

An Explorer's Guide to Julian of Norwich

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Julian of Norwich: A Voice for Our Time

What is it about Julian that speaks to us today? Why are her fourteenth-century *Revelations of Divine Love* so relevant to us in the twenty-first century? What is Julian telling us that we desperately need to hear in our violent, suffering world?

Julian has been a presence in my life since high school. I attended a private academy in New York City where I learned to think long and hard about everything and to be unafraid of asking tough questions. My favorite theology teacher used to quote Julian to me whenever I was in crisis: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Considering that from the time I was nine years old I was a professional actress on Broadway and television, and taking into account that all through high school I was trying to juggle adolescence with acting and academics, you can imagine that I was in crisis a lot! I drew great comfort from Julian's words; yet all that time, I never really knew who Julian was.

Jump cut to the late 1970s. As a young wife and mother, I finally read Julian's *Revelations* and was overwhelmed by her passionate questioning (just like my own), her luminous faith, her buoyant hope, and her large-heartedness. Julian struck me as an immensely courageous woman. Most of all, in every one of Julian's sixteen revelations of Christ on the cross, I heard, for the first time, the gospel in a woman's voice and from a woman's point of view. That was life-changing. I read Julian's Short and Long Texts over and over again, for decades. It was the sound of Julian's voice, speaking to me directly off the page, that strengthened and guided me through some very difficult times. Here was a theologian, and (as I became convinced through my research) a wife and mother, who dared to write about God in maternal terms from her own deep experience of being a mother. Julian became my spiritual mentor and my friend.

For years, I taught Julian's *Revelations* in courses on the history of Christian mysticism. Students, both male and female, were deeply struck by Julian's brilliance of mind and warmth of heart, responding very personally to her profound understanding of why and how "all shall be well."

While doing exhaustive historical research on every aspect of the fourteenth century that could possibly throw light on Julian's life, I continued to delve into Julian's text and subtext for hidden clues to her mind, her heart, and her story. I wanted to bring this fascinating woman to life by reconstructing a personal history in a dramatic and poignant way that could resonate with modern readers. I also wished to provide contemporary men and women with the necessary theological explanations and spiritual context in order to experience Julian's text on a deeply personal level. After four years of research and writing, *Julian's Gospel* became the first book to combine an in-depth historical reconstruction of Julian's life in fourteenth century Norwich alongside a chapter-by-chapter exegesis of her *Revelations* (using

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Veronica Mary Rolf is an independent scholar of medieval studies, educated at Columbia University; an academic lecturer; a professional playwright; and a master teacher of dramatic arts in New York, London, Buenos Aires, and Berkeley. She is the author of the award-winning *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life & Revelations of Julian of Norwich*.

my new translation of Julian's text from the Middle English).

Perhaps the best answer to the question "Why Julian now?" is that in our age of uncertainty, inconceivable suffering, and seemingly perpetual violence and war (not unlike fourteenth-century Europe), Julian shows us the way toward contemplative peace. In a time of rampant prejudice and religious persecution, Julian inspires us to non-judgmental acceptance and universal compassion. In a world of deadly diseases and ecological disasters, Julian teaches us how to endure pain in patience and trust that Christ is working to transform every cross into resurrected glory. In a generation of doubt, cynicism, and disbelief, Julian offers a radiant vision of faith and hope – not in ourselves, but in the Lord who created us, loves us, and will never, ever abandon us.

Moreover, across six centuries, Julian's voice speaks to us about love. She communicates *personally*, as if she were very much with us here and now. Even more than theological explanations, we all hunger for love. Our hearts yearn for someone we can trust absolutely – divine love that can never fail. Julian reveals this love because, like Mary Magdalene, she *experienced* it firsthand. Julian tells us about her mystical visions of Christ's love on the cross and how that love totally transformed her life. Unlike other medieval mystics (who may appear sometimes too extreme, too ascetic, or too intellectual for our postmodern taste), Julian comes across as a flesh and blood woman, thoroughly sympathetic to our human condition. And in heartfelt terms she expresses her profound awareness of God who became human like us, suffered, died, and was transformed into glory.

Why is Julian so appealing today? I think because she is totally vulnerable and transparently honest, without any guile. She is "homely"; in medieval terms, that means down-to-earth, familiar, and easily accessible. She is keenly aware of her spiritual brokenness and longs to be healed. So do we. She experiences great suffering of body, mind, and soul. So do we. She has moments of doubt. So do we. She seeks answers to age-old questions. So do we. Then, at a critical turning point in her revelations, she is overwhelmed by joy and "gramercy" (great thanks) for the graces she is receiving. We, too, are suddenly granted graces and filled to overflowing with gratitude. Sometimes, we even experience our own divine revelations.

Again and again, Julian reassures each one of us that we are loved by God, *unconditionally*. In her writings, we hear Christ telling us, just as he told Julian: "I love you and you love me, and our love shall never be separated in two" (58:13-14.307). Indeed, Julian's teachings have greatly endeared her to Christians and non-Christians alike. Everyone can relate to her as a spiritual mentor because we sense that, even though she lived and wrote six hundred years ago, Julian the mystic, the seeker, and the theologian is very much "a woman for all seasons." Julian's voice of prophetic hope, speaking to us from the fourteenth century, is one that we in the twenty-first century desperately need to hear.

– Adapted from chapter one, "Why Julian Now?"

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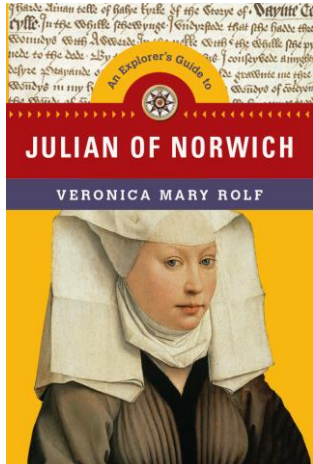


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“Julian travels with us and intimately inhabits and transforms our world and outlook.”

“Rolf plumbs Julian’s spiritual audacity in this must-read for those interested in medieval Christianity and literature.”

–*Publishers Weekly* starred review

“With an encyclopedic knowledge unfolded with the lightest of touches in a beautiful, soigné text, Veronica Mary Rolf enables us to travel back in time and vividly inhabit Julian’s fourteenth-century Norwich as well as her remarkable life and writings. Rolf’s guide is so brilliant that when we reluctantly return to our equally troubled twenty-first century, Julian travels with us and intimately inhabits and transforms our world and outlook. Stunning, unforgettable, and life changing.”

–**David Wilbourne, honorary assistant bishop in the Diocese of York**

“Veronica Mary Rolf skillfully reveals the historical significance and contemporary relevance of Julian of Norwich. In our renewed interest in the writings of Christian spirituality, Lady Julian can instruct us in the centrality of the Trinity, the nature of sin and grace, God’s providence, and suffering and prayer. Rolf serves as a wise and gentle guide to illuminate both first time and seasoned readers. This book is deeply learned and highly practical.”

–**Tom Schwanda, associate professor of Christian formation and ministry at Wheaton College**

“Rolf’s work is more than an informative guide by an expert in Julian scholarship. The reader begins to feel the heartbeat of this great mystic as the author works around key texts and highlights choice quotations. This could only have come from someone who is intimately acquainted with her. Whether one is a first-time or seasoned explorer, this book will not disappoint.”

–**Simon Chan, Trinity Theological College, Singapore**

“Taking on the role of tour guide, Veronica Mary Rolf leads us on an engaging, vivid, and historically rich journey with Julian of Norwich. A figure both familiar and mystifying, Julian comes into view with gentle clarity through Rolf’s accessible and deeply researched voice. I highly recommend this book to spiritual seekers, retreat leaders, and scholars alike.”

–**Jennifer Davidson, American Baptist Seminary of the West, Graduate Theological Union**

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E N D O R S E M E N T S

“Julian of Norwich is an underappreciated gem — she belongs alongside Augustine and Aquinas as one of the greatest of Christian spiritual guides. Thanks to Veronica Mary Rolf, the life and teachings of this great mystic are more accessible than ever. *An Explorer’s Guide to Julian of Norwich* offers a clear and insightful introduction to Julian, one of the treasures of our faith.”

— **Carl McColman**, author of *Befriending Silence and Answering the Contemplative Call*

“Julian of Norwich is among the most radiant of Christian mystics. The radiance is all the brighter for Julian’s frankness in questioning the darkness she experienced in her culture and in herself in a deeply troubled time. The unequivocal and insatiable love of God for all his creatures rings in her words throughout her book. Veronica Mary Rolf is a scholar with a deep heart that probes the mysteries Julian probes and uses her historical and textual research to shed clarity and light on Julian’s teaching that speaks to our own time with increasing urgency.”

— **Andrew Marr, OSB**, author of *Moving and Resting in God’s Desire*, abbot of St. Gregory’s Abbey in Three Rivers, MI