

**Empathic Witnessing to Suffering
in Julian of Norwich and Howard Thurman**

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Introduction

Bearing witness to suffering is an empathic recognition of others' pain with God's compassion. The narratives of Julian of Norwich and Howard Thurman provide spiritual resources for the practice of empathic witnessing. Suffering is different from pain because suffering is a conscious symbolization of pain.¹ Thus, suffering consciously makes pain meaningful. Furthermore, empathic witnessing is a faithful action of not only publicly professing one's Christian faith but also of having a deep recognition of others' pain with God's compassion. In this article, I will begin with the human experiences of Julian and Thurman: (1) What did they witness in their contexts? (2) How did they render the empathic witnessing to suffering in their writings? (3) What implications might personal and communal responses to suffering conceive in Christian education? Because this paper was an archival study, I was limited in the archival works concerned with Julian and Thurman.

Julian of Norwich as Witness to "Age of Anxiety"²

Julian bore witness to the "age of anxiety" in which she lived. This expression refers to Joan M. Nuth's portrayal of England in the 14th century as an age of anxiety. According to Carolyn Walker Bynum, Julian, through her showings of Christ's passion, not only revealed her bodily sickness but also reflected on her contemporaries' sufferings, such as the plague and the Crusades.³ Amy Frykholm suggested that Julian's early experience of the plague had a significant influence on *Showings*.⁴ Shelly Rambo emphasized the importance of historical context, including the Crusade of 1383.⁵ Rambo assumed that the wounded in the Crusades and the plague needed a message of consolation and peace.⁶ As scholars have mentioned, Julian's main theme in *Showings*, the revelation of Christ's passion and love, had relevance for this "age of anxiety" in 14th-century England.

Julian of Norwich's Empathic Witnessing to Fellow Christians

¹ Pamela Cooper-White, "Suffering," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 25.

² Joan M. Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 2001), 99–120.

³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 130.

⁴ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Julian of Norwich: A Contemplative Biography* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2010), 21–34.

⁵ Shelly Rambo, "Julian of Norwich: Witness to the Wounded," in *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, eds. Don H. Compier, Pui-lan Kwok, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 182.

⁶ Rambo, "Julian of Norwich: Witness to the Wounded," 182.

In *Showings*, Julian of Norwich expresses a spirituality of passion, whereby individual pain and bodily illness elevate compassion of other Christian fellows' suffering through the revelation of Jesus Christ's love. Julian did not just wait and see "age of anxiety" but strongly desire to participate into suffering with others through empathic witnessing. Grace Jantzen argued that Julian's theological reflection is concentrated on her experience of physical suffering, which is identified with Jesus Christ's passion.⁷ First of all, the passion of Jesus Christ's crucifixion is the initial point for understanding Julian's empathic witnessing. In the first chapter of *Showings*, Julian introduces 16 showings concerned with the passion of Jesus Christ.⁸ In particular, she makes a connection between bodily sickness and the passion of Christ by asking for three graces: 1) a truer recollection of Christ's passion, 2) bodily sickness, and 3) three wounds in her body.⁹ In this sense, these graces are a way to not only internalize Christ's passion but also externalize her empathic witness to fellow Christians in her body and mind.

Julian concentrates on the relationship and reconciliation between God and humans in this work. As such, Jesus Christ, who Julian experiences in her revelations, is not an absolute and impersonal Being that is apart from our lives but rather a personal Being who comes to us. Julian calls this coming to us Jesus Christ's "spiritual thirst as the love longing."¹⁰ Thus, Julian's mystical experience of Jesus Christ's passion is a symbol of mutual interaction between herself and Jesus Christ.

Julian's intimacy with God is shown in her desire to have three wounds as God's gifts: "the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing with my will for God."¹¹ Julian's desire for voluntary suffering goes squarely against such instincts of human nature as pursuing wealth, achieving success, and being well. Therefore, Julian strongly wants to directly and personally experience Jesus Christ in the deepest dimension of contemplation. However, Julian does not want to enjoy pain masochistically but to participate in Christ's passion; as a co-sufferer of Christ's passion, Julian may have more knowledge of the bodily pain of Christ and of the compassion of Mary Magdalen and the others who loved Christ.¹² Jantzen emphasized that Julian prays not for suffering itself but for greater integration, compassion, and generosity.¹³

Julian's theological foundation is based on the empathic witnessing of passion and God's compassion. The idea of passion is shown in Julian's desire for three graces in her revelation: her desire to recollect Christ's passion in her mind, her desire to feel it in her body, and her desire to receive three wounds in her life.¹⁴ In this way, Julian identifies her bodily sickness not only with Christ's passion but also with her fellow Christians through the process of empathic witnessing. In Chapter xiii, Julian states: "I saw how Christ has compassion on us because of sin; and just as I was before filled full of pain and compassion on account of Christ's Passion, so I was now in a measure filled with compassion for all my fellow Christians."¹⁵ Thus, Julian wants to become a co-sufferer and lover of Christ and her fellow Christians through the revelation of love through empathic witnessing.

⁷ Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 91.

⁸ Julian of Norwich, Edmund Colledge, and James Walsh, *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 175–77.

⁹ Julian, Colledge, and Walsh, *Showings*, 178–79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, 61.

¹⁴ Julian, Colledge, and Walsh, *Showings*, 177–179.

¹⁵ Julian, Colledge, and Walsh, *Showings*, 149.

Howard Thurman as Witness to the Segregation

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) witnessed personal experiences of racial discrimination in his early childhood. In the religious dimension, the exclusive attitude of the church toward his father led Thurman to have “a lifelong skepticism of dogmatic religious claims.”¹⁶ Thurman recollected the funeral of his father, Saul Solomon, describing his disappointment with the ministers who had rejected his father’s funeral in Mount Bethel Baptist Church and with the traveling evangelist, Sam Cromarte, who had preached his father into hell for being a sinner who died “out of Christ.”¹⁷ Thurman also experienced racial discrimination from a young white girl, who had attacked him with a straight pin because he pointed out her mistake in disturbing some raked leaves. The girl said, “Oh, Howard, that didn’t hurt you! You can’t feel!”¹⁸ The girl regarded Thurman as a sub-human or a thing.

Howard Thurman as Witness to African-American Identity and Community

Howard Thurman attempted to search for a way of overcoming racial discrimination by witnessing to African-American identity as God’s children and to the African-American community during the Jim Crow era. Thurman’s grandmother Nancy Ambrose and the African-American community in Waycross, Florida, strongly encouraged Thurman’s vision of community through the African-American spiritual tradition.¹⁹ Nancy deeply contributed to the establishment of Thurman’s identity and spirituality from African-American tradition. She told Thurman a story about a slave preacher from a neighboring plantation who used to come over to preach to the slaves. When this preacher finished preaching, he would shout, “You are not niggers! You are not slaves! You are God’s children!”²⁰ Thurman wrote that the narrative of Nancy restored his spirit in this Jim Crow town.²¹

Thurman regarded his African-American neighbors as an extended family in Waycross. This tiny African-American neighborhood was a caring community for suffering persons with compassion. Thurman explains that this neighborhood bore an aura of caring for everyone and shared everything during times of illness or suffering. For example, when Thurman’s father died, the Waycross neighborhood supported and cared for Thurman’s family with empathy.²² Thurman’s witnessing to the African-American identity and community obviously had a tremendous influence on his ideas of redemptive suffering.

Howard Thurman’s Empathic Witnessing to Suffering

In these negative and positive witnessing, Thurman understood that suffering is potentially redemptive. Suffering is important to recognize that evil is not an intruder in the universe but a vital, integral part of life. For Thurman, the suffering of the innocent must be

¹⁶ Howard Thurman and Walter E. Fluker, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 35.

¹⁷ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 6.

¹⁸ Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ Thurman and Fluker, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, xxxviii.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

viewed from this perspective. There are two ways in which the suffering of the innocent is redemptive.²³

One way involves the innocent person who is simply caught in the onslaught and perplexities of existence. Thurman suggests that this suffering of the innocent minority is propitiatory in that it restores the balance or equilibrium in humanity that is offset by moral evil: "Their shoulders hold the sky suspended. They stand, and earth's foundations stay."²⁴ Although the innocent sufferer, they are not conscious of their redemptive role; they still participate in the broader purposes of a creative, harmonious universe. This notion has significant implications for Thurman's understanding of America and the redemptive suffering of African Americans.²⁵ Despite the undue ravages and unmerited suffering of African Americans, Thurman's theodicy would suggest that their affliction has been a salvific element in an otherwise destructive destiny through his empathic witnessing.

Educational Implications of Empathic Witnessing to Suffering

Julian's and Thurman's empathic witnessing to suffering has deep implications for Christian educators who live here and now. First, traumatic experiences are existential problems in our context. Wounds and pains exist and have threatened human life in the world. The very existence of wounds and pains has been theological dilemmas and requires the search for meaning through the symbolization of suffering. Second, witnessing to pain at personal, communal, and social levels is a symbolic process to feel and comprehend suffering with God's compassion in the world. Without witnessing, we cannot embody our and others' pain into God's pain. This witnessing process is essential before performing empathic witnessing. Lastly, empathic witnessing to suffering is redemptive. This process makes us engage and participate in others' suffering with God's compassion. Furthermore, the embodiment of others' suffering can transform human suffering into a new meaning of life. Christian educators should not only recognize and feel others' pains and wounds but also participate into others' suffering through witnessing and empathic witnessing with God's compassion.

Conclusion

Although Julian lived in a small room, she embraced fellow Christians who had wounds and pains. Julian's empathic identification of Christ's passion achieved compassion for fellow Christians through empathic witnessing. Thurman overcame his experiences with segregation in the United States through empathic witnessing, which helps us examine the existential nature of suffering and have transformative and redemptive compassion for others through witnessing and empathic witnessing.

²³ Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 268.

²⁴ Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1980), 16.

²⁵ Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).