



# The Girl Who Learned to Pray: A Journey through Psychology, Philosophy, and Theology

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## Abstract

*Throughout Etty Hillesum's short life, she attained a pinnacle of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment, rare for even the eldest amongst humankind. According to Jan G. Gaarlandt, Etty Hillesum had her "own [spiritual] rhythm" (xv). Etty's final years were an amalgam of intellectual and spiritual discovery. However, her religiosity was "totally unconventional" (xv). In other words, Etty underwent a completely individualistic search for practical wisdom. She open-mindedly delved into Jungian psychotherapy, Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy, and theology; she found much meaning in each of these quasi-religious pursuits. Thus, Etty Hillesum's spirituality knew no formal boundaries.*

**Keywords:** Jungian psychotherapy, Unconventional approach, Spiritual, Eastern ideology

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*"I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Jew." ~ Mahatma Gandhi*

## Introduction

Throughout Etty Hillesum's short life, she attained a pinnacle of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment, rare for even the eldest amongst humankind. According to Jan G. Gaarlandt, Etty Hillesum had her "own [spiritual] rhythm" (xv). Etty's final years were an amalgam of intellectual and spiritual discovery. However, her religiosity was "totally unconventional" (xv). In other words, Etty underwent a completely individualistic search for practical wisdom. She open-mindedly delved into Jungian psychotherapy, Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy, and theology; she found much meaning in each of these quasi-religious pursuits. Thus, Etty Hillesum's spirituality knew no formal boundaries. In this essay, Etty's spiritual development will be separated into four distinct sections: (I) Jungian psychotherapy, (II) atypical disinterest in institutional religion/spirituality, (III) unconventional merging of religions, and (IV) an analysis of how Etty's epoch may have had a subconscious impact on her spirituality. Ultimately, I postulate that Etty Hillesum's unconventional approach to studying spirituality resulted in her successfully finding prayer and faith, even during the darkness of the Holocaust.

## Jungian Psychotherapy

Julius Spier catalyzed Etty Hillesum's spiritual exploration by introducing her to Carl Jung's psychotherapy professionally. One ought to assume - due to her intellect - that Etty *knew* about Jungian psychology before meeting Julius Spier; however, she likely did not know much detailed information about Jung or his work. Who was this mysterious Julius Spier? Julius Spier was an assimilated Jew, just like Etty Hillesum. In other words, Spier and Etty were both Jews who did not identify with the religious values of Judaism *in totality*. Julius Spier was religiously open-minded; he actively encouraged Etty Hillesum to read the New Testament and other famous Christian thought-leaders. Julius Spier was undoubtedly a strong advocate for Jungian psychotherapy, and he was very spiritual.

Carl Jung and Julius Spier knew each other personally and had mutual respect for one another's work. Carl Jung wrote the introduction to Julius Spier's *The Hands of Children*. Julius Spier utilized this professional relationship with Carl Jung to the greatest extent possible. He ultimately became a successful psychologist, palm reader, and spiritual philosopher. Of course, Julius Spier's relationship with Carl Jung was beneficial to his career in psychotherapy.

Nevertheless, this relationship between Jung and Spier was out of genuine respect for each other. Julius Spier was excellent in his work. In Etty's own words, Julius Spier "took me metaphorically by the hand and said, look, that is how you should live" (6). Julius Spier was to Etty Hillesum what a spiritual "guru" (or guide) is to their spiritual apprentice. A few weeks before her final stay in Westerbork, Etty Hillesum wrote about Julius Spier and his spirituality. She asked herself: "did [Julius Spier] not lead me to God, after first paving the way with his

imperfect human hands?" (222). Yes, he did precisely that. Armed with the imperfect nature of psychotherapy, Julius Spier paved Etty's way to God.

Although Julius Spier was well versed in multiple areas of psychological, philosophical, and theological thought, most of what he taught revolved around Jungian psychotherapy. For instance, Julius Spier would often perform "breathing exercises" with Etty Hillesum. Similarly, Carl Jung highlighted the utility of calm breathing. For Jung, "it is on the ability to breathe that a true perspective of growth can be built."<sup>1</sup> This focus on breathing is certainly an Eastern ideology (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the importance of calm breathing). Ergo, Carl Jung and Julius Spier derived many psychological practices through Eastern (or "Oriental") psychology and philosophy. Furthermore, Julius Spier's firm belief in a soul was similar to Carl Jung's theory of the soul.

After Etty Hillesum was introduced to Jungian psychotherapy by Julius Spier, she delved into Carl Jung as an avid student and then - ultimately - as a teacher of his psychological thought. To start, Etty Hillesum read *Symbols of Transformation* by Carl Jung. She found an extra copy of this text in Julius Spier's living quarters. Later, she wrote, "for days Jung's book [*Symbols of Transformation*] had been beckoning me" (106). Therefore, she went ahead and read it. She also wrote that she kept on "being drawn towards Jung" (www.degruyter.com). Although Julius Spier was an excellent inspiration for Etty Hillesum's psychological endeavors, it appears as though Etty's continued interest in Jungian psychological thought was wholly self-motivated. Etty's journey through Jungian psychotherapy metamorphosized into something that did not entirely *need* Spier's constant vigilance. Carl Jung's psychotherapy surely did provide a helpful way for Etty to decipher both her own and others' minds.

Once Etty Hillesum was acquainted with Jungian psychotherapy, she began performing in-depth Jungian psychoanalysis on her friends and family. She performed psychoanalysis with great frequency, and always valued Julius Spier's psychological advice. A crucial element of Etty Hillesum's personality should be mentioned: she had a sincere desire to help others through her quasi-religious intellectual pursuits. For example, Etty Hillesum's brother, Mischa, was in dire need of psychological help. Mischa may have had an undiagnosed case of schizophrenia. So, Etty Hillesum began psychoanalyzing Mischa. After requesting help from Julius Spier, they worked together to analyze Mischa and help him overcome his mental hardships. Of course, Mischa was killed far too soon ever to reap the benefits of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, for Etty Hillesum, knowledge was something she yearned to acquire to help others through many different forms of struggle.

In Etty Hillesum's opinion, the study of psychology had a few shortcomings. First, she rejected the idea that an individual can be broken into distinct parts. In other words, Etty believed that "people cannot be reduced to psychological formulas" (32). The human mind is undoubtedly much too complicated to be categorized in its totality by a single field of study. Second, Etty Hillesum was searching for psychological comfort and spirituality as a whole. Therefore, psychology would not answer all of her (or anyone's) existential problems.

Jungian psychology was a solid mental ground for Etty Hillesum, from which she would develop an atypical type of spirituality through the blending of multiple Eastern and Western religions and philosophies. In the end, psychoanalysis was not spiritual or all-encompassing enough for Etty Hillesum. Her mind and soul were far too spiritually advanced ever to be confined to the rigid rules of psychoanalysis.

## Institutional Religion

Etty Hillesum steadily rejected many forms of institutional religion/spirituality throughout her spiritual journey. To her, there was no logic behind the idea that a singular institution could have a 'key' to the 'lock' of spirituality. For Etty, all religions were a type of spiritual encouragement. In other words, there was no such thing as *the* correct version of spirituality. Nay, on the contrary: all forms of spirituality/religion, in a sense, were *good* spiritual experiences.

To fully conceptualize and understand Etty Hillesum's separation from institutional religion, one ought to observe her relationship with "God." Unlike conventional religious peoples, Etty did *not* believe that God was all-powerful. On July 11, 1942, Etty Hillesum wrote about how the Jews were being treated in Auschwitz. Indeed, the details were gruesome and heartbreaking. She overheard many Jews claiming that "Germans [were] burying [other Jews] alive or exterminating [them] with gas" (173).

Nevertheless, Etty Hillesum's faith in God and his work through humanity overpowered the primordial anxieties such information must have caused her. In the same entry, Etty Hillesum wrote: "if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God" (173). In nearly every religion, the concept of 'helping' God is relatively futile. How can a simple human help an all-powerful being? Simple answer: they cannot help at all. However, if God was *not* considered an all-powerful being, then any individual can, of course, assist Him in accomplishing His will. As Etty Hillesum restated in a later entry: "one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves" (178).

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<sup>1</sup> "Carl Jung on Pranayama Breathing."

Furthermore, Etty Hillesum's God did not predetermine the world's events. In her mind, God was not to blame for the persecution of the Jews. Thus, an argument can be made that Etty Hillesum's God was neither an all-powerful nor an all-knowing being. An all-knowing God would be to blame for the Holocaust, as in such a case, He could have easily stopped the Holocaust or at the very least warned the Jewish people. However, for Etty Hillesum, God was not considered an all-knowing being; thus, God was also not to be blamed for the Jewish persecution. Etty Hillesum wrote that she did not "hold [God] responsible" for the Holocaust (178). "[God] cannot help us, but we must help [God]" (178).

### Merging Religions and Philosophy

Etty Hillesum was raised without Jewish traditions or values. Still, Etty knew that she was born into a genetically Jewish family. She was "so glad that [Julius Spier] [was] a Jew and [that she was] a Jewess" (127). However, living amongst Holland's Christian majority impacted Etty's spirituality. Often, Etty Hillesum would open the New Testament and read the Psalms. Etty would start many mornings by reading the New Testament, specifically the Gospel of Matthew. On April 8, 1942, Etty Hillesum wrote that "there is the Gospel of Saint Matthew morning and night," suggesting that she did, indeed, read and contemplate much about Christianity (108).

Furthermore, Etty Hillesum felt very spiritual while reading the Gospel of Matthew. She "sometimes [had] the feeling that God [was] right inside [of her], for instance, when [she heard] the Saint Matthew Passion" (74). Etty studied a myriad of different Christian theologians, as well. She wrote that Saint Augustine and the Apostles "inhabit my life" (110). Moreover, after finishing Saint Augustine for the first time, Etty Hillesum wrote: "I am going to read Saint Augustine again. He is ... so full of simple devotion in his love letters to God" (228). Like Saint Augustine, Etty Hillesum also wrote emotional 'love letters' (i.e., diary entries) to God. This sacred journey through Christian ideology was a piece of Etty's spirituality that never left her. When her death was ever near, she consciously prepared herself to be like Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He - one of her favorite authors - was able to survive a four-year prison sentence with *only* a Christian bible at his spiritual disposal.

Etty Hillesum was unafraid of merging two ideologically opposed religions. Religion was *not* significant on an institutional level for her. Religious laws were of no importance. In Etty Hillesum's mind, the concept of religion ought to assist an individual in constructing his/her own spiritual identity, not limit it. Until her death, Etty remained in adamant rejection of conventional religion. Etty was unable to follow a particular religion because she could not "help feeling that every hotly championed [religion/philosophy] hides a little lie. That it must fall short of the truth" (67). In the end, "Christ and the Jews. Two philosophies, sharply defined, brilliantly presented, rounded off, defended with passion and vigor" (67). There was no competition between the two religions within Etty. Both religions had their benefits and their detriments. Etty had mutual respect for these two spiritual paths that she masterfully combined into one.

Etty Hillesum believed that she (physically) prayed like a Christian due to her kneeling. Etty wrote: "I ... have my folded hands and bended knee. A posture that is not handed down from generation to generation with us Jews" (228). Though kneeling while praying is embraced by many Christians, it is also undoubtedly permissible to kneel while praying in the Jewish religion. Therefore, Etty certainly had a few misunderstandings surrounding the Jewish religion. In the Yom Kippur *Machzor*, one reads: "during the repetition of the Musaf Amidah, the chazzan and the congregation kneel on the ground at various times." It even says that "if the synagogue has a stone floor, worshippers should place a cloth or sheet on the floor when kneeling." Seemingly, Judaism supports the act of kneeling while praying to God. Knowingly or not, Etty Hillesum adhered to Judaic custom in her bowing to God in prayer. This misunderstanding suggests that Etty Hillesum was entirely assimilated into Holland's Christian culture, enough so to be convinced that kneeling is strictly a non-Jewish custom.

Even with her misconception about Jewish prayer, Etty Hillesum certainly had the utmost respect for cultural and religious Judaism. For instance, Etty believed that "something elemental flows out of the Old Testament," suggesting that she - of course - read the Old Testament in addition to the New Testament. Further, "something homely" flows out of the Old Testament "as well" (162). A reader ought to notice the word "homely." Judaism's sacred text - the Old Testament - made Etty feel comfortable, at home. She continued: "splendid people live in [the Old Testament's] pages" (162).

Etty Hillesum did not limit her religiosity to the standard spiritual paths of Christianity and Judaism. Upon her arrival at Auschwitz, Etty was found to be carrying not only the Talmud but the Qur'an, as well. Significantly, even many devote Jews do *not* study the Talmud - it is much too complicated to read and comprehend. Regardless, the assimilated Etty Hillesum planned to delve into the Talmud while she was quite literally about to die. Arguably more surprising are the reports that Etty Hillesum had a copy of the Qur'an. Ever faithful to herself, Etty wanted to die while enhancing her spirituality. In her relatively short life, Etty broke the many religious barriers and stereotypes that continue to plague the world to this very day.

Etty Hillesum's unconventional spirituality was not confined to merging Abrahamic religions. Philosophy was also fundamental to Etty's spiritual development. Jan G. Gaarlandt writes that Etty was "eager to read books and study philosophy" (xvi). Etty combined theological studies with Eastern and Western philosophies to form her

own spiritual identity. It seems as though Etty was quite knowledgeable about stoicism, Buddhism, and Rilkean mysticism.

Etty Hillesum was undoubtedly a stoical figure. During the brutal years of the Holocaust, she faced many adversities with tremendous courage. Etty continued to love humanity through all the pain. She wrote: “I love people so much. [I] never [have] any bitterness about what was done” (227). Seemingly, Etty could discern when things were within and were without her power – something definingly stoic. In her words, “how rash to assert that man shapes his destiny. All he can do is determine his inner responses.” (85). Etty determined her inner response: love - not hate. In a remarkably stoic manner, Etty argued that “we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves” (95). She constantly wanted to better herself, another unequivocally stoic ideal.

Similar to stoic ideology, Buddhism promotes the idea that life is full of suffering; further, one ought to accept this suffering. As a dog tied to the back of a moving wagon has no choice but to move *with* the wagon, man has no choice but to accept (and move with) the unavoidable pull of suffering. Etty wrote: “there will always be suffering, and whether one suffers from this or from that really doesn’t make much difference” (129). In other words, accept the pain of living as being inescapable. Then, once pain and suffering have been accepted as inevitable, authentic living can begin.

Like Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum found much-needed solace in nature. She wrote: “[I] offered all my tenderness up to the sky and the stars and the water and to the little bridge... I felt this was the only way of transforming all the many ... tender feelings one carries ... into deeds: to entrust them to nature, to let them stream out ... and to realize that there is no other way.” (123). Again, the Buddhist ideal of *acceptance* is the only way. Historian, Ralph Melnick, in a personal correspondence with me, mentioned that Etty Hillesum had “previous exposure to other spiritually oriented materials” like “Buddhist” thought.<sup>2</sup>

Etty Hillesum studied the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. His poetry was essential to Etty’s spirituality. In the abridged version of her diary, Etty mentions Rainer Maria Rilke more than forty times. Rilke had a substantial impact on Etty’s spiritual self. In her own words: “a poem by Rilke is as real and as important as a young man falling out of an airplane” (41). Her spiritual desire for Rilke’s poetical mysticism was *not* a short-lived phase. She had “been soaking Rilke up these last few months: the man, his work, and his life” (102). Rilke was another spiritual guide for Etty Hillesum. His work - to this day - is widely considered ‘mystical.’ In fact, Rilke is often thought to be more of a mystic than a poet. One does not need to understand Rilkean mysticism to acknowledge that it significantly impacted Etty’s spirituality. Etty wrote that she “would so much like to read everything of Rilke’s before the time comes” (170). Unfortunately, Etty’s time came before she could accomplish the goal of reading all of Rilke’s work.

### Sign of the Times

Spirituality was important to Etty Hillesum; however, one should ponder the pessimistic possibility that her spirituality was primarily forged due to the violent and evil period in which she lived. It may very well be that Etty’s unconventional spirituality was the psychological output of the Holocaust’s input. Many lose their spiritual self in hardships, while others - like Etty - enhance their spirituality during the relentless waves of pain and suffering. Thus, I believe that Etty may have subconsciously formed a strong sense of spirituality (*i.e.*, light) to actively combat the massive darkness of the Shoah. In this way, she became “The Girl Who Learned to Pray.”

***“Make your own Bible. Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your readings have been to you like the blast of a trumpet.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson***

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<sup>2</sup> RM to CW, 28 November 2021, Email.