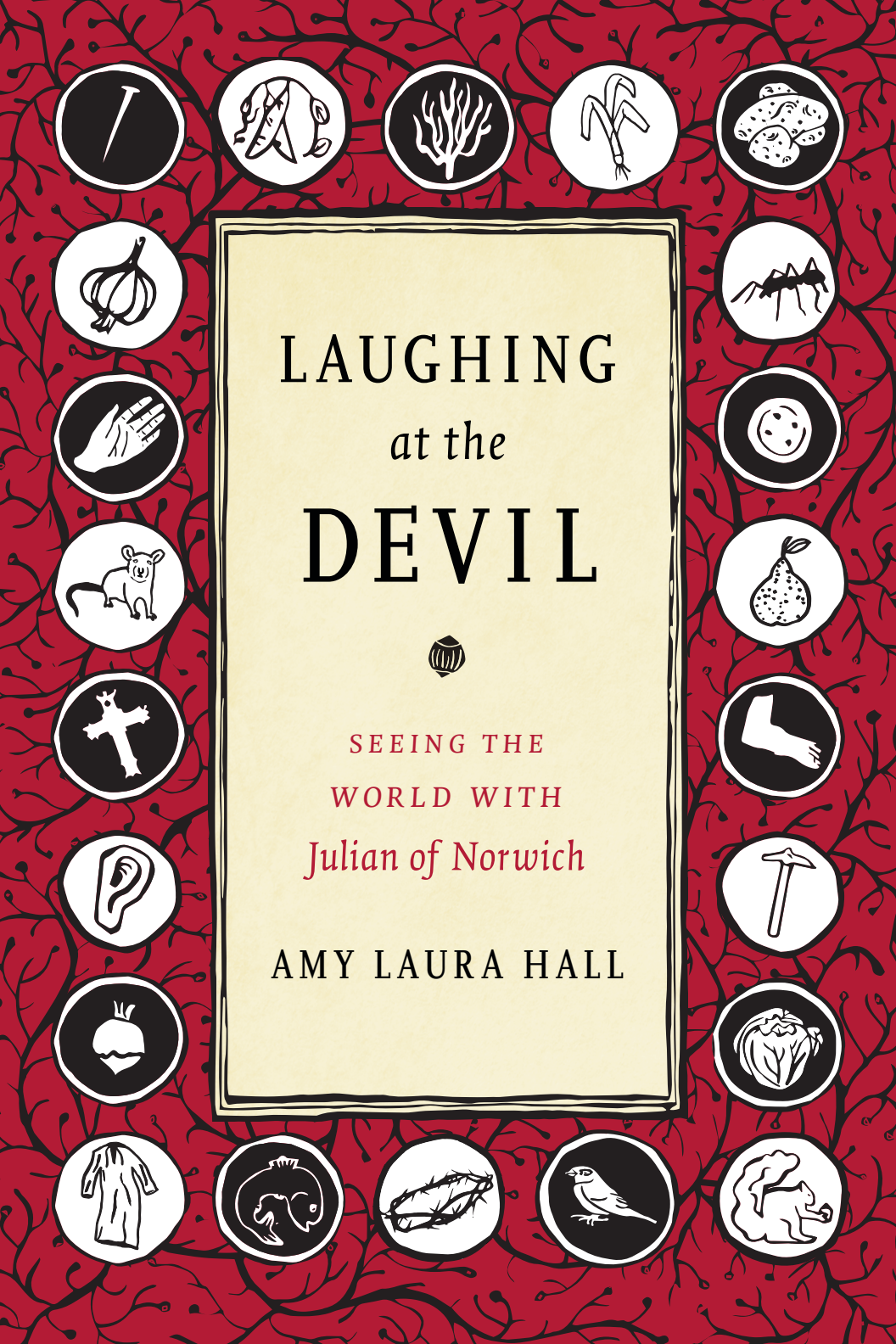
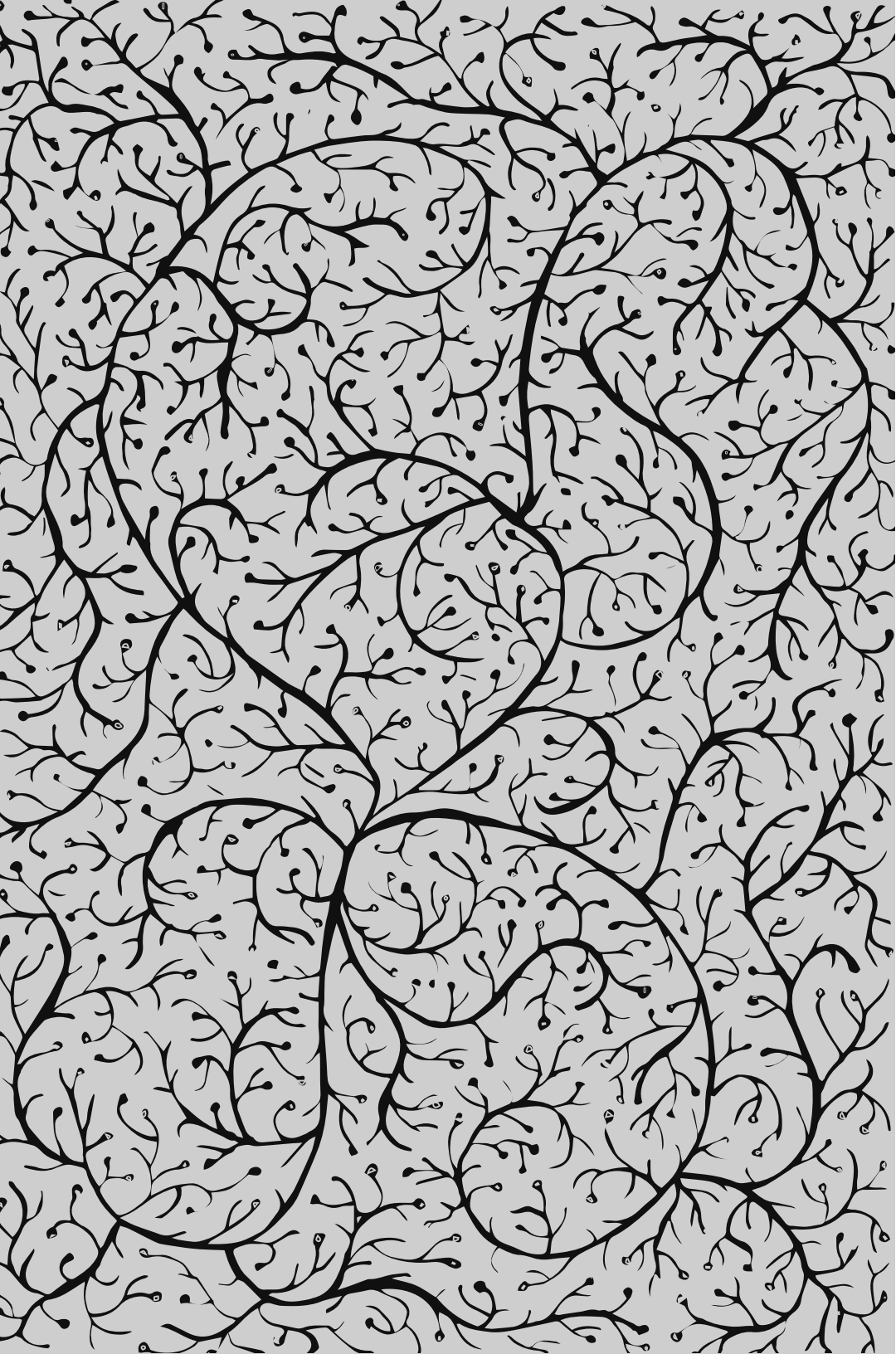


LAUGHING *at the* DEVIL

SEEING THE WORLD WITH *Julian of Norwich*

AMY LAURA HALL

LAUGHING
at the
DEVIL



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For my parents,
Robert and Carol Hall

Just because I am a woman,
must I therefore believe that
I must not tell you about the
goodness of God, when I saw
at the same time both his
goodness and his wish that
it should be known?

—JULIAN OF NORWICH,
Revelations of Divine Love

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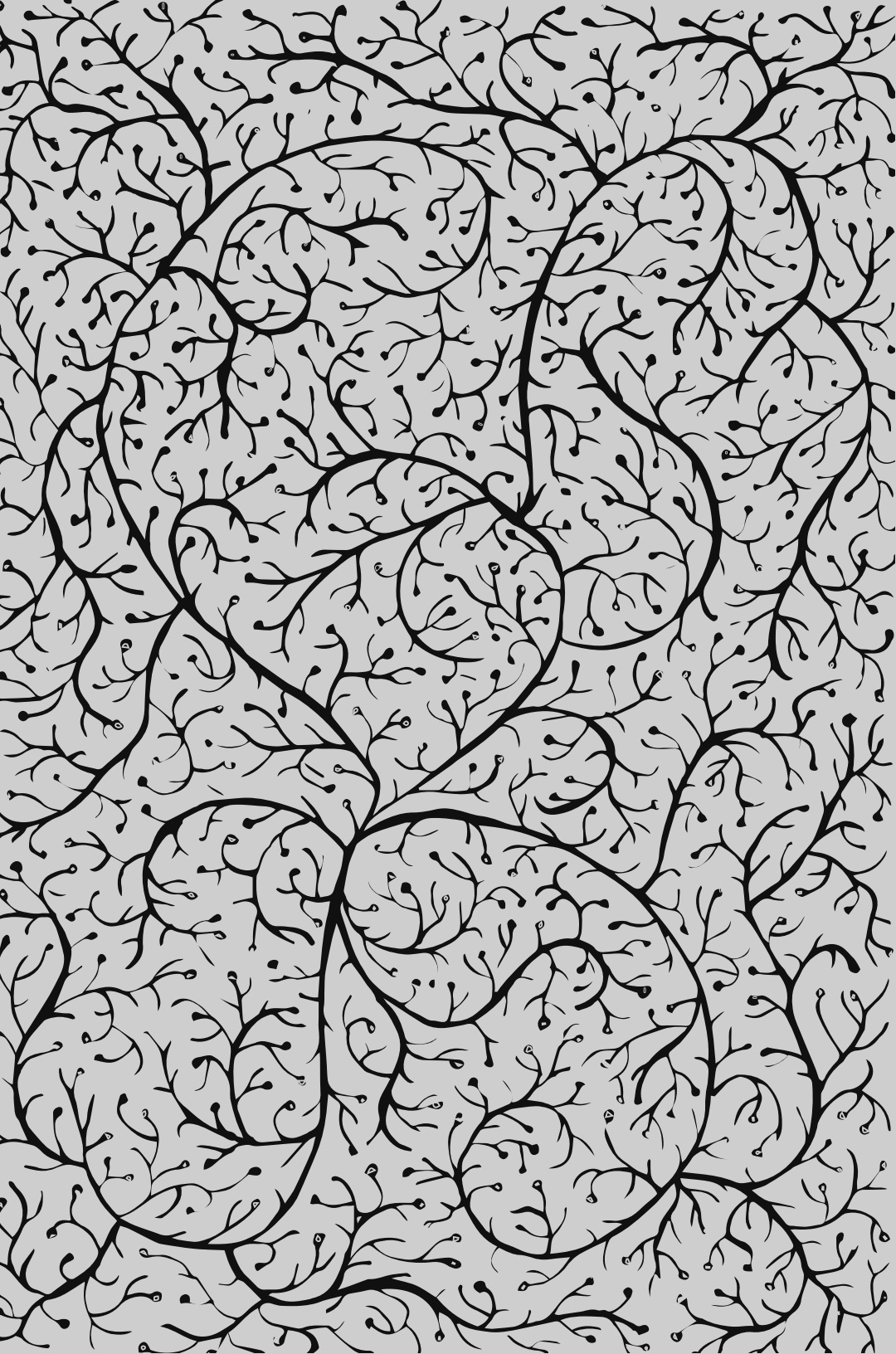

PREFACE
Devil: Zero

> I also saw our Lord scorn [the Devil's] wickedness and set him at nought, and he wants us to do the same. At this revelation I laughed heartily and that made those who were around me laugh too, and their laughter pleased me. I wished that my fellow Christians had seen what I saw, and then they would all have laughed with me. But I did not see Christ laughing. Nevertheless, it pleases him that we should laugh to cheer ourselves, and rejoice in God because the Fiend has been conquered.
>
> —JULIAN OF NORWICH, *Revelations of Divine Love*

Rejoice?
But I did not see Christ laughing.
The Fiend has been conquered?
The Lord has made the Devil into nought, into a no-thing?
What does it mean to laugh at the Devil? To believe that "the Fiend has been conquered"?
What does it mean to live not governed by fear?

Julian of Norwich is the medieval anchorite who taught me the courage to look evil in the eye. Here are the fundamentals a new reader needs to know about her: Julian of Norwich wrote two books

that, when bound together, fit in a coat pocket. As far as we can ascertain, Julian is the first woman to write a book in English. She was born in 1342. She received a series of visions from God in 1373, while she was on what she and others around her thought would be her deathbed. It took Julian two decades to sort out what she first saw when God granted her visions of love and truth. This is the reason we have a Short Text (ST) and a Long Text (LT) describing what she saw.[1] She wrote down her visions soon after she received them (the Short Text), and then took her time to think about how to write what is referred to as the Long Text. It took her years and years to think about the ramifications of what she had seen. We know Julian became an anchorite at St. Julian's Church in Norwich by 1393. This means that, by the time she was around fifty years old, she had dedicated herself to living the rest of her life in rooms attached to this busy church, centrally located in a port city. Her rooms faced a busy road. The fact that Julian eventually committed to live in a local church strikes some contemporary readers as remarkable. I am fascinated most by her extraordinarily unconfined visions, as she testified to a God uncontrolled by the strictures of her time and my own. Also Julian of Norwich laughed at the Devil.

I have come to hear Julian's laughter as a call to holy audacity. She received her delighted and defiant laugh while incapacitated with what could have been yet another recurrence of the Great Plague that had devastated England in her childhood. There was ample evidence of evil in her time, and there is ample evidence of "the Fiend" in my own time—miseries and evil machinations over which to weep and to rage. Julian received the courage to resist, to defy, and to laugh.

This book is about Julian's defiant laughter, in her own words and from her own time, and my teaching these words in historical context

1. I use the Penguin edition of *Revelations of Divine Love* (1998), which provides a translation from Julian's Middle English into everyday modern English by Elizabeth Spearing. I will note first whether the quote is from the ST (Short Text) or LT (Long Text), followed by chapter number (which will allow you to locate a reference if you are using a different edition) and page number in the Penguin volume.

to other people confounded by life. Like many women I know, I find it almost impossible to laugh while in full awareness of evil. As part of my vocation, I teach and write about war, torture, drone strikes, sexual domination, and racial terror. Evil makes me angry, scared, and sad. I laugh from my centered, most courageous part of my soul, a part of myself that I can access only when in the presence of people whom I trust with my full, vulnerable truth and hope. Then, and only then, I sometimes laugh so loudly that strangers turn around and stare. I snort and spontaneously clap, sometimes with my hands in the air praising God for whatever truth I have just heard. I have come to experience this full-on laughter as a miracle—as a dose of sanity to help me move on to another day, to face more of the bloody truths of my own time.

Nicki Minaj is a musician to whose music my daughters and I dance in the car. Her songs feature a laugh that is all-out courageous and joyful, rebellious and delighted. She turns around and looks squarely at the punishing music industry and laughs, with a snort. When I first heard the laughter in Nicki Minaj's music, it struck me that her combination of courage and elation was like the laugh Julian laughed in the face of the Devil. Her lyrics mock the ways a male-dominated and racist music industry measures women's bodies, and she plays with caricatures of sexuality, making them powerfully her own. With defiant indecorum, she laughs. Julian also faced full-on many bloody truths about power and cruelty, and she refused to flinch.

Sometime around 1373, when Julian was about thirty years old, she received a series of visions as an answer to prayer. She asks for "vivid perception of Christ's Passion," meaning Jesus's death on a cross. By "Passion," Julian means a particular kind of passion. She asks to be infused with a full sense of Jesus when, by her theology, Jesus was bringing all of the world into God. That is, Julian asks to be one with Jesus on the cross. (I will explain this more below.) She also asks for "bodily sickness." And she asks for "three wounds" (ST: 1, 3). Today this may sound bizarre. At first reading it sounded masochistic to me. But it was not odd during the Middle Ages for fervent Christians to ask God for Jesus to become one with their own body. It was not strange

for people seeking holiness to feel in their bones a union with Jesus on the cross. Julian interprets her time of sickness as a gift of vision from God. In her room, focusing on a simple household crucifix on the wall, she sees everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be held safe by God in love.

When I say Julian laughed at evil, I mean she asked God to be with her while she kept looking the Fiend in the eye, knowing that, as she puts it, she had been given "strength to resist all the fiends of hell and all spiritual enemies" (ST: 3, 7). Rather than viewing the world around her as filled to the brim with misery, she saw simple miracles and resilient safety. She did not deny that there was a fiend to be conquered. She did not pretend the world was simple. The Devil is no-thing, but that does not mean Julian denied the evil around her. Because of this her laughter is all the more powerful an antidote to a religion of fear.

Julian received suffering as a kind of inoculation against dread. A reasonable response to the manifold traumas around her—recurring plague, famine, a brutal aristocracy—would have been precisely to catch a contagion of terror. Instead she changed the whole scene. In her vision God gave her the blood of Jesus, straight from Jesus's own body, in a way that changed how she saw the entire universe, including God. Seeing God's "familiar love," she knew God as "hanging about us in tender love," like "our clothing" (ST: 3, 7). Hers is not the only way to understand and live the Christian faith, but she has helped to shape my life and the lives of many other people seeking truth. I am still trying to follow her lead—dancing, laughing, seeing, crying, and thinking, thinking, thinking, and, again . . . praying and remembering how to trust enough to laugh from the most centered part of my body and soul.

I teach Ethics (capital E) at a prestigious secular university, where an ethicist worth her salt cannot offer dressed-up academic platitudes about what is ethically wholesome or what is ethically legal or what

is considered moral to some universal judge of clean living. I cannot evade the hardest questions about the world around me or about Jesus. If I do not ask a bewildering question about ethics and God, students will call me out as giving too simple an account of their world. I am also a mother. Both of my daughters live with the stigma of a "broken home," a phrase that is still used in North Carolina by both older and young adults who grew up with a simple vision of wholeness. The brokenness my daughters knew before our home was publicly, officially "broken" has left me with recurrent questions about the possibility of love. Julian's writings have helped me not to give up on either the most unbearable sorts of truths or on Jesus as truth. Julian has helped me listen to the hardest questions coming at me and the most painful questions coming from within me. During times that have seemed to me and to many other people around me to be nothing short of apocalyptic, Julian has helped me resist running away from reality.

I came to Julian by accident. You may be reading this book because you already love Julian of Norwich. I first read her *Revelations of Divine Love* in a hurry, and with impatience. It was 1999, and I had just started my position as a new teacher. I was teaching a large Introduction to Christian Ethics class at Duke Divinity School, and I did not have a single woman on the list of readings from "the classics." A colleague suggested Julian of Norwich. When I looked puzzled, he said something like, "You know her. She wrote 'All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well'?" No. I'd never heard of her, and she sounded stupid.

"All shall be well"? I had heard too many Christians say some version of "All things work for good for those who endure misery" to people who needed a friend just to sit with them in silence. I had also seen "All is well" language used like a Jedi mind trick on people who were aggrieved and grieving. "All is well," and God knows what is good, so what you are grieving or raging against is not worth all of those tears or all that rage. No, thank you. I had heard this language before. No more of that soporific crap for me. But Julian's name kept coming up as a crucial theologian to read and to teach.

I read *Revelations of Divine Love* while trying hard to perform open-

ness and grace for those around me at work and in my new hometown. This, while I was trying to convey a message of joy in the midst of chaos. That chaos was, in fact, a recurrence of abuse in my own home. In this state of intimidation, scrutiny, and almost unbearable fragility, Julian became my lodestar. She was my focal point as I tried to twirl with a semblance of grace on the stage of my life. This book is in part a testimony to how the visions of a courageous woman can transform a setting of dread into a call to courage. "All shall be well" became, for me, a refusal of intimidation, scrutiny, and shame. Julian helped me to look at even the most terrifying truth of my own personal life and trust in the love of God.

I have found that Julian's visions resonate even with readers who have not grown up Christian. Her words about hope and love can speak to people who are privy to secular messages of despair, despondency, competition, and straight-up hate. Images in *Better Homes and Gardens* recommend ways to have, well, *better* homes and gardens. *Cosmopolitan* offers unique tricks to make sure a woman is not alone, or disappointing, on a Saturday night. *Men's Health* shows men how to achieve a configuration on their abdominals known as a "six-pack" while also advising them how to choose the best craft beer. Television viewers in the United States view high-end fights for survival and fitness on *The Sopranos* or *Game of Thrones* and, even more popular, literal fights for scarce goods on *The Price Is Right* and "fight nights" promoted by Ultimate Fighting Championship. Julian has helped me to diagnose and counter such subtle and overt calls to see the world as a competition for scarce resources.

For some Christian readers, her visions powerfully counter a particular form of Christian faith that manipulates anxiety to quicken obedience and compliance. This medieval anchorite, writing with courage when Christianity and political hierarchy were intertwined to convince people to shut up and stay in their place, can speak across

centuries to embolden Christians who have been privy to a similarly toxic blend of religion and politics. Writers and speakers in the United States continue to use Christian language to intimidate and to shame. Julian's visions offer a hearty rebuttal of this use for Christians and for non-Christians who must navigate a political scene where Christian language is used to scare people. Preachers showcased by major media outlets too often speak a false gospel of obedience and order, an isolating message of individual responsibility, or some combination of the two. Commentators like the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reinforce these messages, diagnosing humanity as inherently narcissistic and prescribing selflessness for everyone, as if prescribing fluoride in water.

Julian saw visions of Jesus's blood coming to her and for her, with no intermediary, during the same decade when, customarily, only priests received the cup of blessing (the blood) and the bread (or body) was parceled out according to a strict division of who was above whom in an aristocratic, feudal system. Her resultant laughter is a testimony today against a summons to purifying humiliation and obedience. Julian's visions of God's familiarity and love counter messages of austerity and obeisance to hierarchical ordering. And she wrote with an intention of being read, by real people, from a position of kinship rather than superiority.

Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (2006) edited a volume on Julian that provides her original writings, in Middle English, and copious notes on the particular words and historical context of her writings. In their introduction to the volume they write, "*A Revelation* [meaning the Long Text] is a work with no real precedent: a speculative vernacular theology, not modeled on earlier texts but structured as a prolonged investigation into the divine, whose prophetic goal is to birth a new understanding of human living into the world and of the nature of God in his interactions with the world, not just for theologians but for everyone" (3). What they mean by "a speculative vernacular theology" is this: Julian was willing to ask questions that a woman was not supposed to ask. In fact only men trained in theology at Oxford or Cambridge University were considered qualified

to ask the questions she asked. Julian was "speculative" in that she speculated—she asked questions. And she wrote in the vernacular, meaning she wrote in English, the language people not trained at Oxford or Cambridge spoke to one another about everyday things. Julian was a churchwoman and a prophet who wanted people to catch sight of what she saw and to become curious about what it meant that God told her that God's meaning is, always and for eternity, love. She wanted people to think, see, sorrow, and *laugh at the Devil* with her. This is my invitation, in my own vernacular, to join in this vision.

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Miriam Angress has edited a book that crosses boundaries. I am grateful for her courage. I am grateful to Judith Hoover and Liz Smith for correcting and clarifying my prose. Elizabeth Spearing translated Julian of Norwich from Julian's English to my own. I am grateful for her expertise. Shannon Gayk told me reading Julian is important. Professor Gayk also recommended more readings about vernacular theology. Elizabeth Spearing and Shannon Gayk prompted me to ask librarians at Duke University for more essays about this period. I am grateful to every librarian at Duke who made this book possible. Elizabeth Benson, Judith Heyhoe, and David Lott read the manuscript and helped me to write in the vernacular. Mariya Paykova Tivnan taught me the difference. Liturgy does not respect boundaries of past and present. David Lott read the manuscript and helped me convey the present and past of liturgy. Students at Duke Divinity School, University of Virginia, Point Loma, and Princeton Seminary helped me discern how best to teach Julian. Robert C. Lyons wrote a close reading of Julian in 2000 that helped me decide to teach her works as long as I have words to speak. Silas Barber and Amanda Smith listened as I sorted out what most matters. Lillian Daniel and J. Kameron Carter reminded me to preach. Rachel and Emily inspire every word I write. I now dedicate this book to my parents. This is long overdue. Dear

Carol Tisdale Hall and Robert Edward Hall, I love you. You were my mom and dad. You are now Cookie and Pop to Emily, Rachel, and my beloved nephews. You taught me to read words closely, to love real people, to be brave, to sing hymns even when I do not have the spirit in me, and always to risk the truth.

INTRODUCTION
Love in Everything

> Though the three persons of the Trinity are all equal in themselves, my soul understood love most clearly, yes, and God wants us to consider and enjoy love in everything. And this is the knowledge of which we are most ignorant; for some of us believe that God is all mighty and has power to do everything, and that he has wisdom and knows how to do everything, but that he is all love and is willing to do everything—there we stop.
>
> —JULIAN OF NORWICH, *Revelations of Divine Love*

I have tried to think past the "stop" that Julian of Norwich writes about in this passage. I have always found it almost impossible truly to believe in my bones and my flesh and my brain that God is "all love" and truly "all love" *for me*.

Omnipotent? Yes. God is *omni* (all) *potent* (powerful).

Omniscient? Yes. God is *omni* (all) *scient* (wise).

I know these two attributes make God God. I was taught this in Sunday school when I was a child. Summer after summer I sang of this in hymns during worship at church camp. In between listening to the 1980s rock group Van Halen on my cassette player, I had memorized the hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise!" God knows

everything, and God can do everything. Check and check. I say these affirmations by rote.

But omni-loving?

I am not alone in this doubt.

One of the earliest examples we have of someone reading Julian of Norwich is in the record of a nun named Margaret Gascoigne, from seventeenth-century France. That was a long time ago, but Sister Margaret is not so far away. Margaret was writing about her struggles to believe that Jesus was actually *for her*. She was trying to believe in Jesus in a way that was more than just a required affirmation to which she said YES in order to be allowed into heaven. Margaret focused on a passage by Julian to help center herself. The passage Sister Margaret focused on is translated from Middle English in this way (God speaking): "Consider me alone my precious child, make me your object, *I am enough for you*" (LT: 36, 92). As Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (2006, 15) put it, Julian's vision "speaks words of comfort across two and a half centuries to a dying woman still beset by the uncertainties of a theologically gloomier age."

Gloomy is a more polite word than I would use. But the word *gloomy* begins to tell the truth of a doubt that I have had and that others have also had for centuries. If God is all-knowing and all-powerful—if both of these statements are true—then God may also be omni-cruel. Or, if God "loves," then God's love is twisted. God is the creepiest, most calculating, most omni-patient sort of horribly cold lover. Is God the sort of supposedly loving lover who waits until the very end of all time to reassure people whom he supposedly loves that love is truly love?

Julian of Norwich sees that God is all love and is willing to do everything. For us. For me. For you. And that "is" truly is an "is," not a "will be" or a "was." Her vision is love, and love now. Her vision is not about a love-pie in the sky. This vision is not insipid, but it is also so complicated that it took her many years to describe what she had seen.

This book is my cerebral and soul-wracked reckoning with the possibility that Julian of Norwich saw the truth about God. In four parts I sift through things I have learned and the questions I still have:

Time: what it means that Julian says God is willing to do everything, present tense.

Truth: what it means that Christians know a truth that makes us odd.

Blood:[1] what difference it makes for us that Jesus was bloody and comes to us in the blood of Holy Communion.

Bodies: how you and I are a blood-and-bone miracle held by God.

I cannot tell my story of reading her without a short history lesson. This part matters for how Julian thinks about our matter. At the beginning of her Short Text she writes, "I asked for three graces of God's gift. The first was vivid perception of Christ's Passion, the second was bodily sickness and the third was for God to give me three wounds. I thought of the first as I was meditating: it seemed to me that I could feel the Passion of Christ strongly, but yet I longed by God's grace to feel it more intensely" (ST: 1, 3). By praying to come right up next to Jesus and "feel the Passion of Christ strongly," Julian may have created and received her own opiate, dulling the pain around her with bloody hallucinations. Some readers have decided that is exactly what she did.

A woman, a visionary, a universalist, a writer from a long time ago: Julian of Norwich is by many different categories easy to dismiss. I gave a lecture about Julian at a local church, and a stately priest, already extra-stately in his clerical robe, stood at the back of the lecture hall and asked me about Julian's "mental illness." He explained in front of the members of his congregation that he had been taught in seminary that Julian was put into "solitary confinement" after having a "mental breakdown." I have not heard or read an actual scholar

1. Different Christian groups use different terms for what happens when people receive a bit of bread and a bit of squashed grapes (whether wine or Welch's) during worship. There are good reasons for calling this practice by particular names, but I am going to use the common terms interchangeably. For the purposes of my book, the Lord's Supper, Communion, the Mass, and the Eucharist are the same. If you do not believe that Jesus is present in some material way in the practice of receiving a bit of bread and squashed grapes, I hope this book is still useful to you.

of medieval history call Julian "hysterical," but she has been given that loaded label over the centuries by men and women who have not known how to think through what she saw. Taken apart in little quotations, she can seem trite. Her history, taken apart for a case study, may make her appear odd. Her theological affirmations were so dangerous it is a miracle she was not executed. In order to catch sight of the truthful courage and beauty of her visions, it is important to know about the theology of her time and about the meaning of her eventual position as an anchorite.

The name that Julian's mother gave her is not available. Julian was not part of the people in the England of her time to be recorded for posterity. She was not of the aristocracy. We cannot look up the name she went by before she came to be called Julian of Norwich. We refer to her by that name because she eventually became an anchorite, named after her church. Anchorites were a diverse group, but they had one thing in common: they were anchored to a particular church; at some point they each dedicated their full-time existence to living in a small apartment attached to a church.

We know from official records that, by 1393, Julian had become an anchorite in the busy city of Norwich, at the busy church of St. Julian's, a name it received centuries before her birth. Sometime in the late fourteenth century, this writer we now know as Julian took the name of that church. We also know from historical records that she was sought out as a sage. So while some anchorites were secluded, it is likely Julian was at least periodically busy. To think of her as being in solitary confinement is absurd. Catherynne M. Valente, a fantasy and science-fiction writer who loves Julian and writes a blog about spirituality, describes the life of an anchorite this way: "She is an oracle, an academic, a hermit in the midst of life." As an anchorite in a busy church in a busy city, Julian would have been very much "in the midst of life." People might have come to hear her words after seeing a beheading or after having buried a husband or after having been accused of heresy.

St. Julian's Church was not named for Julian of Norwich. She was named for the church. But Julian's Church in Norwich may still be

around because of her. The woman we now know as Julian of Norwich loved that church, and she became a part of it. St. Julian's Church was bombed almost to the ground by orders of a German general during World War II, and the church was rebuilt because many people read and loved Julian of Norwich. Tourists who know nothing about the second-century St. Julian, a man for whom the church was originally named, go to Norwich because they believe Julian of Norwich was holy. Pilgrims hope to see the church to which she was attached. Some take Holy Communion there. Maybe they hope to feel close to her laughter.

Julian was a visionary. Around the time that her words were circulating, people were also threatened, imprisoned, and tortured as examples of how not to see the world. King Henry IV and his parliament passed a statute in 1401 called *De heretico comburendo*. The statute ordered any person adhering to heretical views to be "publicly burnt in a high place." The document added, "May punishment of this sort strike fear into the minds of others" (Given-Wilson et al. 2005). Today a pub in Norwich bears the name Lollards Pit, and its sign hanging out front features naked people in flames. The notion that an English leader would be so intertwined with a form of faith as to decree death for anyone who thought off-brand is now peculiar enough to be a pub's advertising gimmick. At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, when Julian was writing, the king and the archbishop of Canterbury were all up in one another's business. When they were not fighting against one another, they were reinforcing their own power with every intertwined form of control they had available. The century during which Julian received her visions and wrote her words culminated in a royal decree to regulate who was allowed to write and speak about God.

The turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century was a time of holy mischief. People who were literally hungry due to wheat shortages and feudal machinations were also hungry to read Scripture in their own language, to hold a scrap of scriptural verse in their hands. It was a time riddled with despair and sadistic repression. Julian wrote with temerity at this intersection. It is one of the reasons people return to her words, and to the church now known for her name. It is a reason

I turn to her—in order to look the ugly truth in the eye and not only refuse to flinch but "to consider and enjoy love in everything."

Julian's Norwich was not so different from any postdisaster, postapocalyptic human world in Western history. She was about eight years old when a horrific plague, known at the time as "the Great Plague," spread from Europe and the Middle East to England, killing half of the people in many towns and creating a sense of impending disaster that reverberated for generations, through recurrence in England of the deadly disease itself and in graphic memories of loved ones lost. She was seeing visions of Jesus's blood coming to her and for her, with no intermediary, during the same decade when, customarily, only priests received the cup of blessing (the blood) and the bread (or body) was parceled out according to a strict division of who was superior to whom. With peasant uprisings throughout England, the rules that governed a system of feudalism were being challenged and violently reinforced.

Under English feudalism, rules about who could speak to whom were kept in part by memorizing who was whose child, by class-based rules about clothing, and by which language people spoke. If you spoke Latin, you were trained in theology and could talk about God. If you spoke French, you were part of the aristocracy. And if you spoke English, you were someone who mostly did not matter to the first two groups, unless you tried to change things. Then you were punished. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt (1999, 22) quotes the historian R. H. Tawney on this point: "The gross facts of the social order are accepted in all their harshness and brutality. They are accepted with astonishing docility, and, except on rare occasions, there is no question of reconstruction." Bauerschmidt explains, "This 'harshness and brutality' is accepted as intrinsic to the social order" (22).

Julian's Long Text was written at a time of societal and personal crisis. Common sense included also a dose of death. The dread of death may have been just a whiff if you were among the few people who lived above the fray. But it was palpable if you were a starving peasant or a commoner who wanted to talk about Scripture or changes to the feudal system or if your village had a recurrence of plague. Part of

what I found fascinating even the first time I read Julian is how, as Bauerschmidt (1999, 14) puts it, hers is "a particularly crucial period of transition." The "docility" that Tawney describes in his writings on medieval England is accurate. But there was resistance. I have come to read Julian right at the juncture of dread, docility, rebellion, and hope.

In the mix of all of this, Julian received visions of love, love, and more love. These visions left her asking complex questions for, as she tells us, "fifteen years and more" about the meaning of what she had seen. The answer she received, after praying on her visions, is clear. The answer she received from God verges on bossy. She writes, "My spiritual understanding received an answer, which was this": "Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand or know from it anything else for all eternity" (LT: 86, 179). She continues, "I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall" (LT: 86, 179). The last few pages of Julian's book about her visions leave us knowing Love, Love, Love, and Love. And, by the way, focusing on these visions of Love will, with grace, lead us back into an answer of Love. If you want from her visions a different answer to a different question than the ones she is asking, and if you crave a different answer than the one she received, she warns you that you can go ahead and look for "all eternity" at her writings and not find what you are looking for. Bauerschmidt (1999, 160) writes that, for Julian, "From creation to consummation in heavenly bliss, God sees all of humanity as enfolded within the humanity of Christ." Focusing on the cross, Julian returns again and again to see in Jesus Christ God's vision of love.

John Piper is a popular Christian writer and speaker in the United States. He gave a short lecture in 2009 to the annual meeting of the

Religious Newswriters Association about a movement and marketing scheme he calls "the New Calvinists."[2] In his summary of the basic message of New Calvinism, the most important contribution is its emphasis on human "insignificance." Using examples from a syndicated cartoon and a granola advertisement, Piper suggested to the gathered reporters that there is a deep longing among people in the United States for an authoritative word about God's power, particularly after September 11, 2001. As Piper describes it, people desire the truth that God is omnipotent and that, in contrast, humans and our bodies and daily concerns are like dust. When faced with an unimaginable tragedy like September 11, what people most want is an affirmation that God controls everything and mere human beings control nothing.

As I write this book, the New Calvinists often still proclaim this, what I call a Gospel of Austerity, to generations of Christians and seekers who are trying to live with the aftermath of two wars, during an economic debacle, hearing about drone strikes in Pakistan, dealing with the militarization of police in cities across the country, and learning about torture in prisons from Chicago to Cuba. It is fair to characterize the neo-Calvinist message Piper summarized this way: If you are still alive in this age of terror, thank God, and stop whining about government surveillance. If you still have any job of any kind during this, the Second Great Depression, pick up your broom, and stop complaining about minimum wage. Oh, and keep going to church every Sunday, because God deserves your obeisance.

Julian of Norwich was a woman living through the tumultuous Middle Ages in England, and she saw things differently. She asked a different sort of question, and she embodied a different answer. She assumed that God is all-powerful. She also assumed God's knowledge of all that is. She didn't have to underscore God's knowledge by making sure everyone knows human beings are senseless. Her primary ques-

2. There are different ways to read any theologian in the Christian tradition, and John Calvin has been read in different ways over the centuries. Piper was speaking about a particular way of using some of Calvin's words today.

tion was about God's love. The query that kept her going back again and again and again to the cross concerned neither God's omnipotence nor God's omniscience. Her query concerned God's *omniamity*.[3]

In her decades of writing and rewriting her one book, Julian returns to Jesus Christ on the cross like a dancer uses a focal point. When twirling in a circle, a dancer fixes on a point to steady his balance and to avoid keeling over. Julian did the same with the image of Jesus on the cross. She uses a metaphor of a toddler who, when faced with danger, runs to her "mother's bosom." Christians seek the "Lord's breast" in this way (LT: 74, 164). Using maternal language for God does not mean that Julian softens the real monsters of her world. Plagues, public hangings, forms of domination subtle and overt in a drastically hierarchical country infused with Christianity—these were not figments of a fearful toddler's nightmares. These cruelties were the bloody truth. But Jesus is also the truth. Seeing the world truthfully through Jesus is her task. Jesus is the reason Julian is able to see the microfissures and gaping ramifications of evil and go past the "stop" of doubt in God's omniamity. God is "all love and is willing to do everything." That is our focal point, our mother's bosom, our question and our answer.

You may have had or may eventually have your own particular snowflake-of-arsenic difficulties and social torments that lead you to doubt or scorn God's omniamity. Divorce, death, war, domestic violence, cancer, bullying at work or at school, imprisonment—personal horror is unique, poisonous in a way that is singular and almost indescribable to another person. I do not presume to interpret Julian authoritatively for everyone. I write alongside Julian, in a personal, sometimes pastoral, and unapologetically political way. I assume that all research is in some way introspective. I also assume that my own body is related to the politics of what we might call the "social" body. The rules of how I am supposed to think about God and God's relation to me are related to the rules of how I dress, what words I can and cannot say, how I am supposed to raise my daughters, and so forth. Any

3. This is a word I made up. "Omni" means all, and "amity" means love.

close, careful reading I give of a treasured book is also formed by my reading of myself and the politics around me.

I should say a word up front about that most contested *p* word, *political*. The first book I read about Julian, back when I was preparing my class lectures on *Revelations of Divine Love*, was Bauerschmidt's (1999). Without the telescope of his historical interpretation, she would have remained at the periphery of my spiritual universe. The name of his book is *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ*, and the ways that England was politically fraught during Julian's time is a central part of his analysis. I was persuaded quickly, reading Julian herself, that she was not vapid. But I might have missed the political import of her piety if I had not also read Bauerschmidt's book on the *body politic of Christ*. He described for me in detail the context for Julian's visions of safety in the cross.

Having taught Julian now for over fifteen years, I have decided that to read her without attention to her politics risks turning her *Revelations* into a logic puzzle. An apolitical reading may become a bloodless interpretation of a book that is often about blood. A comparison to another female writer might help. Nadine Gordimer was a novelist writing during apartheid in South Africa, and she was criticized, threatened, and censored for being too "political" in her stories. Gordimer countered that, under a regime that defined every waking moment by procedures of racial and ethnic exclusion and division, human interaction was ineluctably political. In her own time Julian saw copious blood flowing from the cross that "kinned" people who were by law supposed to remain unkinned. That is, she saw people made into equals and relatives who were not supposed to be kin with one another.

At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, England was divided into social stations even more rigidly than it is currently. The term *blue blood* was not a joke; as during other times and in other places, the sense that some people had superior blood and others had inferior blood was based in what I might call (somewhat ironically) "common" sense. And the things that went on under the label "Jesus Christ" or "Church" were part of that hierarchical ordering. Bauer-

schmidt (1999, 18–20) describes the historical record from this period in a way that takes time to understand, but it is worth that time: "The celebration of the mass, particularly the High Mass, in which the priest was assisted by a deacon, subdeacon, and clerks, was a complex rite that depended on the participants properly performing their distinct functions." He continues, "This hierarchical nature of the rite was vividly expressed in the way that subdeacon, deacon, and the priest were ranged on increasingly higher steps before the altar, as well as the complex order of precedence in which the choir was censed and the Gospel book kissed." The way Holy Communion was arranged reinforced the order of people in England at that time. Holy Communion was like a pageant of the different ranks of people, and it was not the case that the first went last and the last went first. The first layer of people even argued with one another, during celebrations of Holy Communion, about who was first among the first. At the time that Julian laughed at the Devil, there also was a practice called the "ceremonial kissing of the paxbread." Bauerschmidt relates a story of a man intent on being higher in the ordering of the first sorts of people who used the paxbread (peace bread) to hit the person carrying the paxbread, angry that someone else had established prominence by kissing the bread before he did.

These practices were all tangled up with ways that the English aristocracy and the Roman Catholic Church were attempting to keep the lid on changes to the system of Christianity. People in the upper ranks of England during Julian's time argued and threatened one another over who could be at the front of the line to kiss Jesus. Let that historical fact sink in. I cannot now unsee what Bauerschmidt helped me to see. I cannot take the politics back out of Julian's visions, given what I now know. So my book on Julian is also political. Her visions of Jesus's blood coming to her and of Jesus's blood making each one of us family are politically loaded.

There is another escape route away from reading Julian politically. In his book on this period in England's history, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Nicholas Watson (1991) helpfully explains how thinkers thinking alongside Julian can render her hygienically apolit-

ical by tossing her into the stratosphere and leaving her there. People may be tempted to hagiography when reading a writer who has seen visions from God, "approaching the verbal surface of a text with a mixture of aesthetic and religious awe" (Watson 1991, 2). *Hagiography* technically means writings about a saint. Writing hagiography today, in my world, means turning a merely human writer into an angel. I am using the term to describe the way some writers make another writer into someone who is not writing for flawed people like me. Julian might become worthy of my awe and my study, but, with this sort of hagiographic misreading, I myself become unworthy of reading her as writing *for me*.

It does not help us that someone at Penguin Books decided to put on the cover of their edition, which contains the best translation, a young woman who is *not* Julian of Norwich. Roger van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Young Woman Wearing a Coif* presents a person in a starched, clean, white coif, looking like she might, possibly, sometimes smile but would never laugh at the Devil and probably would not risk the indecorum of laughing like Nicki Minaj. Although women who were not in a religious order wore coifs during Julian's time, the connotation for readers today is of a prim nun. The way the book's cover is situated, the words "Penguin Classics" and "Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love" also cover the woman's ample breasts and folded, ungloved hands. (You have to turn the book over for the full view of the chosen painting.)

Watson's funniest example of the silly "Blessed Mother Julian" reading that leaves her floating angelically above worldly politics is this: "What Mother Julian meant we cannot know in this life." Hogwash, Watson says. (He does not actually use the word *hogwash*, but it fits.) He recommends a way of avoiding such silliness when reading Julian: "Focus instead on what we can call a mystical writer's 'predicament' in formulating doctrinal positions, articulating an appropriately didactic discourse and describing mystical experience. . . . Look at the specifically *mundane* pressures that beset a mystical text, impelling it toward complex and ambiguous claims for its own status

as an embodiment of truth" (1991, 2). In other words, think about this "mystical text" with the actual earth in mind.

Given that Watson is a medievalist and he has gone to the trouble of italicizing the word *mundane* in his book, I looked up the uses of *mundane* during Julian's time. Then as now, it means earthly, earthy, of this real planet we walk around on and sleep on and eat from. Watson is explaining to his own readers that it makes sense to read a writer like Julian as a person who was writing from a particular real life that involved "pressures" that are right here, on this ground, held by the same gravity that holds us today. Your "predicaments" will be unique, but to read Julian as a non-earth creature is to avoid not only her earthly challenges but your own. Her claims to truth are "complex and ambiguous," Watson notes, but that may make her writing all the more fascinating as an "embodiment of truth." I am not interested in teaching a Christian writer who is cocksure. A mundane theologian who was confused periodically and who needed time to sort and sift and think and pray in order to write down what she learned from God is worth my trouble.

Van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Young Woman Wearing a Coif* does suit Julian in one respect. Her eyes hint that she has much more to say than you would at first glance guess. Her eyes look a bit like Mona Lisa's eyes. Teaching Julian has been different from teaching someone in the Christian Tradition (with a capital T) who bears the authoritative stamp of Gravitas (with a capital G). Julian is a woman who wrote like a woman, and she wrote about blood. The challenge of convincing young, conservative students who have been told to trust only theologians with penises to pick up her book and read it has been a surprising gift. It is precisely the "mundane" particulars and her "predicament" that hooks them to read her visions as more than a task to check off their list. Reading her politically has helped students not to underestimate the more that is hinted at by the painting on the cover of the book. Julian's vision of God's omniamity in the "plentiful shedding of his precious blood" is a different perspective on the world than that of the various John Pipers of her own time, men determined to

shore up God's sovereignty and accentuate human impotence (ST: 5, 9). The mundane aspects of Norwich life six hundred years ago help me to see and to teach Julian's visions of God's "homely" friendship with crimson vitality.

Here is one basic, mundane intersection of Julian's visions and what goes on in a church worship service today. Christians are supposed to believe that the people gathered in worship are Jesus's body on earth and that the bread on the altar is Jesus's body for our bodies. So how the food line at church is structured matters for how people see one another. Julian prayed to receive Jesus and saw each person as part of the same body of Jesus. She saw a Jesus who did not parcel out himself according to the strict hierarchy of England, but who was grace itself, in bodily form and also in his body. Jesus is profligate grace, giving life and making each human life real and good and family with all others.

That blurring of lines between groups of people was a capital offense by the fifteenth century. Julian of Norwich could have been hanged for describing the holy miscegenation she had received in her visions. This may explain her frequent use of *maybe* and *like* and *perhaps* and other words that have marked Julian as "feminine" over the centuries. (I have had students dismiss Julian outright because *Revelations of Divine Love* does not read like a debate or as an academic duel.) She saw people who supposedly had different kinds of blood all mixed together in Jesus's blood and knit together in Jesus's body. It took Julian repeated, careful engagement with what she knew was the official doctrine of Holy Church and what she knew she had seen from God to land on the strong possibility of universalism in the final version of her Long Text. Her use of what may be seen as tentative language could be in part her deference to Church authorities, but this language also represents her persistence to find the best words to express the challenging truths she had received in her initial visions.

The Lollards, after whom the trendy Norwich pub I mentioned is named, has become a catch-all term for heretics sufficiently troublesome to be censored or killed. The term was used most frequently for followers of John Wycliffe, who argued for the translation of Scrip-

ture into the language most people actually used to communicate: English. Many of the people labeled "Lollards" thought Christians ought to be able to hear the words used by another person in worship in their own language and to hear Scripture read by another person in words they could understand. Again, at this time in England the royalty spoke and wrote in French, and holy people in charge wrote and spoke in Latin. The language of Christianity at Julian's time was regimented to keep the social body—that is, the people who made up the daily life of reality—divided into layers. There were those allowed to read the holy words, handle the holy objects, and be buried in the holiest places, and those who were not. And, again, there were gradations among the various layers. To be anachronistic to make a point, the lords and ladies went before the ladies and gentlemen went before the doctors and lawyers went before the hotel heiresses and heirs went before the extended family of a once celebrated athlete went before the common people who ride the bus because they can't afford gas, and so on. Can you imagine if you walked into a church that required people to line up for the Lord's Supper that way? Can you imagine being told you could not talk about theology until you learned Latin? Or that you had no right to learn French because your blood was not the right sort of blood?

The historic fact of the plague is also important for understanding Julian's visions. Grace Jantzen (1988, 8) has a summary of the human misery and Church crisis brought on by the Great Plague that I cannot summarize better than I can quote:

> People died, horribly and suddenly and in great numbers. It was so contagious that one contemporary witness describes how anyone who touched the sick or the dead immediately caught the disease and died himself, so that priests who ministered to the dying were flung into the same grave with their penitents. It was impossible for the clergy to keep up with all those who required last rites, and to die unshriven was seen as a catastrophe of eternal proportions. Nor could the people who died be buried with dignity. . . . The psychological impact on the survivors was incal-

culable, made worse in subsequent years by the further outbreaks which occurred at unpredictable intervals.

Jantzen explains that more than a third of the people of Norwich died during this relatively short period of time, and around half of the priests died.

One word in the quote that was new to me when I first read it years ago is *unshriven*. Priests who did not flee the deadly plague were dying, and so their parishioners were dying without being given the last rites—the prayers and actions performed by a priest to give those at the end of life a chance to confess and to receive Communion, or the Mass, before they died. Jantzen points out that people were not only losing their loved ones left and right; they understood that they were losing their loved ones in a way that would separate them forever from one another. People were dying without receiving the practice that secured one's hope for eternal life with God and one another. So during a time when food shortages periodically swept through England and there was not enough bread for people to eat, there was a spiritual crisis as well; people not only died of the plague, but they died in a way that left survivors in despair. Julian grew up in the wake of this tragedy.

Piper argued that the mass murder of September 11 brought on a crisis of biblical proportions, eliciting in people a desire to be reminded of their own submission and insignificance before the Lord God Almighty and his inscrutable purposes. There is an unhelpful way to point to 9/11 as the cause of every ensuing cultural impulse in the United States, and I understand it is possible to overestimate the import of 9/11, but I have found reading Julian of Norwich helpful for thinking about different responses to what might be called collective trauma, or trauma suffered at a societal level by a large group of people. I have come to believe that it is not merely coincidence that there

has been an outbreak of medievalphilia in the United States since 9/11. I interpret the popularity of movies like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the television show *Game of Thrones* as a misdirected desire on the part of viewers to watch staged hangings, beheadings, impalings, sexual violation, and large-scale destruction to experience a manageable form of affliction. The rise in violence on screen (large and small screen) after 9/11 may be similar to the impulse of a survivor of sexual violence to cut herself in order to try to become the master of the pain she has endured.

During a time of misery and division, Julian asked to receive a bodily experience of Jesus's suffering. By one reading, this was nuts. I think her request for proximity to pain was a way of responding to the manifold traumas going on in her time. I think she asked for the wounds of Jesus to take her away from a cycle of despair, shame, domination, and the violence of retribution that tempts at least some people during times of political tumult.

Julian's answer of God's omniamity is a redirection away from an obsessive rotation of fear, shame, domination, and submission. Her visions of God's love scramble the hierarchical ordering of things. Or, to put it differently, all bloodlines are bled together. And her visions answer that God has not favored the survivors over the afflicted. Her answer to the crises of her time was not to reinforce the order of things, affirm the rightness of authority, and threaten other people subtly or overtly with God's wrath or God's indifference.

On 9/11/01 children across the United States watched their parents and their teachers watching their televisions with horror as people died in ways that are unthinkable. One response to seeing human beings reduced to worse than nothingness is to submit to and inhabit that version of religious truth. We are dust; deal with it. Another response, Julian's response, is, eventually, after years of trying to understand what she had received from God, to discern a vision of redemption:

> At one time our good Lord said, "All manner of things shall be well"; and at another time he said, "You shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well"; and the soul understood

> these two sayings differently. On the one hand he wants us to know that he does not only concern himself with great and noble things, but also with small, humble, and simple things, with both one and the other; and this is what he means when he says, "All manner of things shall be well": for he wants us to know that the smallest things shall not be forgotten. (LT: 32)

By the proper, analytically true reckoning of her time, a significant percentage of the population were eternally lost. By the proper, political reckoning of her time the great and noble were the arbiters to restore proper order and win again God's favor. I am willing to wager that the proper, commonsense reckoning of many Christians during Julian's time was that it would be foolhardy to recommit to hope in "the smallest things" at such an apocalyptically terrifying time. But Julian received visions that emboldened the words of lived lives, making them stand out not just as *not forgotten* but brought, bit by bit, into God's goodness. She received visions that underscored the holy significance of actual, daily, real people and our actual, daily hopes and fears. As the poet Denise Levertov (1997, 58) writes of Julian, "She lived in dark times, as we do: war, and the Black Death, hunger, strife, torture, massacre." Julian's visions are not timeless. They are timely. So I start with Julian's perspective on time.