

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #4:
God's Container
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

MAY 15, 2020 — I have practiced yoga off and on since my early 20s. In recent years, I added Pilates to the mix and committed to weekly classes. Both practices help me maintain good health. When I started Pilates, I found could not do some of the exercises. My core lacked strength. But I kept at it and in time began to see that I could do more and more. I was growing stronger. Then COVID-19 hit. All in person classes were cancelled.

My teachers moved to online instruction. At first, I did not sign on for these classes. They did not appeal to me—one more activity that involved staring at a screen. Back aches and hip pain convinced me to reconsider that choice. I began zooming in. And, much to my dismay, I found, again, I could not do some of the exercises. In a few short weeks, I had lost some abilities.

I see the stretching and strengthening that I need to do to take care of my body serves as an apt metaphor for the ways in which we all must commit to care for each other and our world. While it would be wonderful if we would always feel love and warmth towards others, the truth is that we don't. But with continual effort, similar to committing to regular exercise, we can learn to treat others with respect and understanding. We can learn to listen with empathy.

Our nation is now in conflict as to how to move forward in a world in which COVID-19 has been unleashed. Do we stay home and stay safe from the virus? Or do we return to patronizing bars and restaurants? Do we open up retail stores and other venues to help the economy? If we do go out, do we wear masks when in public? What about visiting family and friends once again? What is prudent? What is a "cure worse than the disease"? Unfortunately, many answers fall along political lines. And that is a tragedy.

Is there a way that we can move forward as a nation, and as individuals, that is expansive enough to include all approaches?

I like to think yes, but it takes practice. Practice makes possible, says my yoga teacher. Just as I lost ground when I quit practicing yoga and Pilates, I find if I allow myself to sink into despair because of the way things are in the world, I lose resilience. If I veer toward self-righteousness, refusing to consider the validity of the opinions of others wrought out of their own experiences, I lose compassion. And both resilience and compassion are qualities I long to cultivate.

I know the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test has fallen out of favor in recent decades, giving way to the more popular (and perhaps more useful—I can't say) Enneagram. But I still find the insights I gained from my own Myers-Briggs test in the late '70s to be helpful. For one category, I score close to center between those who continually need more information before drawing a conclusion (meaning they often have a hard time making up their minds) and those who can ascertain a situation and make a clarification (no problem, this is the way it is). Now since I see usefulness in each approach, some may call my not being able to declare an allegiance to one way of being waffling. But I like to think otherwise. I think there is value in

trying to understand the “other side,” that is the side not in alignment with mine, yet still be clear on my values.

Just to be clear, when it comes to words or practices that are clearly prejudicial, or worse, hateful, and points of view that do not recognize and respect the dignity of all people, I have little patience. But when people, hard-working people, who feel that the system under which we have organized our society leaves no room for them, and consequently have views different from mine, I, who has been blessed beyond anything I deserve, want to understand.

The Episcopal priest Mary C. Earle, author of *Julian of Norwich: Selections from Revelations of Divine Love—Annotated & Explained*, writes of Julian’s insistence, radically so, that there is “no anger in God.” Such a radical concept, so different from how many of us were raised, questions if the anger, bitterness, and vengeance we have seen in God is merely a projection on our part.

Earle writes, speaking of Julian, “In a resolutely maternal way, she encourages us to grow up, to cast aside our immature and punitive images of God, and to be honest with ourselves about our own actions that have their roots in spiritual blindness. Julian tells us, again and again, in a variety of ways, that God is our friend, our mother and our father, as close to us as the clothing we wear.”

Julian is firm: “God is One. Everything is in God. God is in everything. God transcends and *encloses all* that is made.”¹

I come from a large family, so there is room for lots of opinions, and we have them all. Fortunately, within the *container* of our family life—siblings and spouses, adult nieces and nephews with more spouses—we seem to be able to hold all of these conflicting ideas. When hearing each other’s opinions we tread carefully in response. Somewhere we have learned that no opinion is worth the loss of a relationship.

I know that is not the case with all families.

Some family relationships are so toxic that separation is the only healthy thing to do. Barring abuse and other forms of cruelty, however, all other opinions are really just small stuff in light of the expansiveness of God. I think COVID-19, despite our national disagreements on how to move forward, may be teaching us that.

Is there a way we can imitate God, keep our circles wide to contain all, and still be faithful to ourselves? Yes, and my family provides an opportunity for me to practice such an inclusiveness.

I would be the first to admit that honoring the beliefs of family members that are different from mine is not always easy. Often I think (to myself, though my loved ones see through me), they are just wrong. But if I stay with it, focus on what matters, just as sticking with my exercises keeps my body strong, I can enlarge the circle of my point of view to make room for those beliefs contrary to mine. Fortunately I love family members, so I have an incentive to do this. Besides, being in relationship with them is a good way for me to practice doing so with those who think differently within the larger world.

We are in the season of Easter, and as I write this, we just celebrated Mother's Day. Father's Day will be here soon. In my belief system, I recognize God as both father and mother, which brings to mind, my own dear deceased parents. From them, my siblings and I, and consequently their children, have learned to keep the circle wide, to make room for all within our family container.

Perhaps that is the answer to how we are to reconcile so much disagreement in our society today. *We need a really, really big container.*

God encloses all that is made, says Julian of Norwich. Can we, as daughters and sons of God, do no less?

¹ Mary C. Earle, *Julian of Norwich: Selections from Revelations of Divine Love—Annotated & Explained* (SkyLight Paths: 2013), xxi-xxii, xxiv.