, and (c) the woman who anointed Christ's feet with costly ointment — in addition to all her other Gospel appearances and activity. You also know that there is absolutely not the slightest biblical evidence that these identifications were accurate. The only thing we know about Mary Magdalen from the Gospel accounts is that (a) Jesus had driven "seven demons" from her, and (b) she was present at the crucifixion with the other women, and (c) at least according to Saint John, she was the first person to experience the Risen Lord.

It is this latter event which is included in the Gospel account for the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene, and since we are 21st century Americans, we are very used to reading everything — including the Gospels — quickly to get over-all, general information and to see how the story turns out. If you are like me, you missed what I think is a significant phrase in the Gospel story. Let me repeat a few lines that precede the Gospel and then the first line:

"Then Peter…went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other

disciple who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scriptures, that he must rise from the dead.

"Then the disciples returned to their homes, but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb."

Some very small thing just happened and we almost missed it: "Then the disciples returned to their homes, but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb." Mary Magdalene discovered the open tomb, ran and got the disciples. Peter and John followed her back to the tomb, looked everything over, and then returned home. "But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping." And because Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping, she was the first person on earth to meet and speak to the Risen Lord.

I want to suggest that "staying" was the core of Mary's virtue. First, when Jesus was dying on the cross and everyone else was in hiding, Mary stayed at Calvary. And when Jesus had died and everyone else was mourning and moaning in their grief, Mary returned to the tomb — early in the morning, while it was still dark. When everyone else had abandoned the dead Jesus, Mary did not leave him, but she returned to the tomb.

And then, after she had brought Peter and John to see the empty tomb, and they had also gone back home, Mary stayed there.

Mary stayed.

In neither instance was there any sense to her staying; in neither instance was there any reasonable justification for her to stay. What's the point in staying? Everything had been discovered — there was no new experience or information to await. But still she stayed.

She stayed long after all the evidence was gone, long after there was anything to gain by staying, long after there was anything more to learn or see. But she still stayed.

And that is a very simple thing, which speaks particularly to us monastics with a very quiet depth. And it reminds us of the Benedictine vow of "stability". It was Mary's simply "staying" which made her the first witness of the miracle of miracles.

And one wonders what her motives were for staying. I'm willing to bet that it was simply that her life had been so wound and bound with Jesus's that even his death did not immediately or easily unwind it. Her life still referred primarily to him, and so against all reason and against every evidence, she goes back to the tomb, and then when all else have left, she stays there.

My brother and sisters, he comes to each of us, and we will hear him, and be fascinated by him; we may even experience his miracles; and perhaps we decide to follow him. And then, for each of us, he dies — that is to say, all we have known of him apparently dies and disappears from our lives — and all the early ardor and commitment and excitement evaporates. And the question then is whether our commitment goes beyond mere comprehension, or agreement, or even adoption of his ways. The question then is whether or not we have wound and bound ourselves with him so that even in his apparent death, his apparent absence from us, we will still stay.

The Greek verb that Saint John uses in this account is *h'staymi* — it carries the idea of "staying" or "standing", particularly of "standing firm" or "holding one's ground". So the subtle connotative sense of the text is that while the disciples went away, Mary "stood her ground" and didn't leave.

In Benediction we sing that little two-verse squirt of a psalm, Psalm 117 and we sing "the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever".

There is the model for Saint Mary today: the faithfulness of Mary endures even past death — even past learning and obeying and following and serving and all the rest of those pragmatic activities. When everything else seems to fail and to come apart, Mary stays. Past reason and past usefulness, Mary stays and waits for him.

Julian & Hope

Sr Cornelia OJN

The Confession of a Simple Julian Reader

"God wills that we hold on to this trustfully: that we are all in as *certain hope* of the bliss of heaven *while we are here*, as we shall be in certainty *when we are there*." (Ch. 65)

Can you remember the first time you read Julian? For many people it is such an intensely moving experience that any puzzles in the text (and there are many) are skipped over in the resulting ardor. But what if your reaction in your first reading of the *Shewings* didn't live up to that standard? In all fairness, to give another side of the picture, let me tell you about my experience — maybe I'm not alone. I met Julian in an evening class on the classics of western spirituality and the first assignment was simply to read the book straight through. "But all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well" — *that* sounds as if it will turn out OK, I thought, which makes a change from some of the other more guilt-ridden books in the syllabus. Despite the vivid recounting of what she had seen in her vision — the graphic depiction of the body of Christ sagging on the cross — I managed to persevere. Her bewilderment over sin — "you could have created the world without sin, so why didn't you?" — that's a reasonable question to be asking; Julian seems to be a practical person.

The delightful parable of the Lord and the Servant saved the book as far as I was concerned: "pay attention to all the details even if you don't see the relevance at the moment" — *that* certainly went down well with a lover of detective stories! And certainly topics like "substance" and "sensuality" needed to be sorted out in considerable detail, though it was too complicated for me to know why. And, throughout, the book was full of "nice touches". Julian was skilled at observation of daily life and her skill in putting all that clarity into simple everyday

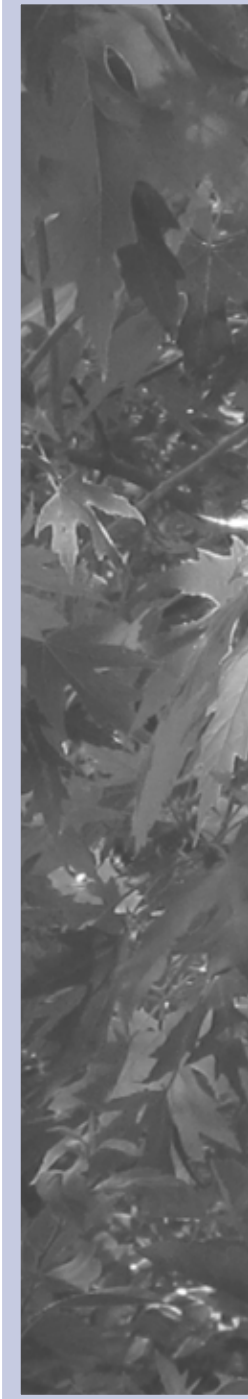
words caught my fancy: the "all shall be well" sentence, the Jesus our Mother images, the cloth hanging out in the wind to dry, the herring scales pattern of blood drops, the raindrops pelting down from the eaves. And so you see that my overall reaction to the book was low-key, and focused on literary pleasure rather than an appreciation of Julian's serious discussions of theology.

My experience with Julian in the few classes devoted to her in a survey course made me a little afraid of her; and after joining an Order inspired by her witness, I was overwhelmed by the need to "understand"; yet, still, after 23 years, I feel at a disadvantage when it comes to talking about her work. The Order of course has "Julian classes" of its own for its newcomers, and I had attended those, long after one could apply the label "newcomer" to me. The first classes I attended dealt with problems of translation almost more than with theology, as well as with pointing out the passages which had been particularly influential in identifying the charism of the Order — and so for some time I found my preference for literary pleasure catered to. Later, other classes were offered, painstakingly complete analyses which I had to admire but felt far away from being able to add to in any way. I also tried to keep up with scholarship, mostly devoted to theology; but I found it hard to come to grips with the deeper issues — I lacked so much background. Yet the steady stream of "spirituality"

books using Julian as their basis became tiresome, sometimes even mawkish — not *another* "course of daily readings" with specially constructed prayers to be offered and searching personal questions to be pondered over! Laudable no doubt, but so repetitious!

There was, however, one issue on which I did feel strongly: I felt that books which dwelled solely on the "all-manner-of-thing-shall-be well" spirituality of Julian — the turning of her into My Lady Optimism — presented a shallow and one-sided picture of her experience. There is no doubt that readers come away with a warm feeling of confidence after reading the *Shewings* — Julian makes it very clear that all the Holy Trinity seem to be well-disposed towards humankind and to feel that its creation had been a good idea which had actually been well thought out, despite the existence of certain drawbacks such as sin and the devil. (That attitude was of course very unusual among writers of Julian's day, which was an historical period of misery and violence.) How did Julian manage this feat? For it's not just optimism and it's not just pessimism. How did she convey that broader picture so simply? And above all, to make the reader accept her description *of* confident trust *with* confident trust?

As I, now an old woman, continue to hear her words day after day (and how very important *hearing* Julian is!) it occurs to me that one explanation might lie in Julian's use of the word "hope", in its everyday sense as well as the theological concept of confident trust, with its companions of faith and charity. Julian frequently steps aside modestly and courteously in her writing when she makes a statement — she hopes that she can express herself clearly enough that her reader will understand what she means — in the Short Text she sometimes even admits that a woman



hasn't enough education to do a good job of it but she will persevere nonetheless and hope for the reader's mercy (luckily she removed most of such references from the Long Text). Her gentle voice offers up seemingly irreconcilable topics — how can she continue to believe the sometimes stern statements of Holy Church in the light of the courteous and homely lessons which Jesus her Mother has showed her in the parable of the Lord and the Servant? That parable was constructed *just for her* to understand and then to pass on to her even-Christians. She simply hopes that she can manage to do this, standing between two tensions with only gentle hope as her tool. Just as she notices the alternation within herself between moods of unhappiness and happiness (as she analyzes the alternations of her behavior between bad and good), she has to admit the lack of fervor in her theology. "There was no comfort or ease for me except faith, *hope* and love, and these I held in truth (but very little in feeling)" (Ch. 15). Now, there is comfort for *me*, the simple reader of literary pleasures — or could it be the less laudable desire for self-respect, as when, confronted with theological observations, I find myself yet again having just to sit silent as thoughts, let alone words, refuse to come . . . .

Strangely, the opportunity to make this little confession about theological lameness may just possibly be a turning-point to show that one can continue to grow even in old age. Julian's confident trust of course gathers up prime passages from St. Paul

and in the process smooths over my usually negative reaction to his prose. She and he share an attitude towards words; yet she could take greater care since she had plenty of time to revise and rethink, whereas he was always in a hurry to get on his way to somewhere else. So, as a bonus, how useful that Julian's use of "hope" should make me look again at Paul's writing — and perhaps read it with more compassion. What can I offer to a Julian discussion? That "seeking with faith, hope, and love pleases our Lord and the finding pleases the soul and fills it full of joy" (Ch. 10). And that will do. *That* is quite enough.

Mary, and Martha

Sr Therese OJN

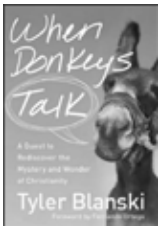
Martha has an entire household of disciples to feed, and there is her sister hanging out with the men, as if she had nothing else to do but sit and listen.

But listening, and attentiveness, is precisely the better part Jesus commends Mary for choosing. If Martha is worried and distracted, it is not because she has a a hundred-and-one things to do and no-one is helping, but because she is not still or quiet inside. She is a tumult of self-concern, anxiety, and illusions, and has no room to hear anything else or to listen.

Jesus does not praise those who are singled out on account of some particular purpose or work, like his mother, but he will say 'blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it'. This is the better part that Mary chooses when she quiets herself and listens to what he says. Perhaps before she decided to be still within and listen, all Mary could think of was all the work she had to do; yet she made a choice to listen to Jesus instead of her inner tumult.

So the entire house was silent and listening to his words, except for Martha, who might have also enjoyed the better part at that time had she wanted it more than herself.

Book Notes: *When Donkeys Talk*



When Donkeys Talk
Tyler Branski
Zondervan 2012
ISBN-13: 9780310334989
page count 224

God is like the summer rain that plummets to earth and soaks into the land and seeps into every crevice. It is only on the hard concrete or the black tarmac that the rain finds no way and must cascade away in search of a river.

And there was a time when Christians knew that as a truth—that the whole world was sopping wet with divinity! Sadly, that was in a time we now easily write off as "passé", "archaic", "medieval". But what would happen if the deepest truths of the Middle Ages came truly alive again, and we discovered that there was a charm and a wonder there that we had forgotten? What if the stars were again seen as angels? What if a priest's hands trembled once again in holding the fragile Host at the altar? What if all that is narrow and judgmental and unforgiving about modern Christianity were wiped away and dissolved in an overwhelming torrent of love and forgiveness? And, most of all, what could a person say who witnessed such wonders?

If you would like to know, then find Tyler Branski's little book *When Donkeys Talk*, for between the covers of this slim volume is a renewed perception of the world in the light of the divine. And the magic that this young seminarian has captured can only be called enchantment, awe, and sheer delight in God.

Tyler's wonderful insight renews one's vision of the creeds, the sacraments, the kalendar, the dinner table, the old-growth forests, and even the zodiac. He has rediscovered for us a vibrant Presence of God in all works and in all times, with a sensitivity rarely encountered in print. He cooks a stew here of serious devotion and vibrant imagination, of Oxbridge discipline and autobiographical insight, occasionally challenging and altogether to be treasured. *When Donkeys Talk* is an immeasurable gift offered to every Christian reader who still has a heart open to wonder. It is truly a burning bush!

Community Notes

Spring began with so much rain it was not necessary to water the garden for several weeks. The seasonable weather readied a nice crop of weeds for our picnic and gardening day with our LDS friends in May. They also cleared up some sizeable fallen branches and tidied up a troublesome patch of the pasture.

In mid-June we celebrated Julianfest in Oconomowoc, professing three new Oblates. We were delighted to welcome some affiliates who have never made it to Julianfest before.

This summer a bumper crop of mulberries resulted in weeks of preserving, and we also put in some thorough housecleaning of lofts and basements. The long struggle with the teasel in the pasture is being won: diligence and selective spraying of horticultural vinegar (plus the drought from last year) have almost totally eradicated this highly invasive species on our land. We also made the happy discovery of at least 3 thriving highbush cranberries, planted some years ago by migrating birds.

The biggest news in the house in June was that Sr Cornelia finally got her first 'driver's license': the arrival of the motorized wheelchair means she is now cruising around the house and chapel on her own steam and with gusto.

Normally we remain at the monastery for life, but in special cases, residence elsewhere may be arranged. In order to provide the best environment and care for Br Barnabas's Parkinson's both now and in the future, in August he made the transition to St John's On The Lake in Milwaukee.

Fr John-Julian's book *The Complete Introduction to the Devout Life* was published in the spring, and he is already at work on another for Paraclete Press, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*.

Sr Cornelia behind the wheel • Newly professed Oblates and their sponsors at Julianfest • Mthr Hilary and one of the new trees—Metasequoia glyptostroboides

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