



The Long, Long-term Effects of Saying “Yes”

In 1934, in the dark recesses of an old English family library, a rare fifteenth century manuscript came to light. Scholarly investigation revealed it to be what is now known as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the life story of an extraordinary medieval woman who answered “yes” without hesitation when she thought Jesus was calling her. Today, some regard her as a mystic; others as a sick, or attention-seeking woman but, whatever the truth, Margery gives us a surprising lesson in devotion and perseverance.

Margery was born in 1373 in the Norfolk town of King’s Lynn where her father, John Brunham, had been the Mayor for five separate terms. At twenty years of age Margery married John Kempe and within a year of the marriage, had given birth to her first child. She went on to have a further thirteen children but the first birth was especially decisive as, immediately following it, Margery experienced what we now would probably describe as a post-partum psychotic episode but which Margery herself describes as being tormented by devils. Margery explains that the relief from this episode came in the form of a personal visit from Jesus and this unexpected encounter set her on her life’s quest of serving God.

Margery did nothing by halves. After Jesus had appeared to her during her illness, she began to spend a great amount of time praying, arising at two or three in the morning and making her way to church where she would pray until midday and then again in the afternoon. She confessed to a priest twice and, sometimes, three times a day, in particular seeking forgiveness for an early sin which she had avoided confessing for many years. She adopted stringent fasting and the wearing of a hair-shirt made from the coarse cloth on which malt was dried. It was in these early years, too, that Margery reports receiving the ‘gift of tears’.

This gift, in particular, with its associated crying and wailing at even the mention of Jesus’ name, saw Margery shunned by many who witnessed the extreme

behaviour. Such was her disruptive influence that some priests refused to allow her in the church when they were to preach. But Margery persisted in her devotions, feeling that her original “yes” to God was a promise on which she could not renege. She also felt compelled to embark on numerous and extensive pilgrimages and travelled, over several years, to the Holy Land, Rome, Assisi, Santiago de Compostela, Norway and Germany, as well as important pilgrimage sites throughout England. This was an amazing undertaking in the 14th century and even more remarkable for a (sole) woman.

Then, as now, Margery’s travels and general behaviour garner divided opinions on the authenticity of her mystical calling. That is, while there is no doubt of her devotion, her motivation for, and expression of, it remain a matter of considerable debate. Putting this debate aside, however, there emerges a wonderful and unexpected consequence of her “yes”...

From *The Book* we know that, though Margery was illiterate, she managed to dictate her story to an unidentified scribe. Six hundred years after she lived and was almost forgotten, the finding of the manuscript of her life story gave the world the great gift of the first autobiography in English.

We, too, will often not know the repercussions of saying “yes” in our lives, of being willing to undertake a difficult task or of making a commitment. We can only have faith that something good will come of it (and hope that it doesn’t take quite as long as Margery Kempe’s “yes” for its effect).

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