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The Modern Anchoress

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Shepherd of our souls, and First Voice
of creation, now *let there be* . . .
freedom.
For we're still wretched creatures,
always weary, always weak,
and only You can rescue
us from the unhappiness
we make.

—Hildegard of Bingen[1]

I am rarely alone these days.

When I was much younger, I lived alone. I enjoyed the freedom, the solitude, and the silence. But then friends needed a roommate, then I married, then I had children, and then I found I was never alone. In those early years of motherhood, it was a small miracle if I could get fifteen minutes of quiet, let alone any amount of time to dwell in solitude. As the children grew, I found more time for

[1] Hildegard of Bingen, "The Sheep, Listening," in *St. Hildegard of Bingen: A Spiritual Reader*, ed. and trans. Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013), 31.

An extreme example of voluntary Christian solitude were the anchoresses of the Middle Ages, women who sought a hermetic life by being walled into enclosers in churches or convents. Though apart from the world, as figures of great reputed holiness they interacted with streams of admirers who sought their spiritual help and guidance.

myself, but I found joy in togetherness, and I think I may have forgotten how to be alone.

Like just about everyone else on the planet, my life fundamentally changed in March of 2020, and my story is not unique by any means. During 2020 and 2021, I was a full-time employee, a homeschool teacher to my distance-learning elementary school–aged children, a short-order cook in my own kitchen accommodating a seemingly endless series of requests for meals and snacks, and a writer, desperately trying to finish a book while concentrating was difficult, to say the least.

While others I knew were dealing with tremendous isolation and loneliness, I was simply never alone. Yet I was. I missed seeing my extended family and my friends. Zoom happy hours quickly became one of my least favorite activities—an awkward and inadequate shadow of true community, in my opinion—and I began to politely decline all such invitations. I missed my students in the classroom, and I missed seeing coworkers in the halls. I missed in-person church and the interactions with my fellow believers (online church ranks up there with Zoom happy hours in least favorite activities). I missed those little accidental conversations with acquaintances and strangers—small talk with a barista, discussing the weather with a neighbor, and so on. So, while I was never alone, my social network shrank to my immediate household and the occasional outdoor gathering. Testaments to my desire to socialize in person are the hours spent *outside* in the freezing Minnesota winter with friends.

In this bizarre lonely-but-never-alone existence, I became fascinated by medieval urban anchorites and anchoresses.[2] Our contexts are different in many ways, yet I found a strange connection to their circumstances. Two anchoresses in particular captured my imagination: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Julian of Norwich (1342/3–after 1416). They are popular religious figures, better known for their mysticism, but they lived as anchoresses for a significant portion of their lives. Hildegard was an anchoress when she was young, and Julian when she was older. I tried to imagine what provoked their willingness to embrace enclosure *for decades*, and I wondered how they endured the years confined to their cells while I found staying in my own home for only a few months in 2020 largely intolerable.

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Before I dive into the particulars of their lives, a brief explanation of an anchoress may be helpful to the reader. A basic definition is simply a woman who was willingly walled into a cell so she could live a life of prayer and contemplation,

[2] *Anchorite* and *anchoress* are the masculine and feminine versions of the same position. In this article I am focusing on women; therefore, I generally use the term *anchoress*. However, it is important to recognize that there were anchorites in the medieval period as well.

and she was expected to spend the rest of her life there. Depending on how old the woman was when she entered seclusion, she could have been there for many decades. English anchoress Elizabeth Scott, for example, likely spent thirty years in her anchorhold, and another nearby anchoress by the name of Julian Lampett may have spent fifty years as an anchoress.[3]

Christian history is not lacking for examples of religious recluses. From solitary desert monastics to medieval hermits, many Christians at various times and places have withdrawn from secular society to lead a life of solitude, prayer, and asceticism. On the surface, one could easily assume that anchoresses were just another manifestation of the religious recluse, and anchoresses are often classified that way. However, that designation is not quite accurate, and they had a surprising amount of interaction with the world. "Anchoresses of this type gained unprecedented esteem and greatly influenced religious life in the later Middle Ages. Dozens, more likely hundreds, of devout women converted to this way of life."[4] They were both in the world and secluded from it. They were both isolated and in community, and this parallel existence is likely what drew me to them.

Medieval Anchoresses

There is considerable historical evidence for the anchoritic vocation, including ceremonies of enclosure, wills, court documents, bishop's registers, ecclesiastical documents, and personal correspondence.[5] The process of becoming an anchoress generally involved gaining ecclesial permission, financial planning, and, of course, the physical construction of a cell or the process of moving into an already-built cell. While there were exceptions, most cells were simple—only one or two rooms.[6] Though they did not typically have doors, there were windows so the anchoress could receive food, get rid of waste, and interact with visitors. The anchoritic tradition was particularly prominent in England, where the height of its popularity was the fourteenth century,[7] but there is ample evidence of anchorites and anchoresses on the Continent as well.

There was no one way to be an anchoress, and different historical accounts feature different lifestyles. The ninth-century Saxon anchoress Liutbirga was walled into a cell inside the abbey church of the family cloister at Wendhausen.[8] In Mulder-Bakker's examination of five different urban anchoresses from the lowlands of northwest Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, one anchoress

[3] Mari Hughs-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism: Ideology and Spiritual Practices* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 7.

[4] Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 6.

[5] Hughs-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, 4.

[6] Hughs-Edwards, 6.

[7] Hughs-Edwards, 6–7.

[8] Frederick S. Paxton, *Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony: The Lives of Liutbirga of Wendhausen and Hathumoda of Gandersheim* (Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 2.

withdrew to an anchorhold in what appears to be a family monastery, one was enclosed in a chapel in a leper colony, two others were enclosed together in a lepers' monastery, and one girl of twelve was enclosed "in the street" and later moved to a Dominican convent.[9] Hildegard was enclosed in a men's monastery along with two other women, and Julian was enclosed at a church.

While anchoresses withdrew to their cells, they were not cut off from society. The decision to become an anchoress was not a private affair but a public proclamation, and they performed a particular function in the church—a ministry offering intercessory prayer and council.[10] People assumed anchoresses were especially wise and devout because of their religious commitments, and their religious authority stemmed from their holy lifestyle.

Hildegard of Bingen

I am not convinced that Hildegard wanted to become an anchoress, but regardless, that is how she lived for many years. Hildegard, born in 1098, was the tenth child of noble parents, and it is often told that she was turned over to the church as a tithe. Upon closer inspection, this seems a dubious claim. As a child, Hildegard suffered from frequent bouts of illness (which would plague her for the rest of her life), and she was prone to religious visions. These two factors, which did not bode well for the marriage market, compounded by the high cost of dowries more likely influenced her parents' decision.[11] The particulars of how and when Hildegard was dedicated to the church are a bit fuzzy, but it seems she was turned over to the care of a young noblewoman named Jutta of Sponheim when she was eight, and the two, along with another woman named Jutta, entered into an anchorhold at the newly constructed Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg on November 1, 1112, when Hildegard was fourteen.[12] Today the monastery lies in ruins, but archaeologists have found evidence that their cell consisted of two small rooms behind a wall next to the abbey church with perhaps a garden or yard.[13]

Hildegard's companion, Jutta of Sponheim, was a practitioner of extreme forms of penance. She wore an uncomfortable chain under her clothes, as well as hair shirts; she prayed standing up barefoot for extended periods of time—even in the cold German winters; and she severely limited her food intake. There is no indication that Hildegard partook of such activities; in fact, later in life she would teach moderation.[14] While the modern reader likely finds these activities disconcerting, people at the time were exceedingly impressed, and Jutta gained a significant amount of fame. Visitors flocked to their cell, where Jutta offered counsel, prayer, and healing. People also asked her to take their daughters, requests that

[9] Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses*, 8–9.
[10] Hughs-Edwards, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism*, 6.
[11] Honey Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 3–4.
[12] Meconi, 4.
[13] Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 35.
[14] Butcher, *St. Hildegard of Bingen*, 6.

were accepted by both Jutta and her superiors. Therefore, Jutta and Hildegard's cell was at some point opened so other girls and women could join, though the date of this monumental event is unknown. From that point forward, the small community under Jutta's guidance operated more like a monastery within a monastery than a group of anchoresses.[15]

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When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was thirty-eight years old, and she had been enclosed at Disibodenberg for twenty-four years. Immediately after, the women in her small community voted that Hildegard would replace Jutta as their leader. She was not given the title of abbess—only *migistra* (or teacher)—yet she was undeniably their leader.[16]

Five years later, Hildegard had a mystical experience that would completely change her life. Through this vision she gained an understanding of divine revelation, and God commanded her to write what she saw and heard.[17] This revelation became her best-known work, *Scivias*. She explains in the beginning of the text that God commanded her to write an intelligible account of her visions because her testimony would help others know about their creator. A few paragraphs into her work she states:

> Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments.[18]

There are instances where other mystics claim to have received direct knowledge of theological matters from God, so this is not an outlier in the genre, but it is still a remarkable claim, nonetheless.

In 1150, while she was writing *Scivias*, Hildegard felt God calling her to found her first monastery, in a separate location. The monks with whom she and the other women were living were vehemently opposed to the move (Hildegard was quite famous already and brought prestige to the monastery), but Hildegard

[15] Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 6–7.

[16] Meconi, 7–8.

[17] Butcher, *St. Hildegard of Bingen*, 10–11.

[18] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist, 1900), Declaration on 59.

felt confident that God was calling her to move. She took twenty nuns and their priest and confessor, named Volmar, and moved to Rupertsburg, overlooking Bingen on the Rhine, where she lived for the next thirty-three years.[19] By 1165, her religious community was so crowded, she established a second one. At the age of nearly seventy, she bought a former double monastery at Eibingen, which was east of Bingen. She would cross the Rhine twice a week and visit the nuns at Eibingen for the next fourteen years, until her death.[20]

Without question Hildegard had one of the most brilliant minds of the Middle Ages, and she went on to have an incredible career. She influenced a wide number of other disciplines including music, pharmacy, and literature. She corresponded with princes, kings, bishops, and popes. She wrote the first morality play and three major works of theology: *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*), *Liber vitae meritorum* (*Book of Life's Merits*), and *Liber Divinorum operum* (*Book of Divine Works*). Her mastery of language translated into skills as a preacher. In 1158, she launched a preaching tour, which was unprecedented at the time for a woman. While monks and nuns had a long history of evangelizing, Hildegard lived in the era of cloistered convents—not the times of wandering evangelist nuns. During her first tour she spoke exclusively at monasteries, but during her second and third preaching tours, she preached in public to lay believers. She would launch a fourth, and final, preaching tour in 1170 at the age of seventy-two.[21]

It is likely Hildegard had little control over her life when she was young. It was her parents who chose to dedicate her to the church as a child, and it was likely Jutta who was the driving force behind the decision to become anchoresses. However, once Hildegard was able to step out from Jutta's shadow, she lived her life to the fullest. What a remarkable transformation from a young teenage girl enclosed in a small cell to a confident woman running two separate monasteries, publishing books on various topics including theology, and traveling through Europe proclaiming the Word of God to crowds of people!

Julian of Norwich

Like Hildegard, Julian is known for her mysticism, her powerful writings, and her life of enclosure. However, while we know quite a bit about Hildegard's life, to study Julian of Norwich is to come to terms with uncertainty; in fact, we do not even know her real name. The name by which she is known was probably taken from the church where she lived as an anchoress: St. Julian's in Norwich, England.

While there is much we do not know about Julian, there are things that we can infer from her writings and her context. We can confidently state that she was born in either 1342 or 1343, and she was probably raised in or around Norwich, a vibrant and important city in England known for its trade, industry, and

[19] Butcher, *St. Hildegard of Bingen*, 11–12.
[20] Butcher, 22.
[21] Butcher, 15–16.

commerce. Julian lived during a difficult point in history. She was a child when the Black Death ravaged Europe, and there is evidence that the population of Norwich shrank from an estimated 25,000 people in 1333 to as few as 8,000 in the 1370s.[22] Without discounting the suffering that we have experienced as a result of Covid-19, the plague was so much worse. It was likely the deadliest disease event in human history, and it took centuries for medieval society to recover economically and population-wise. However, I believe that our experiences with Covid-19 give us a better understanding of and greater empathy for those experienced during the plague—the fear, the uncertainty, the conflicts, and the loss. In addition to the pestilence that defined her era, Julian lived during the Hundred Years' War between England and France; it is no exaggeration to say that violence, disease, and death were defining features of her historical era.

Julian's life prior to her revelations and her enclosure has been the subject of scholarly debate. Some historians argue that she had been married with children, and others, that she was already a Benedictine nun at the time of her visions. It is certainly plausible that she was married, and considering the various rounds of plague and war, it is entirely possible she lost her husband and any children she may have had. It is also equally plausible that she entered a monastic house instead of marrying; we simply do not have enough evidence to say definitively either way.[23]

We do know that in May of 1373, when she was thirty years old, Julian experienced an intense illness that precipitated sixteen visions or "shewings." The visions were primarily about God's love for humanity, and she wrote two texts concerning the visions: the first was a shorter text later titled *A Vision Shown to a Devout Woman*, and the second, *A Revelation of Love*, which is a longer, expanded version of the visions. The overarching themes of Julian's visions are of love and comfort. One better-known example of this divine love occurs in the fifth chapter of *A Revelation of Love*. God shows her something the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand, and God explains that *it is all that is made*. When she wonders how something so small could last, God explains: "It will last forever for God loves it. And so shall all things that are loved by God."[24]

We are not entirely sure when Julian became an anchoress, but four different wills provide evidence for her enclosure at St. Julian's between 1393/4 and 1416. She could have been enclosed before 1393, and she may have lived past 1416, but at a minimum we know she was enclosed in her cell for more than two decades.[25]

St. Julian's Church sat on a busy street in an industrial part of town, and Julian would have heard the hustle and bustle of urban life from her cell. She was

[22] Barry Windeatt, ed., *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xvi.

[23] Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love* (University Park: The University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 4.

[24] Julian of Norwich, "A Revelation of Love" in Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 139. I translated the phrase from Middle English for ease of reading.

[25] Windeatt, *Julian of Norwich*, xiii.

not tucked away from the world, but right in it. Interestingly, Julian was the first recorded anchorite in Norwich since 1313, so her life may have been inspiration for others to follow in her footsteps. "Between thirty-five and forty-seven anchorites and hermits are reckoned to have lived in Norwich between c. 1370 and 1549 (of whom between twenty-four and thirty-five have been identified as female)."[26] Unfortunately, her cell was destroyed during the Protestant Reformation, but it was reconstructed after the church was hit by a bomb during the Second World War, and it is open to visitors today.[27]

At least locally, Julian gained a reputation and fame as an anchoress during her lifetime. She received guests and provided counsel. There is a fascinating reference to Julian in Margery Kempe's book, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which gives us a glimpse of Julian as a spiritual guide. Kempe was a married mother who also experienced divine visions around the same time as Julian, and Kempe visited Julian around 1413 to discuss her own visions. Kempe spent days at Julian's cell, and reportedly, Julian was a source of great encouragement for her.[28] Julian likely provided this type of support and ministry to many over the course of her life as an anchoress. Ironically, it was her confinement to a small cell that allowed her to be "in the world" acting as a religious leader, a public holy woman, and a minster to those seeking out her counsel.

The role of anchoress gave medieval women an unofficial authority in the church and a public ministry in which people could come to them for prayer and counsel. However, this ministry came at a heavy cost—to forever leave gatherings with friends and family, casual social interactions, and simple pleasures like walking down the street or through a forest.

Concluding Thoughts

Hildegard and Julian demonstrate remarkably different experiences regarding the anchoritic life. One gets the impression that Julian truly desired the life of an anchoress and lived into her ministry while Hildegard seemed to relish her freedom once she was finally able to leave her cell and make her own choices. The role of anchoress gave medieval women an unofficial authority in the church and a public ministry in which people could come to them for prayer and counsel. However, this ministry came at a heavy cost—to forever leave gatherings with friends

[26] Windeatt, xix.

[27] David Ross, "Church of St Julian and Shrine, Norwich," Britain Express, accessed February 4, 2022, https://www.britainexpress.com/counties/norfolk/norwich/st-julian.htm.

[28] Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 4–6.

and family, casual social interactions, and simple pleasures like walking down the street or through a forest. It must have been a difficult choice, but for those called to it, perhaps they found a meaningful life within four walls, dwelling in solitude but not necessarily loneliness.

This morning when I woke up, the wind chill was twenty-four degrees below zero, and yet another wave of Covid-19, this time fueled by the omicron variant, is forcing many of us back home. My children are back to distance-learning, and my husband and I are largely working from home. Between the pestilence and the weather, I am spending a lot of time indoors. However, I know this confinement is temporary. This will soon pass. The curve will flatten; spring will come. Yet in this moment, I feel just a little like a modern anchoress. ⊕

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