**Excerpts from the diary and letters of Etty Hillesum**

*“By not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, freed from all sense desires, is free from the duality of birth and death.”* Today I’d like to say a few words about this line, the last line, from the Metta sutra. But no words that I could string together could possibly elucidate what it means to be free of the duality of birth and death better than the words of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jew who was murdered in Auschwitz at age 29. Etty kept a diary and wrote letters as her world began to collapse under Nazism. Much of what she has to say is almost frightfully pertinent to us in our time and circumstances. While she never uses the word “metta,” she conveys a sense of urgency about doing the hard work that comes with facing hatred, bitterness, resentments, and other afflictions within us and to purify them. She resolved to live a life of harmony and good will to the very end.

**“We human beings cause monstrous conditions, but precisely because we cause them, we soon learn to adapt ourselves to them. Only if we become such that we can no longer adapt ourselves, only if, deep inside, we rebel against every kind of evil, will we be able to put a stop to it. While everything within us does not scream out in protest, so long will we find ways of adapting ourselves and the horrors will continue.**

**“I really see no other solution than to turn inwards and to root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we first change ourselves and that seems to me the only lesson to be learned. Each of us must turn inward and destroy in ourselves all that we think we ought to destroy in others. To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore the external reality for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse, that’s quite a task. Nazi barbarism gives rise to an identical barbarism in us that would proceed with the same methods if we were able to act today as we would like. We must internally reject this incivility. We cannot cultivate that hatred in ourselves, because otherwise the world will not come out of the mud by a single step. Ultimately, we just have one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace within ourselves. More and more peace. And to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is within us, the more peace there will also be in this troubled world.**

**“If an SS man were to kick me to death, I would still look up at his face and ask myself with terrified amazement and human interest, “My god brother, what terrible thing has happened to you in your life that you resort to such things?” I don’t think I have nerves of steel—far from it. But I can certainly stand up to things. I’m not afraid to look suffering straight in the eyes. By coming to terms with life, the reality of death has become a definite part of my life. My life has, so to speak, been extended by death by looking death in the eye and accepting it. By accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the 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.**

**“Ought we not, from time to time, open ourselves up to cosmic sadness? Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears their grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge, from which new sorrows will be born for others, then sorrow will never cease in this world, and will multiply. I believe I know and share the many sorrows and sad circumstances that a human being can experience. But I do not cling to them. I do not prolong such moments of agony. They pass through me like life itself, as a broad, eternal stream. They become part of that stream, and life continues and, as a result, all my strength is preserved.**

**“My red and yellow roses have opened completely while I [sit here in this] hell. They just quietly stand there blooming. Many say, “how can you still think of flowers?” But they are as real as all the misery. There is room for many things in one life and I have so much space, my God. Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths. Or the turning inwards to prayer for five short minutes.**

**“When you have an interior life, it certainly doesn’t matter what side of the prison fence you’re on. I’ve already died a thousand times in a thousand concentration camps. I know everything. There is no new information to trouble me. One way or another, I already know everything. And yet, I find this life beautiful and rich in meaning at every moment. Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors, it is all as one in me. And I accept it all as one whole…**

**“Everywhere things are both very good and very bad at the same time. The two are in balance, everywhere, and always. Everything is fine, just as it is. Every situation, however miserable, is complete in itself and contains the good as well as the bad. … once the love of humankind has germinated in you, it will grow without measure. Never give up. Never escape. Take everything in and perhaps suffer. That’s not too awful, either. But never, ever give up. There are moments when I feel like a little bird in a big protective hand. Yesterday my heart was a trapped bird. Now the bird is free again and flies unhindered over everything. Today the sun shines.**

**“…[If I] should die next week, I would still be able to sit at my desk [this] week, and study with perfect equanimity, for I know now that life and death make a meaningful whole. Every day I shall put my papers in order, and every day I shall say farewell and the real farewell, when it comes, will only be a small outward confirmation of what has been accomplished within me from day to day.”**