



# Julian Jottings

*Thoughts on Things Spiritual*

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The Order of Julian of Norwich • Julian House Monastery • 2812 Summit Avenue • Waukesha WI 53188

## Practicing Heaven

Gregory OJN

Hell is not just for the next life. It is something we all experience, to varying degrees, in everyday life. Whenever we are not free to respond to the creative gift of God's will, whenever we are constricted in fear or possessed by wrath or absorbed by anguishing despair, we are experiencing a little of hell. Such afflictive emotions make us sick in our bodies and in our relationships. Obsessive, self-centered thoughts further amplify our fear and alienation and sense of perpetual conflict. Compulsive desires send us down pathways that disgust us with ourselves and leave us more empty than before. It can seem like an endless circle, which, of course, hell is. But there is a way out of hell. In fact, spiritual tradition suggests there are three different ways. Which way you use depends on how far into hell you are.

If you are not really in hell yet, but only bothered by infernal thoughts, passing emotions, or troubling imaginations flying up out of hell to trouble you as you go about your day, the first method is simply to banish these consciously by offering yourself to Christ. The monastic mothers and fathers were very clear on this. About 90% of our struggle with inner demons can be cleared out of the way by actually knowing what is going on inside our minds and bodies – a big enough feat, to be sure. When we are aware of a thought or emotion that would drag us down into fear and conflict, we offer it immediately to Christ. For instance, I know that anxiety manifests itself both emotionally and mentally in me. I also know that the basic script of this anxiety, its DNA, is infernal. Its running assumption is that I am separated from God and have to fight my way to fulfillment against everything else. It is the opposite of faith. Thus when I find an anxious thought in my mind or an anxious feeling in my body, I stop, picture the anxiety as a demon that would love to have control over me (Work! Hurry! Faster! Louder!). I then consciously offer myself to the Risen Lord. Do I want to be enslaved to the demon, or to be a servant to Christ? Because I am conscious of what is happening, the choice is obvious. Freedom rushes in. Space returns. I am alive.



Sometimes however we find ourselves not merely bothered by infernal thoughts, but in our own internal hell. We all have programs for infernal unhappiness and these outstrip any practice of conscious awareness and choice. Having been hurt by life, we have retreated into a hell of fear or compulsive desire or obsessive thinking in order

never to be vulnerable or feel pain again. The sad thing is that the programs to avoid pain and vulnerability often just create more pain. We are witnessing the organizing programs that create an endless circle of suffering.

In order to deal with these, it is no good learning more conscious awareness and choice. The roots go so much deeper than what we can be aware of. Here we have to take a more radical and long-term approach, and this is to encourage and feed what is already working and beatific, what is heavenly, connected, and open to God's flow in our lives. While we can't access the deep programs for unhappiness, we can begin to build around them structures of positive engagement of life in which life and love and light all flow in. For instance, I may make a conscious choice to make intimate friendships a key priority in my life. These in turn allow me to begin to feel in my body a flow of energy and life based in mutual care and cherishing and delight that gives me an inner, visceral feeling for what heaven is like. (Yes, heaven is visceral! It is the resurrection of our bodies in communion with everything!). This begins to strengthen the heavenly in me, making it more habitual, and weakening the force of the infernal.

Finally, if there is no hope for you at all, if the programs for infernal unhappiness, isolation, anxiety, and conflict, are so huge that there is no escape, there is still one more way out of hell. I call it 'riding the demon down,' referring to Dante's ride down into deeper circles of hell on the back of a flying monster in *The Divine Comedy*. At the very center of our programs for infernal unhappiness there may be a part of us that has been so hurt as to have become a refusal of life itself. There may be a negation, a wrathfulness, a turning of one's back on reality at the center of our experience of ourselves. As this comes into conscious awareness, typically through depression in which a refusal of life is being made conscious, instead of fighting this demon (always a mistake) we can hop on its back and ride it down to the very bottom. There, we can do nothing more but to surrender to God in utter helplessness. We let everything, our whole life's history, meaning, and purpose, flow out into God's hands. Dante's way through hell was to go to the very bottom as a conscious observer, then to climb onto Satan's body and climb down and down until, passing through the center of the earth, he found himself going up and up (!) and out on the lowermost terrace of the purgatorial mountain.

If we 'ride the demons down' out of sheer desperation because we can do nothing else, as an act of surrender to God with our hearts and minds still totally fixed on him, we just might discover that, having let go of our life totally, we are still alive! We still exist, but fantastically unhooked from all that massive preoccupation that we had previously called our selves and our lives, generated by that hurt and wrathfulness at the center. We experience in ourselves God's creative force flowing into us, holding us up into being and joy, in spite of ourselves, and with no effort of our own. This is a foretaste of heaven. We experience Being.

Note that in all three of these ways out of hell, the demons are never engaged directly. Never engage demons directly! Once you do try to fight them, you have become a part of their game and they own you. They play with you. Instead, whether we are turning from afflictive thoughts or building up what is positive, or surrendering to God at the very bottom of hell, we are turning our gaze to God in Christ and making him our choice, our love, our reality. We are practicing love for God by choosing to look at him rather than at the demons who try always to get us involved with themselves instead. And as it has often been said, you become what you pay attention to.



## “By the Side of the Road”

Cornelia OJN

Maybe we share an admiration for John’s skill in writing the gospel passage for today. I am always caught up by this piece—Jesus’ long, measured saunter into and out of view.

Here I am, standing in a small group near the side of the road. Away in the distance a man appears, walking towards us. He catches everyone’s attention. “He’s special,” says the leader of our little group; “do you know, I was here before he was, but he still ranks way ahead of me.” The man comes on, not doing anything special—just walking—but somehow managing to seem special. Yet he passes us by without stopping to look at us, or saying anything to us. Our leader repeats, “He IS special,” and uses quite extravagant terms.

Suddenly Andrew and young John peel off and start following the man. Well down the road, he stops and turns and says something very briefly to them and my friends move closer to him—go with him, in fact; and the three disappear down a side turning.

Now . . . my question is: WHY am I still standing here by the side of the road? I don’t disapprove of this man. I’m not scared of him. I found him interesting what I saw of him, especially since our leader says he’s so special. There was no reason to make me think twice about following him too—no commitments or anything like that to hang back for. And I’m not really lazy. BUT I didn’t do anything. I just stood there. . . . And now I’m wondering why I didn’t make a move. All this turns the man and his walk down the road into a risk I didn’t take. And it’s disturbing to me to realize that.

All that was a long time ago, of course. Now I know who the man is. He brought the Kingdom of God among us and taught us a new way to live, to live by loving each other the way God loves each one of us. Including me. This man laid down his life for me because he considered me as his friend. And in fact he had thought of me in that way from without beginning—isn’t that amazing! And he still considers me as someone he wants to help. So in his friendly mercy he uses all the choices I made and didn’t make, all of



which look to me most of the time like a great sheet of tightly woven cloth of undifferentiated color—like sailcloth, maybe—a drab heavy inert thing that I’m all tangled up in and that trails along with me and weighs me down. But he will lift a thread from one point and pull it along and show how it connects surprisingly with threads over here and over there and a pattern suddenly springs to light. Here in the quiet of the monastery this happens a lot. So I can see that nothing I’ve been or done has been wasted—it has all been put to use in helping me to live more in accordance with his teaching.

But one thing he still hasn’t made clear: why I just stood there when he came walking along. Why I let Andrew and John go on without even a thought of saying, “Hey, I want to come too”. That’s still a strange thing to me, even with all that I’ve learned by now.

So on the one hand I know exactly who the man on the road is and what he has done for me and how incredibly he has honored me by his care; and on the other hand I’m still puzzling about why I stood there like a great lump by the side of the road, even as I know that he will make it crystal clear to me some day.

And so it is actually comforting to me to be able to express both those hands—the one and the other—at the same time. The one hand: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; happy are those who are called to his Supper.” And the other hand: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” That statement covers the bases, known and unknown. A pretty good assessment of the situation, it seems to me.



## A Julian Approach to Lent

Hilary OJN

We have been invited, in the name of the Church, “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

To be invited into Lent is to be invited once again to entertain the large, elusive questions that in more active seasons are apt to go underground. Who are we, what are we, to whom do we belong, what are we for? How do we perceive the fact of our ultimate meaning? And this Lenten invitation is three-dimensional: it has outer as well as inner aspects, for Lent dares to make certain bodily claims. As St. Benedict in his Rule for Monasteries puts it, “We urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times.”

Now there are a number of ways to reply to this invitation. Some people approach Lent as they do the rest of their lives of seeking God—something in the manner of the television cartoon character Elmer Fudd. Dressed in hunting clothes Elmer goes out into the woods with a shotgun over his shoulder, turns to Bugs Bunny standing right behind him and says “Be ve-e-e-wy quiet! We’re hunting wabbits!” Jesus said, “From the time of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and the violent have taken it by force.” Going at Lent as if with a shotgun, or alternatively, hacking away at the ground of one’s being with a great grubbing hook is to sink ever more deeply, ever so unconsciously, into ego-driven striving. And all the while we are already, as Julian says, enclosed in God, already being brought along by the Spirit and shown, if we could make ourselves available enough to hear it, everything God really does want from us.



What if, instead of taking on a kind of Lenten offensive, one dared to risk a receptive approach? What if one chose to respond to the invitation merely by enlarging one’s capacity for conscious availability to God, and expanding the possible venues for exposure to Divine Mercy? One may well ask if this approach is safe enough to consider, or whether it can have anything substantive to say to the world in which we live.

Postmodern thought holds that things, events and entities don’t have meaning in and of themselves but only the meaning that has been assigned to them; consequently, any thing, event or entity can carry as many meanings as there are meaning-assigners. Because this is the philosophical air we breathe every day, we may go about with the idea that it is up to us to invent our meaning lest we ourselves ultimately prove meaningless.

It is true that we are greatly responsible for this complicated construction that we call “me” and responsible for who we become, but what if we considered ourselves for a moment from the other end of the hunting telescope? What if we considered ourselves as the one looked-at and searched-for rather than the one who is searching? What if all of a sudden we found ourselves not to be supreme subject, but supreme object?

What is on the table here is the venerable tradition of Christian thinking that we are meant. We are given our ultimate meaning by God and in God who has called us into being. Our meaning as persons is not something we assign but something we discover. And our cooperative creativity is invited as we live responsibly into that discovery. To have to go out and make one’s own meaning—hunt it down, kill it and drag it home—is to be chained to a kind of post-modern hamster wheel, just another tyranny to add to all the rest. In our time we have seen the coffin of modernism safely into the ground only to turn and fall into a worse place, a desperate, boundary-less place where the only orthodoxy is that there are no orthodoxies, no formational givens.

While humans are inveterate investigators, namers, even makers of meaning—and wonderfully so, for we are made in the image of God—all of that creative discovery is held within the widest context of God who has meant us. This is a kind of holy hermeneutic within which we can freely and safely engage the Lenten invitation because we discover ourselves already to be held in God.

Hark back to that Lenten offensive for a moment. If we are to put down the shotgun and back away slowly, is that to say there remains nothing for us to do? Not at all, for the various Lenten disciplines, penances undertaken in an intentional way, help to build up a structure capable of receiving and integrating the meaning that God is giving to us. Indeed, Julian says that all our living is penance. “For the penance that man takes upon himself was not shown to me—that is to say, it was not shown in particular—but it was shown particularly and highly and with full lovely demeanor that we shall humbly and patiently bear and suffer the penance that God Himself gives

us, with remembrance of His blessed Passion.” And Julian continues with Jesus’ words, “And therefore I will that thou wisely recognize thy penance which thou art in constantly, and that thou dost humbly accept it for thy penance, and thou shalt then truly understand that all thy living is beneficial penance.”



Understood as beneficial penance, all our living becomes kinetic intercession for ourselves, for the Church and the world. This intercession is made not so much by the prayers we say every day, but by what we are. It arises organically and with integrity from and within the ordinary, and necessarily implicates and involves the whole of our person.

And there is more, for something about salvation also requires contentment—or at least healthy equanimity—in this very moment regardless of what work is actually being done. Lenten receptivity allows the understanding that whatever is happening in the present moment is some kind of gift instead of some kind of problem. In this view no daily work can be demeaning or meaningless or without contemplative possibility because it is held within the wider context of divine intent. As the psalmist says, “My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed I have a goodly heritage.”

And because divinely meant, every life without exception already has within it and coming to it moment by moment that which can open into greater availability to God. All that is required is training the eye to see it and the ear to hear it.



## New Books & Recommended Reading from Julian Shop

### *Love Bade Me Welcome*

Fr. Robert Llewelyn

Fr. Robert maintained that we project our own anger onto our image of God, whereas the compassionate love of God is acting at all times to abate and dispel the wrath within ourselves. Once our deficient image of God has been corrected we are freed to enjoy a more truly authentic prayer life. *Love Bade Me Welcome* is a practical book that shows how our spiritual life may be deepened and enriched through well-tryed, though sometimes overlooked, methods of prayer from both within the Christian tradition and beyond.

### *Saint Benedict's Rule*

Translation and Introduction by Patrick Barry, OSB, former Abbot of Ampleforth Abbey

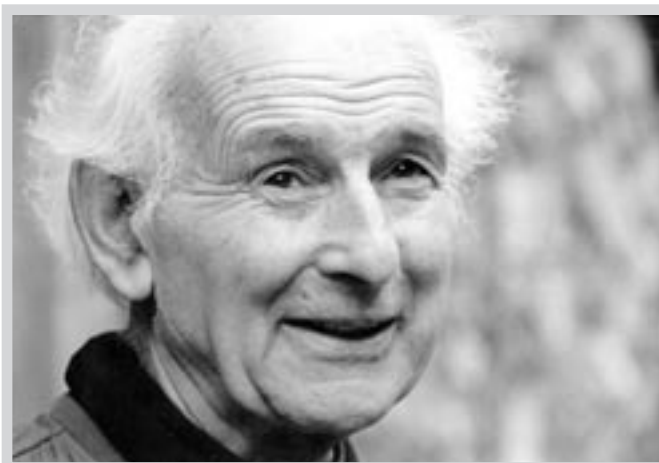
The wisdom of St. Benedict comes vividly to life in this new, sparkling, contemporary English translation of and introduction to Benedict's Rule. The Rule has continued in daily use through fourteen centuries and is a living breathing document that remains fresh in its applications to the world today. Its primary focus is on spirituality and on the beating heart of the Rule: Christ in his teachings, Christ in his loving obedience to his father, and Christ in his message of love for and hospitality toward all.

### *The Hermitage Within*

A Monk

"Not everyone, obviously, can and should live as a monk or hermit. But no Christian can do without an inner hermitage in which to meet his God." So writes this anonymous author of a book devoted to the innermost activities of the soul. As a part of our Desert Spirituality offerings, the author meditates on the wilderness experiences of Jesus, John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene and others, encouraging us to find an inner place so silent that we can hear God.





**Fr. Robert Llewelyn**  
**Friend of God and lover of Julian**  
**July 6, 1909 – February 6, 2008**

“God showed three degrees of bliss that every soul shall have in heaven who has willingly served God in any degree on earth. The first is the honor-filled favor of our Lord God which the soul shall receive when it is delivered from pain.

“The second, that all the blessed creatures that are in heaven shall see that honorable favor, and He makes that man’s service known to all that are in heaven.

“The third is that as new and as pleasing as it is to receive it at that moment, just so shall it last without end. And I saw that simply and sweetly was this shown: that the age of every man shall be known in heaven, and shall be rewarded for his willing service and for his time; and especially is the age of those who willingly and freely offer their youth to God excellently rewarded and wonderfully thanked. For I saw that whenever or at whatever time a man or woman is truly turned to God, for one day’s service and in order to fulfill His endless will, that one shall enjoy all these three degrees of bliss.”

*(A Lesson of Love, Ch. 14)*

From Fr. Robert’s 10th May 1997 Annual Julian Lecture, Norwich, England  
*“The Mercy & Forgiveness of God”*

“What bearing does Julian’s teaching [on forgiveness] at this point have on our own lives? Let me speak in personal terms and from there we can make application to ourselves. For most of my life I have believed that if I sinned against God and repented then God would forgive me my sin. And this is a blessed truth. But Julian’s truth is yet more blessed. For Julian’s truth is that if I sin against God and don’t repent then God still forgives me, though, (and this is vital), I can only appropriate that forgiveness, take it in to myself and make it my own, after I have turned to him again. But the forgiveness is already there, whether I choose to take it or not. Julian is shown that God’s love is pure compassion. This compassion, or we might say this all-forgiving love (for in him is no wrath) is streaming out to us all the time from the arms of God. It is there for the taking. And there is nothing I can do, however deeply I fall from grace, to turn that all-compassionate love into wrath. As Julian says ‘if God could be angry for any time, we should neither have life or place or being’ (Ch. 49).”