

## AN INTENSE SPIRITUALITY

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[Assignment: Facing deportation to a work camp during the German occupation of Amsterdam, Etty Hillesum shows exceptional courage, hope, and spiritual faith in her journal, *An Interrupted Life*. Write an essay that defines her unusual quality of spirituality.]

(1) Etty Hillesum's unusual spirituality is based on the teachings of Julius Spier and flourishes as a direct result of his influence on her. Spier, a psycho-chirologist, first becomes acquainted with Etty when he sees her on a professional basis to provide therapy. Their professional relationship eventually transforms into a personal one when Etty and Spier become lovers. Spier's teachings stress the necessity of prayer, the belief that body and soul are one, and the importance of loving all mankind.

(2) Etty meets Spier at a time when the future looks bleak. His magical personality draws Etty to him. At a time when to Etty hopelessness and inner chaos seem inevitable, Spier exudes love and contentment. In the beginning of her relationship with Spier, Etty focuses mainly on her sexual desire for Spier. However, as her relationship with Spier deepens, she realizes that her primary need is to connect with Spier on a spiritual level. Spier becomes a Christ figure to Etty, and Etty becomes one of his most passionate disciples. Spier's teachings on prayer emphasize the search for truth and the acceptance of truth once it has been discovered. According to Spier, truth is discovered through personal prayer. Etty describes herself as a person who used to find it impossible to kneel down in prayer. She is comforted by the knowledge that Spier, too, at one time, found it difficult to call upon the name of God in prayer. Eventually, Etty not only learns to pray but sometimes has an irrepressible yearning to pray:

A desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body, or rather it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face. (109)

Etty learns that God-realization is actually self-realization, and that it is necessary to search oneself to find the truth. This search is worthless if Spier's advice is not followed. His advice is: "Above all be true to yourself" (62). To Etty the simple act of praying is the most spiritual and comforting experience humanly possible. Etty's newly acquired spiritual maturity is expressed toward the end of the book when Etty implies that her life has become an endless prayer.

Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other, God to God. (214)

(3) Spier begins all of his sessions with a wrestling match with his patients. Because Spier believes that body and soul are one, he arouses the body in order to prepare the soul for enlightenment. As the diary progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Etty also shares Spier's belief about the unity of the body and the soul. She often prays to God and asks Him to restore her physical health. Etty describes her ailments in detail because her bodily pain pierces her soul: "And now I can rouse neither body nor soul, I am so shattered physically" (158). The fact that Etty sings as she leaves Westerbork is another indication of the oneness of Etty's body and soul. Etty's body cannot help but proclaim the peace and joy her soul is experiencing.

(4) Spier's emphasis upon the importance of loving all of mankind is another teaching that Etty has trouble with at first. When Spier tells Etty that he "believes he is her stepping stone to a truly great love" (50), she is upset that the prospect of her being with another man does not make him jealous. Etty does not realize at this point that the "truly great love" Spier is speaking of is a love of humankind. Etty leans to love humankind by watching Spier's actions.

But he [Spier] still sees six patients a day and gives all he has to each one. He breaks them open and draws out the poison and delves down to the sources where God hides Himself away. And he works with such intensity that, in the end, the water of life begins to flow again in dried-up souls; each day the life-stories pile up on his little table, almost every one ending with, "Please help me." And there he is reading and willing to help each one. (147)

Spier provokes Etty to desert her prior belief that loving one man alone is the ultimate expression of true love. Etty becomes painfully aware of the needs of others, and she begins to pray for them obsessively. She also praises God for giving her such an abundance of love in her tiny mortal heart.

(5) When Spier dies, Etty resolves to continue his work. Instead of recoiling in the face of death, Etty is strengthened and is inspired to work twice as hard as she did before. Just as Paul suffered while preaching the Gospel after Jesus Christ died, Etty willingly suffers in order to keep Spier's gospel of love and inner peace alive.

When I suffer for the vulnerable is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer? I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long. (242)

The fact that Etty remains strong and faithful after Spier has died is evidence that Spier's teachings have had a powerful effect on Etty. Though Spier's beliefs provided a firm foundation for Etty's spiritual growth, Etty does not draw strength to endure hardship from Spier alone. Instead, Etty learns to draw strength from her own growing spirituality itself.