Instructor Reading Guide

Etty Hillesum vii-143.

As you are reading works for this course, your focus should be on thinking about what the authors are saying, not on memorizing facts. You will be asked to discuss the readings and also to write an essay exam about them. You are articulating a response, one that will over time build understanding of yourself and your world, so as you read, it would be helpful to make notes for yourself about certain ideas and events and their locations (page numbers) in the texts so you can refer to them in discussions and in your essays.

The editor’s introduction will give you important background information, as will the endnotes. Etty was quite bright, earning a law degree and then, at the time you are reading about, studying Slavonic languages and psychology. One smart girl. Vivacious and attractive also.

As you read along, you should move quickly over some areas and slow down for reflection on others that are more meaningful to you and which you might want to talk about in the discussions. How exactly you do this is up to you, but here are some things to notice.

She takes on a discipline of a half hour of meditation (27-28) where she is able to “listen” (46). She has a lot going on. Does she really have time for this? Do you? “There is a really deep well inside me. And in it God dwells” (44). She’s a Jew but may have gotten this metaphor from one of her favorite authors, Meister Eckhart, a 14th century Dominican spiritual master.

“It is difficult to be on equally good terms with God and your body” (35). What do you think?

She’s clearly preoccupied with the question of women and their (her) role(s) in society (33-35). Have we figured this all out yet?

“Fixed concepts” (65). Hmmm…. Aren’t we supposed to have fixed concepts about important matters and people -- or would that be a serious mistake, causing untold amounts of grief as reality fails to live up to our concepts?

She finds herself kneeling (76) and noticeably changing (87) in “this riven world of ours” (88).

“All of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness in us wherever we go” (93). Is that good news, bad? A rest between two breaths and five short minutes of prayer (93). Here Etty is showing you the contemplative discipline she is adopting: pausing and awareness, if only between breaths. This is a training of attention; she’s schooling her own consciousness. What possible benefit is this to her? To you? Or maybe Americans are too busy for contemplation: we have more important things to do … right?
“There is something of the Early Christian about you” (98). An odd thing to say of an socially active young Jewish woman. What’s going on here?

Her feelings and nature: transforming feelings into deeds (123). She doesn’t leave emotions bottled up inside, and here she is, out of her love, deepening her relationship with nature. This is another aspect of her spiritual discipline.

A prayer: “God, I try to look things straight in the face” (134). Not your usual sort of prayer, right? Especially during a time of developing doom for her and those dear to her. Is this being realistic, or should she try for a little more escapism?

Etty wants to “root out” attitudes and preconceptions that stand in the way of “truly deep feelings and relationships” (137). Is she right about this, or should we leave well enough alone? (Remember what you might think if you were a Native American around 1621 or so.)

Do silence and wordlessness help in all this? She seems to thinks so (137). Do you know a silence that is more potent and nourishing than all the words and images that spill forth in our image-soaked society (iPod, internet, Twitter, Facebook, cell phones, TV)? It seems vaguely un-American, doesn’t it?

Jews can no longer visit produce markets, and will have to hand in their bicycles and no longer use the bus (139-140). Are you ready to walk? How are your shoes?

“Mysticism must rest on crystal-clear honesty, can only come after things have been stripped down to their naked reality” (143). Really? Karl Marx thought that religion was “the opiate of the people” – i.e, poor folks’ escapism. Doesn’t sound like that’s Etty’s take on this. What do you think? Should seeing “naked reality” be a part of a religious practice or do we get enough of that from other sources?