



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

acceptance, compassion, action

Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman who was killed at the age of 29 in a concentration camp. Before being sent to Auschwitz she lived and worked at Camp Westerbork in Amsterdam. The camp was used by Nazis to gather and house Jews before transporting them to concentration camps. Etty's letters and diaries describing her life under Nazi occupation in Amsterdam were saved and published as a book titled *An Interrupted Life*. Etty was one of those remarkable souls who not only accepted an unspeakable fate, but met it with compassion for herself and others and acted until her end on behalf of others.

Earlier this week I came across a quote by Etty in a daily reading. This is what Etty says about accepting her fate:

I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished. I am not bitter or rebellious, or in any way discouraged . . . My life has been extended by death, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.

In the course of our lives we confront many painful situations, from personal physical and emotional pain and trauma—to crises with our families and friends—to economic, environmental, political, and social challenges. What Etty was able to do, we are all capable of doing. The scale of tragedy that we face will rarely be comparable to what Etty faced, but if we can meet our trials with only a fraction of the courage and grace that Etty showed our lives will be vastly richer.

Acceptance is the first and sometimes most difficult challenge. We want to rail against our fate and the fate of others, we wish things were different, we protest against the unfairness, the injustice, anything but accept reality. Some confuse acceptance with giving up but that is not the case. As Etty describes, her love of life was not diminished and she no longer wasted her energies on fear.

Compassion followed; her life was enlarged and enriched by compassion for the sufferings of others. No matter what happens to us there are always others in the same boat, suffering similar experiences and always there are those whose suffering is worse. Feeling love, tenderness, kindness, and charity towards others and ourselves produces feelings of warmth and comfort, enlarging and enriching us.

Finally, as Etty says, she is "not bitter or rebellious or in any way discouraged." Etty did not give up. I think what she means about not being "bitter and rebellious" is that her actions came from compassion rather than anger. From that place of acceptance and compassion we can move into action that is effective and wise. At a personal and family level we can search for help—medical, spiritual, psychological. We can do all we can to cope most effectively with the situation even if recovery is not possible. We become full partners in our treatment, not passive recipients.

At a community and societal level we can do what we can to change the way things are, in small or large ways. Action coming out of the sacred space of love and compassion is right action and will have depth and the power of moral authority.

We look back 50 years to the nonviolent protesters moving across the bridge in Selma being viciously attacked as they marched for voting rights. After suffering two hundred years of brutality at the hands of white people, and fully aware of the terrible reprisals they might suffer for their courage, they chose to act in a nonviolent protest. They were on the moral high ground. They achieved a moral victory and won the hearts of the nation. There were terrible casualties, but their actions that day had a power that we remain in awe of today.

At any moment we can be faced with seemingly insolvable personal, family, social, economic or environmental crises and suffering. If we can meet the challenges with acceptance and compassion we can move into action that is solid and sound. ❧❧❧

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