

Love as the Only Answer

Etty Hillesum: A Portrait

“You have made me so rich, my God—let me give of myself with open hands.

My life has become one long conversation with You, O my God, one great dialogue.

When I stand in a corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth and my face lifted to Your heaven, sometimes tears run down my cheeks—tears born of inner motion and gratitude that seek expression.

And at night, when I lie in bed and rest in You, my God, tears of thankfulness again run over my face—and that is my prayer.”

(Etty Hillesum, from a letter written in the Westerbork transit camp)

Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) was a young Dutch woman of Jewish heritage who, in the midst of Nazi persecution in the occupied Netherlands, experienced a spiritual awakening and came to perceive the events of her time from an utterly extraordinary perspective. From 1941 to 1943 she kept a diary in which she chronicled her personal and spiritual transformation during those dark years, as well as her relationship with her spiritual mentor, Julius Spier. Nearly forty years after her murder at the age of twenty-nine in Auschwitz, a first selection of her journals was published, stirring great international interest. The complete German edition of her writings, including her letters from the Westerbork concentration camp, has only been released this year. What follows is an overview of her short, turbulent, and deeply inspiring life.

Early Life

Esther “Etty” Hillesum was born in 1914 in Middelburg, the Netherlands. Her father, Louis Hillesum, was a teacher of classical languages; her mother, Rebecca, was of Russian-Jewish origin who had fled to Amsterdam to escape a pogrom. After finishing school, Etty moved to Amsterdam, where she first studied law and later Slavic languages, which she eventually began to teach. In 1937 she moved in with a widower and accountant, Han Wegerich, to help him with his household while continuing her studies. Over time a love relationship developed between them. Together with Han and three other housemates—including Han’s son—they formed a kind of communal household.

In 1940 Germany occupied the Netherlands, and the systematic disenfranchisement and persecution of Jews began. Around ten months

after the occupation, in 1941, Etty met a man who would change her life entirely: the German-Jewish psychoanalyst **Julius Spier**.

Julius Spier

Julius Spier (1887–1942) was originally from Frankfurt am Main and showed an early fascination with chiromancy—the art of reading hands. In 1927 he withdrew from business to devote himself fully to this study and undertook a training analysis with the psychoanalyst **Carl Gustav Jung** in Zurich. At Jung’s suggestion, he opened a successful practice as a psycho-chiromancer in Berlin in 1929. Ten years later, in 1939, Spier emigrated to Amsterdam, where he continued his work and began teaching.

Through acquaintances, Etty Hillesum was introduced to him in February 1941 as a test subject, to have her hands analysed. That encounter would prove fateful and decisive for her inner development. She was immediately struck by Spier’s personality and decided to begin therapy with him. Shortly afterwards, probably at his suggestion, she began keeping a diary. For Etty, this practice was not only therapeutic but also literary—she dreamed of becoming a writer one day and hoped her journals would provide material for a novel or something similar.

Over the next eighteen months, the relationship between Etty and Spier deepened beyond therapy into a profound friendship and a spiritual teacher-student bond. Etty also worked as his secretary. A strong romantic attraction developed between them, yet it most likely remained platonic: Spier wished to remain faithful to his fiancée in London, and Etty was still in a relationship with Han Wegerich.

The Inner Path

Spier exerted a powerful influence on Etty’s spiritual unfolding. He showed her how to bring clarity and order into her confusion, depression, and emotional turmoil. Alongside therapy, he taught her physical exercises and a practice she would later describe in her diaries as “*sinking inward*” or “*listening within*.” He also introduced her to the Bible and to Saint Augustine. Rilke and Dostoevsky, whom she had already read before meeting Spier, took on a new and deeper meaning through his influence.

As her diaries reveal, this period marked the flowering of an intense inner journey that she articulated with striking lucidity, precision, and intimacy. She examined her thoughts, feelings, and actions—as well as the events around her—with acute self-awareness and extraordinary honesty. Her connection with God grew ever stronger, especially as the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazi occupation became increasingly oppressive. In the midst of persecution, exclusion, and the arrests of those around her, Etty again and again turned toward trust in God and a profound love of life that only deepened with time.

For her, beauty and the perfection of existence remained self-evident—even in the heart of suffering. She wrote:

“Life and death, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my sore feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecutions and countless cruelties—all of it is in me as one strong whole, and I am beginning to understand how it all connects, though I cannot yet explain it to anyone. I want to live long enough to express it one day—and if that is not granted to me, then another will live my life on from where mine was broken off.”

Gradually she became ever more transparent, as if *wide, empty spaces* opened within her, giving her room to hear the stillness of God. She developed a deep acceptance of her fate and that of her people—not naïve or detached from reality, but rooted in a trust in life’s greater wisdom. Her strength did not come from any abstract or dogmatic notion of God, but from direct inner experience:

“I rest within myself. And that Self, the deepest and richest part of me, in which I rest, I call ‘God.’”

In her journals she now began to address God directly; her words became prayer. This intimacy expressed itself in compassion for others and for all of creation—especially after her transfer to the Westerbork transit camp in 1942.

Westerbork

The “Police Jewish Transit Camp Westerbork” was one of two central collection camps in the Netherlands from which Jews were deported to concentration and extermination camps such as Auschwitz. In 1942, Etty volunteered to serve there for the Amsterdam Jewish Council, working in the department of “Social Care for Travellers.” She dedicated herself above all to the weakest—the elderly, the sick, young women, and

mothers with children. Because of her position, she initially enjoyed certain privileges, including the right to take leave and travel back to Amsterdam. During these periods she could have gone into hiding, yet she resolutely refused every offer: she wished to share the fate of her people.

This exemption for Council employees ended in June 1943, and Etty became an ordinary inmate. By then her parents and brother Mischa had also been deported to Westerbork. In her letters from the camp, she described to friends in Amsterdam the daily horrors—privation, illness, death—yet remained steadfast and helped wherever she could. Fellow prisoners remembered her as a “*radiant presence*.”

Even amid despair she sought gratitude for every breath, writing of fleeting moments of inner joy and love:

“The misery is truly great, and yet I often walk, late at night when the day has sunk away into a deep distance, with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. Then it wells up again from my heart—I cannot help it, it is of elemental force—this life is something magnificent and vast. Later we must build an entirely new world. And against every new act of madness, every new cruelty, we must set a small piece of love and kindness within ourselves.”

Etty surrendered unconditionally to life. Even with the absolute certainty of her people’s planned annihilation, she continued to experience life as beautiful and meaningful. Of course she felt despair and grief at times, yet she also knew:

“This piece of our age, as we are living it now, I can bear—and I can even forgive God that it is as it must surely be. To have so much love within oneself that one can forgive God!”

Deportation to Auschwitz

On September 7, 1943, Etty was deported to Auschwitz together with her parents and brother Mischa. A friend who remained in Westerbork later recalled how, as the crammed freight train began to move, Etty called out cheerfully through a slit, “Taaag!” From that same opening she threw out a final postcard to her friend Christine van Nooten:

“I open the Bible at random and find this: The Lord is my high refuge. I am sitting in a crowded freight car on my rucksack. ... We left the camp singing, Father and Mother very composed and calm, Mischa the same.

*We shall travel for three days. Thank you for all your loving care. ...
Farewell from the four of us.
Etty.”*

Farmers found the postcard and mailed it. After that, silence. According to the Red Cross, Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943. Her parents and brother did not survive either.

Before leaving for Westerbork, Etty had entrusted her diaries to a friend, asking that they be published if she did not return. Yet it was not until 1979—nearly forty years after her death—that a publisher agreed to release them. When her writings first appeared in 1981, they met with immediate international acclaim and were soon translated into many languages. In this way, Etty Hillesum’s deepest wish—to become a writer and a chronicler of her time—was fulfilled.

Even today, she continues to inspire and move people all over the world with her luminous testimony of self-discovery and spirituality.