

God 101: Back to school with Julian of Norwich

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

I find the return to school every fall very exciting. I like the start-up rituals. I still have to have new stuff—pens, notebooks, calendars, and of course new shoes. I am glad to see the faces of my friends and colleagues again and to hear what they have been doing since I saw them last. I love to see former students again and meet new students. I'm eager for classes to start. I haven't yet gotten behind on my paperwork and phone calls.

At the same time, there is always a certain amount of anxiety at this time of year. I worry about how I am going to allocate my time so that I can get everything done without killing myself. And I worry about whether, in the crush of the year's activities, I can preserve my soul. I know I am not the only one who feels such ambivalence about the start of a new year, or who wonders how to get through the year without losing one's soul, or one's faith, or one's intellectual integrity.

I have spent many months recently with Julian of Norwich, so let me relate what advice I think she would give us. She would tell us first of all that what we need is God.

God? That may seem a vague and simple-minded answer. But even if we accept it, we still have to know what actual resources we need, and what to do with those resources in order to seek and find God.

Julian would assure us that these resources are ones we do not have to go out of our way to acquire. In fact, we have had them all along. They are the capacities which belong to the image of God in us. She calls these capacities truth, wisdom and delight, and each corresponds to one of the persons of the Trinity. The capacity for truth "sees God, and wisdom contemplates God, and of these two comes the third, and that is a marvelous delight in God, which is love. . . .

For God is endless supreme truth, endless supreme wisdom, endless love uncreated; and [our] soul is a creature in God which has the same properties . . . And always it does what it was created for; it sees God and it contemplates God and it loves God. . . . [And] the brightness and clearness of truth and wisdom make [us] see and know that [we are] made for love, in which love God endlessly protects [us].

According to Julian, then, as beloved human beings created in the image of the Trinity, we already, right now, at this moment, have our resources for the year ahead: the capacities truly to see God who is the truth, to contemplate God who is wisdom, and to delight in God who is love.

As for how we are to use these resources for seeking and finding God, I imagine Julian saying something like this: Get firmly in your mind that each of these three really does correspond to one of the three persons of the Trinity—truth, to God the Father; wisdom, the ancient Sophia, to the second person, who is God our Mother; and love to the Holy Spirit. This means that none of these three human capacities can operate independently from the others and remain what it is meant to be. None can ultimately be opposed to the other two, or be separated from them, or be subordinate or superior to them any more than we could ever encounter one member of the Trinity without the other two.

Having insisted on the unity of our capacities, Julian would, I imagine, go on to talk about how we can exercise them specifically for seeking, finding and loving God: Your first capacity, for seeing the truth, gives you the ability to encounter God directly, to come face to face with God, she might say. And I would add, you need to exercise it continually so that you don't forget that when you talk about God, you are talking about the one who is most fundamentally and deeply real. God is not a construct of the human mind any more than we are, and so cannot be reduced to anything we say about God.

Furthermore, unless you put yourself in the way of being encountered by the living God, rather than just thinking about God, or talking about God, or stating God's position with respect to various moral issues, your work will be in vain.

I think Julian would go on to admonish us in something like these terms: If you intend to encounter God who is the truth, you cannot do so without the daily practice of prayer, no matter how truncated or inadequate it may seem to you to be. If you

don't already have such a practice, and you need help getting started, find help. If you do have one, let it evolve as it needs to evolve, but don't give it up. Don't forget, either, that Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered, there I will be in the midst of them." Go to chapel regularly; participate in the sacraments. In regular worship you can certainly expect to encounter God who is truth.

But don't practice your prayer and worship as though they are somehow more sacred than or set apart from "ordinary life." God who is truth is the Creator who is truly present in all that is created, and in all people as their truest selves. Be quite certain, therefore, that when you truly encounter another human being and look with the eyes of wisdom and love you are not only seeing them in truth, you are truly seeing and meeting God in them. So pay attention, and never scorn or dismiss anybody as unimportant or unworthy of you.

Be attentive to the students, teachers, staff and classmates who may be very different from you; listen for God in all of them, even if you don't think you're going to find God there. Attend to your mail person, to sales folk in stores, to the old people who walk their dogs in front of your house. Especially be attentive to the situation of those in need whom you encounter face to face, or see from your car window, or read about in newspapers, magazines and books. Don't be quick to deny their need, or explain it away or, worse, judge it. Never forget that you can't talk profitably about God unless you are constantly trying to see God, for God is not the same as what we say about God.

And this, I imagine Julian saying, brings me to our second capacity, which is for contemplation, or wisdom. This is really important, for Christians of all stripes in your culture want to make each other choose between piety, prayer and spirituality on the one hand and theological reflection on the other, as though worship and thought are mortal enemies. But how can they be enemies if Sophia, Holy Wisdom, is, and always has been, a fundamental name for the second person of the Trinity who is incarnate in Jesus? Gazing upon God who is truth and, whether obliquely or directly, thinking about God who is wisdom, considering God's world, and the people in it made in God's image, can't logically be opposed to each other. One can't be rejected in favor of the other, if, as orthodox doctrine tells us, the first and second persons of the Trinity are absolutely coextensive and equal, neither being subordinate to the other.

This means that whatever we can learn that is real knowledge about anything is also knowledge of God who is holy wisdom. Don't worry if the so-called relevancy of the sociology of religion, or medieval theology, or feminist or black theology, or the structure of the Bible, or the thought of Paul Tillich, or Hindu religion is not immediately apparent to you. If it describes God's world and the people in it in all their aspects, it is describing something of God who is wisdom.

Pray, Julian would add, but also think through what comes to you in your prayer. Sing, listen to scripture, receive communion, but realize that using your imagination, mulling over what and whom you are met by in prayer, and bringing that together with what you are learning is the very stuff of the work you do in response to the grace of the Trinity.

As for your third capacity, to delight in God, Julian would say this: Delight is not something you *do*. It is your own response to God who is the Trinity, and yet it is given you.

It is given by God, but you must also understand that it is you who must exercise delight, as you exercise your senses through which you take in the world, though it is more fundamental than a sense. Indeed, delight in God is as necessary to your well-being as looking upon truth and contemplating wisdom. Delight is the means by which you see and understand the origin, meaning and goal of your life, the lives of those around you, and the world in which you dwell, all of which are "rooted and founded in God's love."

The fact is, we are made for love, to bring joy to God because God loves us, to be loved by the God who delights in us, and to love God and God's world and God's creatures and take a deep delight in them in return. Indeed, love is the courteous, familiar ground of our own care of them, for God's love is the ground of everything.

Love, for Julian, was indeed everything. As Julian was told in a final vision more than 15 years after her first revelation:

Do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was [God's] meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did [God] reveal to you? Love. Why does [God] reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know anything different, without end.

In this tough time, to our fears that we will lose our soul, our integrity, our very selves, Julian repeats the words of Jesus, "Don't be afraid." It is, indeed, God we need, but the God who is truth, wisdom and love we already have. And if we remain in God, if we "remain in love," and are faithful to the best of our ability, God will, to use Julian's words, "keep us safe" in the work we do.