

I

Looking for Life

L O N G I N G

Dear Julian,

It is winter, the first day of the New Year. My prairie place is dark and cold; a lusterless grey edged with white. I am here with pen, paper, and your text on my desk. As always, I am looking for my life. I first met you ten years ago. I was in the middle of my life and I found myself in a dark wood. Two friends of yours, the one who penned the line I just stole¹ and the other a student of yours from the awful agony of the twentieth century,² pointed me to you while they were guiding me through the dark places. I read you hungrily. I was most astounded by your mind, by the complexity and orthodoxy of your rigorous theology. I didn't know that one could do what you have—live and speak from the body of love and yet construct amazing edifices for the intellect. I loved you already then, but I was not ready for you. I did not yet love him enough to follow you, except as an intellectual exercise. So, I put you away on the shelf and

1. Dante, *Inferno*, I. I consider Dante a friend of Julian because I believe they are doing similar work. Denys Turner, author of *Julian of Norwich Theologian*, and Vittorio Montemaggi, a Dante scholar who encouraged Turner to work with Dante and Julian together, defend this intuition. Turner, *Julian of Norwich Theologian*, xxi–xxii.

2. Charles Williams was profoundly influenced by Julian and quoted her often. He wrote a brilliant essay building from her doctrine of God's enthronement in our sensual being. Williams, "Sensuality and Substance," in *Image of the City*, 68–75.

looked towards you wistfully, knowing you held something I desperately desired.

With the passing of years, I have been transformed. I have, with Augustine, gone from believing in the truth with my intellect into a conversion of the whole self. It has come gradually, but it has come. I am not now in a dark wood, though I still know its trees and shadows and I return there as a pilgrim sinner far more often than I want to. But I am not lost. Christ has found me and taught me to love him. I have been taught through suffering, tragedy, joy, loss, failure, success, and most of all through love, human and ultimately and absolutely divine. I have come to want God and God's will more than anything else and I have come to know that God is good. There is no going back from this. There is sin and trouble ahead, but the Rubicon of my life has been crossed and I am here with Christ and happy beyond words. It is he who brought me back to you. He took the book and dropped it in my lap when I had come to rest. He said: "*Finally* you are ready, here my girl, here is the teacher you need; talk to her."

So here I am, Julian. I am not young and I am not old, I am given to married life and motherhood. I used to work in the church and it was good. I suffered a chronic illness for ten years while working and my father got sick with dementia during this time; these things shaped me. I did the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius and realized the profound disorder in me and the painful sin of anxiety and control that needed to be loosed in order to survive. I stopped working to care for my family, to go quiet and to ask God to show me my life in a new way. All I know about who I am meant to be right now is that I long for God, I am called to love those I have been given, and I know I must show up daily, here, at this desk, in this small room, with you.

I am a lay theologian, not brilliant, but smart, and I have a poetic mind. I need to do theology that is rigorous, both intellectually and existentially. All explosions of the mind take me to my knees and demand something of my whole life. I want to understand what it is to be and how to become. I am an amateur in the full sense of that word; I love in order to learn. I loved Martin Buber, who taught me to deeply meet the world and in so doing made me ready to meet God afresh. Charles Williams won my mind and taught me history and humility and to do theology poetically; with the heart and mind risking all. In my dark wood, Dante's *Divine Comedy* wielded worldly love to bring the true possibility of transformation to life for me in a way that I could finally grasp and long for.

My life in the church and a lifelong saturation in Scripture has taught me that the way of knowing, being, and becoming that I seek must be grounded in the life of the Trinity, and it must affirm the material world, particularly the body as the place that God entered and transfigured for our salvation through the incarnation, cross, and resurrection. This is what drives me. In the end, I am searching for God's will, for the answer to the question, "how then shall I live?" I am begging you Julian, *teach me*.

I am not particularly interested in your biography, which is good, because what is out there is rather sketchy and fragmented. I am not going to create a character of you and try to imagine what you might say. The you I am in relationship with is the you of your text. I want to watch you happen within it from beginning to end. I know I will have to develop relationships with your translators and interpreters because I am not so much of an idiot as to think I could know you in a vacuum, but I want to be on my own with you and these words, especially to start, and I am going to go slow.

What else do you need to know? You are the teacher. I am always going to assume (properly) that you are significantly smarter than I am. I am not all that interested in what you got wrong, or in a critique of your theology; I am interested in what you got right and the details as to how it is true. I am committed to living within your work, asking all of the questions you and he expect of me, and waiting within the tensions, ready to attune to the paradoxical harmonies of the text as they show themselves.

I am disinterested in the idea of modern progress. I assume that you know things that we cannot know in our modern world, in ways of knowing that we have forgotten. I want to know these ways of knowing because I feel our world is desperately in need of a re-remembering so as to chasten our knowing and deepen our capacities for reason. I want to have my vision expanded. Thus, I hope never to dismiss a spiritual, intellectual, or existential conclusion of yours on the grounds that you are a medieval and the way you see the world is limited and we know better.

What I want is to be with you inside your text. I will think my own thoughts but they will always be chastened by yours; your longing for God will speak to mine. You are resistant to people looking at you. You instruct me clearly to look at Christ always. I hear you, and this will be on my mind even when it is you and your ideas that I see. But here is an area where we are different right from the start: you seem to naturally live and long for the *via negativa*; to see only God, I live more naturally the *via*

affirmativa and see and feel everything and love it all. I don't think this is wrong. However, I am here to learn how to see it all end in this one love of God. I doubt that I will take on the life of the *via negativa*, I don't think I am called to it. But I may be called to it and I need to see how this ends.

Finally, I have pursued this for myself, for my transformation and edification and I trust this process. I am grateful for this task and for the time to do it. I did this for my becoming but I am hoping that this correspondence will be read by others. I hope that we can give to others our vision of Christ and that it can serve their own seeing and loving. I hope this because I sense I need your vision to transform mine. I trust my desire for God and the fact Christ gave you to me to help me see. I didn't receive a vision, I received you.

May the gift continue beyond me.

SAMPLE