

Literature

T. S. Eliot and Julian of Norwich

By **Sandra Glahn**, adjunct professor, Christian education and pastoral ministries, Dallas Theological Seminary. Excerpt from “Little Gidding” by T. S. Eliot. Glahn is editor of *Kindred Spirit* magazine and author of *Informed Consent* as well as the *Coffee Cup Bible Studies* series; www.aspire2.com.

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Thus T. S. Eliot ends the final “Little Gidding” section of *Four Quartets*—the last poem in what is arguably the greatest literary achievement of the twentieth century’s most influential poet. In the concluding sections of “Little Gidding,” Eliot uses the phrase “all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well” three times.ⁱ He borrowed it—and others—from English medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich.

According to Julian’s own account, when she was thirty, she became ill. As she lay dying, she had a series of sixteen “shewings,” or revelations, about God, the Trinity, and the crucified Jesus. Afterward the fourteenth-century mystic recovered completely and recorded her experiences.

Julian's *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, known today as *Revelations of Divine Love*, was the first English book known to be written by a woman. While this accomplishment may seem significant today, in Julian's time English was merely a local dialect. She—like most women then—was unlearned and sought to live in relative obscurity. In fact, she may have had to learn her ABCs before she could even record her “shewings.” After she did so, her work remained unpublished until 1670.

About six hundred years after Julian lived, T. S. Eliot chose to quote her. That she was from England and a woman influenced his choice as he drew on mystics from his adopted country's past. And hers was a credible voice, having gained the respect of even May Sinclair, the critic of modernist writing to whom we attribute the term “stream of consciousness.” Sinclair disliked Christian poetry, claiming it was neither written by poets nor supremely devotional.

For twenty years Eliot desired to prove Sinclair wrong, and in *Four Quartets* we see his deepest attempt. The statement that “all shall be well” is the summary of Julian's entire experience. Her optimism is not one of positive thinking but is based on an eschatological hope. Eliot shares her view that the One who can make even humans killing the God-Man into the still point of history can turn all lesser evils into good. Thus, “all manner of thing shall be well.”

The words take on particular significance when viewed against the backdrop of Eliot's circumstances. A fire warden during World War I, he witnessed bombings and violence as everyday experiences. The evil around him demanded an explanation. And Julian's conclusion became Eliot's refrain. The basis of the wellness of which she speaks is her belief in Christ's power to renew all things to their original “making.”

In reading Eliot's preconversion poems, such as *The Waste Land*, one wonders if he even believes in hope. But by the time he has penned the *Four Quartets*, well after his conversion, the poet has clearly come to affirm a hope of cosmic proportion—one that ultimately transcends time, sequence, geography, and history.

So the great modernist Nobel-winning wordsmith ends his masterpiece with the words of a humble, virtually illiterate medieval woman. Both witnessed overwhelming ugliness, brokenness, and suffering in the here and now. Her century saw plagues; his saw the wars. Though separated by six hundred years, their voices can and do affirm in unison the hope in Christ that all shall be well and, indeed, “all manner of thing shall be well.”

For reflection and discussion

Do you consider yourself a hopeful person? If not, where do you notice the absence of hope? What keeps you from being hopeful? If you are hopeful, what is the basis of your hope? How is your hope connected to faith? To Jesus? Julian was very sick when care was limited and plague was rampant. Yet her legacy is hope. What is the difference between optimism based on “eschatological hope” and optimism based on “positive thinking”? How do you respond to God's prophetic plans for the future?

Arts

Real Art: The Hope Beyond Ground Zero

By **Charles Colson**, JD, founder, Prison Fellowship, and author of *The Good Life*. From *BreakPoint*, February 21, 2007; www.breakpoint.org.

In 2003 the White House announced that New York artist Makoto Fujimura was appointed by President George W. Bush to the National Council on the Arts for a six-year term. Perhaps it's the worldview behind his art that caught the president's attention. Working in his studio three blocks from Ground Zero, Fujimura was deeply impacted by the horrific events of September 11, 2001, and it caused him to challenge the artistic community to see the reality of our broken state of existence.

Fujimura says, "Art cannot be divorced from faith, for to do so is to literally close our eyes to that beauty of the dying sun setting all around us. Death spreads all over our lives, and therefore, faith must be given to see through the darkness, to see through the beauty of the valley of the shadow of death. Everyone has a Ground Zero to face."

Reflecting on his own conversion, he said, "I remember how I used to look at the landscape every day on my way to work, not believing what I saw was true or able to trust my own vision. I realized after my conversion that there was reality I could trust, and that I could also trust what was inside of me to express it. Reality is the foundation of creativity, and any artist who is honest has to make that assumption." Coming from

Japan, with a Christian population of less than 1 percent, Fujimura's worldview shift in his art was radically countercultural and obvious to both his admirers and critics.

For Fujimura, art can be best understood in the context of the incarnation. In the Lord's Supper, ordinary substances become sacred. The immanent becomes transcendent. If God became man and humbled himself, this incarnational principle can be applied to every act of creativity, and, therefore, the results of artistic creation can become sacred. This is the theological understanding that flows through Fujimura's work.

Fujimura works in Nihonga—a medieval Japanese technique of painting using minerals. His works are painted in layers of mineral paints that become transparent over time, revealing the layers below.

When asked by art critic James Romaine how this technique relates to his faith, he said, "The underlying worldview of Japanese art is cyclical, and yet the technique lends itself to this notion that there is a beginning and an end." There is history and story in the painting, as this handmade paint is applied to handmade paper. "There is this rich fabric of story being woven as you work. That is something that is very significant to me, as I am someone who has come to understand that my worldview is a premise that allows for these stories to come alive. That understanding of the world or looking at yourself, as having a history, is very biblical. Because there is a beginning and an end, there is resolution; even in death itself, there is this purpose."

As a contemporary artist, creatively embracing and painting his way through the wreckage of September 11, Fujimura is an example of a Christian effectively using art as a vehicle to show us reality: its depravity and brokenness, but also the hope of restoration that the Great Artist himself, incarnate in Christ, brings to all things.

For reflection and discussion

Fujimura wrote that living and working near “ground zero” in Manhattan intensified his search for meaning. “The Twin Towers,” he wrote, “were twin symbols of capitalism and materialism. Until September 11th, artists here worked both literally and figuratively in the shadows of these symbols. The devastation caused by the catastrophe created a hallowed sense of a presence greater than that of our so-called postmodern world.”ⁱⁱ

Where were you on September 11, 2001? What do you feel when you see an image of the devastation?

What works of art have offered you some connection to suffering? How have they helped you process loss or find healing?

How might a devastation, a great loss, open up a space for a greater presence in your life?

How might you express your thoughts to God about suffering and hope?

ⁱ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943).

ⁱⁱ Makoto Fujimura, in an essay “The Fallen Towers and the Art of Tea,”