

# Edith Stein: Transformation through the world of relationship

*This article considers Edith Stein's world of relationships as the milieu for her development in the years prior to her conversion to Catholicism. It focuses on what she herself says about her own attitudes and her emerging self-awareness in relation to others, and gleans the underlying disposition that fostered her gradual transformation.<sup>1</sup> In this it hopes to find encouragement for our own spiritual journey and uncover a potential message from Edith Stein for today's world.*

## Individuals in Community: a World of Relationship

Images of saints most often depict each of them as a solitary figure, perhaps holding symbols representing what they have come to mean to us, perhaps with divine inspiration and influence represented in some form. But no saint, and indeed no individual, is a solitary figure. We are all individuals in community: a world of relationship. It is within this world, through life experiences and natural maturation, that we are progressively transformed more fully into the unique person God has created each of us to be.

## Family Life: First Community

Like many of us, Edith began her spiritual journey in the setting of a loving family. Writing during 1933, in her early forties, she says of her mother, "Even on bitterly cold winter days she would come home with hands so warm that with them she could take the chill from mine. This always symbolized for me that all life and warmth in our home came from her." (59)

The network of family relationships in which Edith grew to adulthood, and the various influences that shaped her development, included some that permeated from generations past. She recalls that portraits of her maternal grandparents hung in the living room of her Breslau home. Over the years she had pondered her grandmother's "very serious" face and concluded that it "shows traces of much suffering" and writes that, "She died long before I was born so all I know of her is derived from stories I have heard. Still, I do believe I understand her intuitively and can sense who among her daughters and granddaughters most closely resembles her and which of her characteristics I myself may have inherited..." (31-32)

## Observation and self-reflection

Edith's thoughts, on which of her grandmother's characteristics are present in herself and in her relatives, reveal her natural habit of closely observing those around her, and her natural capacity for self-reflection. The interrelatedness of these two qualities – observation of others and self-reflection – is an integral part of how she came to know those in her world and, over the years, how she came to know herself.

The knowledge gained through observation of others, however, was not always put to good use. She relates a number of incidents involving her cousins where her capacity to observe them closely prompted her to tease them. (67) However, along with this childhood behaviour, she realized at an early age that others had *a perspective that differed from her own*. What she describes as the "first great transformation [that] took place in me when I was about seven years old" was when she recognized that her mother and oldest sister Else "had a better knowledge of what was good for me than I had; and because of this confidence, I readily obeyed them." (75) Although she did not know *what* their knowledge was, she respected them and so respected their perspective. We will come back to this.

## Student Life and Intellectual Pursuits

As a young adult, immersed in intellectual pursuits, she recognized only in hindsight the detriment to family relationships caused by this all-absorbing immersion. She writes,

I had scarcely any time left for my family. My relatives hardly saw me except at mealtimes, and sometimes not even then. When I did come to table, my thoughts were usually still on my work; and I had little to say. ... Not infrequently my mother caught no glimpse of me for a day or two at a time. (214)

She admits that at that time,

I was totally unaware of the extent to which I had withdrawn from my family and of the pain this caused. I lived only for my studies and the aspirations they had awakened in me. I perceived them as my duty and felt in no way guilty of any injustice. ... I saw myself as a richly endowed and highly privileged creature. (215)

This self-image also impacted on the way she related to others outside the family. She describes one friend and fellow student, Paul Berg, as “exaggeratedly polite and obsequious” and writes, “His presence always provoked me to shock him by particularly unrestrained expressions.” (127) However, her unrestrained outspokenness was soon to be challenged.

Edith relates a conversation, toward the end of her years at Breslau University, with Hugo Hermsen, the founder and inspiration of the pedagogical group to which she belonged. Prior to her departure he said to her, “Well, I wish you the good fortune of finding in Göttingen people who will satisfy your taste. Here you seem to have become far too critical.” She was stunned by these words, unaccustomed, as she says, “to any form of censure. At home hardly anyone dared to criticize me; my friends showed me only affection and admiration. So I had been living in the naive conviction that I was perfect.” She writes,

I had always considered it my privilege to make remarks about everything I found negative, inexorably pointing out other person’s weaknesses, mistakes, or faults of which I became aware, often using a ridiculing or sarcastic tone of voice. There were persons who found me ‘enchantingly malicious’. (195-6)

Despite these youthful character traits, she takes this criticism “from a man I esteemed and loved” as “a first alert to which I gave much reflection.” (196) Her response reveals her underlying attitude of *openness to a perspective which differed from her own*.

### **New worlds and new relationships**

Her years at Göttingen University introduced Edith into new worlds and new relationships. She recalls her first meeting with Adolf Reinach, and writes,

After this first meeting, I was very happy and filled with deep gratitude. It seemed to me no one had ever received me with such genuine goodness of heart. That close relatives, or friends one had known for years, should be affectionate in their attitude was self-evident to me. But this was something entirely different. It was like a first glimpse into a completely new world. (249)

This new world included a whole community of students and teachers, many of whom had Jewish ancestry and converted to Christianity during the time she knew them. She was particularly influenced by Max Scheler, a recent convert, who “employed all the brilliance of his spirit and his eloquence” to plead Catholic ideas. She writes,

This was my first encounter with this hitherto totally unknown world. It did not lead me as yet to the Faith. But it did open for me a region of ‘phenomena’ which I could then no longer bypass blindly. ... The barriers of rationalistic prejudices with which I had unwittingly grown up fell, and the world of faith unfolded before me. (260)

She realized too that this, ‘world of faith’ was more than an intellectual world of ideas and concepts requiring “systematic investigations” but that people “with whom I associated daily, whom I esteemed and admired, lived in it.” Edith’s on-going relationship with these people who *lived in* this world of faith, and her own attitude of *openness to their perspective*, affected her to the extent that “almost without noticing it,” she “became gradually transformed.” (260-261)

### **Living in the world of faith**

She relates a number of specific incidents where what she observed made a deep impression on her and promoted much reflection about others who ‘lived in’ the world of faith. I’ll mention only a few here:

- In 1912, she visited Sister Frieda’s home where “children from broken homes were cared for in the light and cheerful rooms. ... In one of the workrooms, Sister Frieda showed us a sewing machine. ‘We were desperately in need of one,’ she told us with natural simplicity, ‘so we prayed for one, and before long it came as a gift.’ Those to whom she said this were probably all free-thinkers, but not one of us smiled in derision. Respectfully, we deferred to such childlike faith.” (193)
- In July 1916, while on a hiking excursion in the Black Forest, they stayed overnight with a farmer. “.. it made a deep impression on us when this Catholic master said his prayers with his men in the morning and shook hands with each of them before they went out haying.”<sup>2</sup>

- In late 1916, she observed a woman who came into the Frankfurt Cathedral, “and knelt down in one of the pews to pray briefly. ... here was someone interrupting her everyday shopping errands to come into this church, although no other person was in it, as though she were here for an intimate conversation. I could never forget that.” (401)
- In early 1918, she experienced the way her friend Anna responded to the death of her husband Adolf Reinach. Edith spoke about this episode to Fr Johannes Hirschmann who wrote, “The decisive reason for [Edith’s] conversion to Christianity was, she told me, the way in which her friend Frau Reinach, in the power of the mystery of the Cross, made the sacrifice that was imposed on her by the death of her husband at the front in the First World War. In this sacrifice [Edith] experience a proof of the truth of the Christian religion and became open to it.”<sup>3</sup>

In these examples, by observing the people in her life, and at the same time *not understanding* what motivated their behaviour, she was able to appreciate that *from their perspective* the *experience* of these events differed from her own. Again, through such an attitude of openness she was gradually transformed.

### **Attitude of openness: closer to home**

Edith’s attitude of openness also permeated beyond her student life and friendships into family dynamics and relationships. She describes the effect on the household of the presence of Hans Biberstein, the future husband of her sister Erna, and Hans’s mother.

She writes of Hans and his mother, “Both were excessively sensitive and suspected that an intent to offend lurked behind the most harmless remark made to them; they were likely to take offense instantaneously and obviously.” (119-120) After an incident in which her sister Rosa had caused “unintentional offense” Edith encouraged her to apologize “in order to restore peace,” and writes, “One has to take persons as one found them.” (234)

Edith recognizes that this has not always been her own way of relating to others and in particular to Hans. She reflects on the changes in herself over the years and her new attitude towards others and writes,

We never again had a falling-out such as we sometimes had during our student years. This was because I had completely changed my attitude towards others as well as toward myself. Being right and getting the better of my opponent under any circumstances were no longer essential for me. Also, though I still had as keen an eye for the human weaknesses of others, I no longer made it an instrument for striking them at their most vulnerable point, but, rather, for protecting them. Even my tendency to correct others did not affect my new attitude. I had learned that one seldom reformed persons by “telling them the truth”. That could benefit them only if they themselves had an earnest desire to improve, and if they accorded one the right to be critical. Therefore, in these conversations with my brother-in-law, my prime concern again was to get to know him and his mother better since their ways differed so much from ours. This enabled me later to support Erna on many an occasion. (234-235)

Edith’s support for Erna was particularly needed in the year prior to her wedding in December 1920. Edith, now in her late 20’s, was the one to whom Erna confided her struggles. Edith wrote,

Her engagement had been a protracted torment. ... in the morning, ... she would come in to tell me what had transpired the evening before. ... Frequently her first words were, ‘I don’t know what to do; I’m desperate!’ ... I would have Erna tell me everything, giving her whatever advice I could. My guiding principle was always: give in, in all that is not unjust.<sup>4</sup> (235-236)

Edith’s advice to Rosa to “take persons as one found them” and her advice to Erna to “give in, in all that is not unjust” displays a fundamental attitude of respect for the perspective of the other. This respectful attitude bears little resemblance to the ‘enchantly malicious’ youthful Edith.

## Open to the unknown

As Edith says of the Bibersteins, “my prime concern again was to get to know him and his mother better since their ways differed so much from ours.” Seeking to get to know another acknowledges that *there is more to know than what is currently known*. To be open to this *more*, open to what is currently *not known* is essentially to be *open to the unknown*.

Being open to the unknown reduces the compelling need to be “right” and get “the better of my opponent under any circumstances.” Rather than a static, oppositional relationship, the relationship can have an ongoing dynamic which is always open to change as more becomes known about the other. With such an attitude to relationships, those whose ‘ways differ so much from ours’ are no longer the ‘opponent’ but rather an ‘other’ whose perspective deserves as much respect as our own.

As a child, Edith was open to the unknown perspective of her mother and eldest sister; as a student, open to the unknown perspective of those who lived in the world of faith; as a young adult, open to the unknown perspective of her future brother-in-law and his mother. This disposition of being *open to the unknown* may or may not have changed the other, but it allowed for *her* gradual transformation that happened “almost without noticing it” over the years prior to her conversion to Catholicism.

## Message for today’s world

For me, an important issue for our world today is the issue of how we respond to diversity; how we respond to those whose “ways differ so much from ours”. Our responses to those who are ‘not like us’ in our families, communities, churches, and wider organizations, reveal underlying critical attitudes, the consequences of which are largely shaping our world today.

Edith’s attitude to those who are ‘not like us’ is to respectfully acknowledge their perspective and reflectively seek to understand. Being always open to further understanding is consistent with a Christian/Carmelite way of life. We do not already have the fullness of what we are attempting to grasp about the other – whether that other is another human being or the God in whom we profess to believe.

In fostering an attitude of openness to the other, and the Other, we will become open people who recognize *there is always more to know than what is currently known*. If we are open people, our day-to-day dealings with *all* others, regardless of their views and values, are likely to reflect a deep seated fundamental attitude of respect. The ground of this respect for others is, in fact, respect for the unknown, and the Unknown.

Taking Edith Stein as our guide, being Christians/Carmelites in our world today invites an underlying open disposition: open to further understanding, especially in relationship with those whose ways differ from our own. Through being open people, in our world of relationships, *we can be transformed* and together we can transform the world.

Written by Bernadette Micallef

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<sup>1</sup> All page references taken from *Life in a Jewish Family*, ICS, 1986 edition.

<sup>2</sup> Teresia Renata Posselt, *Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*. Edited by Susanne M. Batzdorff. Josephine Koepfel and John Sullivan, ICS, 2005, page 58

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 13 May 1950 to Sr Teresia Posselt, quoted in Gibbs, ‘My long search for the true faith’ *The Conversion of Edith Stein*. <http://www.carmelite.org/documents/Heritage/gibbsconversionofstein.pdf> page 21

<sup>4</sup> These reflections are recorded in Chapter VI, *Life in a Jewish Family* which is titled *1913* although Erna was married in 1920. (17) This time frame is important regarding Edith’s statement, “At that time my health was very poor, probably as a result of the spiritual conflicts I then endured in complete secrecy and without any human support.” (237) The time she refers to here was 1920, the year before her conversion, not 1913.