

From Time to Time

“I wanted to be everything”

From Time to Time
by Hannah Tillich
New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1974.

Reviewed by Cheryl Peck

If you prefer to view your Great Men from the pristine splendor of history's retrospective pages, *From Time to Time* will not please you. If you like your Great Women serene or dignified, calm or comforting, Hannah Tillich is not the woman for you to read. If, however, you want your men three-dimensional and whole, your women creative and honest, totally alive, then you will enjoy reading Hannah Tillich's memoirs, *From Time to Time*.

From Time to Time is a completely irreverent book about Hannah Tillich's life with Paulus (Paul Tillich), the well-known German theologian and a leader in the religious socialist movement. Scathingly honest and perceptive, she has disdained playing the role of myth-maker for her famous husband; whatever one says about *From Time to Time*, it is not just another love story written by a dotting wife.

Instead, while we have a candid glimpse of a Paulus generally unknown to his neo-orthodox readers, by far the most interesting story is Hannah's.

The book is suffused with her eroticism, her passion for the experience of love and life. From the first surreal parable where she says, “When I was seventeen, I wanted to be everything, male and female, a self-sufficient hermaphrodite,” Hannah moves freely from woman to man, seeking more than all else to reach the extremes of sensation of which she was capable.

She possessed a mystical attachment to the spirit, a sense of cosmic-mindedness. “I was eager to become a human being, but what set me on fire was the spirit and the mind.” Life was the celebration to which she was called. “Our flagrant desire to live/Knowing about Death—/Have we not become possessed/To celebrate the feast of life.”

Indeed, Hannah Tillich frequently suffered from the emotional excesses which her strength of spirit and will produced. “I would burst into a rage. I could rave beautifully, unexpectedly pouring streams of abuse on my poor adversary.” During an illness when Paulus's betrayals weighed heavily on her, she



“lay in bed, raving that the hatred I felt within me would destroy me. I felt poisoned by my hate against Paulus.” At last, slowly, she began to gain control of herself through the practice of yoga.

Her attachment to Paulus was a curious mixture

of the impossibly inevitable. It was as impossible that he limit his flirtations and romances and provide her with the strength and protection she craved as it was for her to end her search for ever-expanding involvement and strength of identity.

But, it was equally impossible for them to separate with any finality. Their lives seemed to cross at some existential point which bound them inextricably to one another.

These opposing forces were not easy to live with. Even while she acknowledged her needs and sought some kind of reconciliation of spirit, Hannah suffered excesses of jealousy over Paulus's women. “He never protected me, he always protected the other woman. It took me years to realize that the hostility of the other woman toward me was just as painful to her as my hostility and sorrow were to me.”

Even after his death, she was torn by his betrayal of her needs. “I unlocked the drawers. All the girls' photos fell out, letters and poems, passionate appeal and disgust . . . I was tempted to place between the sacred pages of his highly esteemed lifework those obscene signs of the real life that he had transformed into the gold of abstraction—Kind Midas of the spirit.”

But, if she was sorely tried, she was also strengthened by her experiences. Gradually she expanded her self-awareness. Of her first marriage she says, “I pretended to be what my first husband wanted me to be, the body beautiful . . . He drew, painted, and worshiped me . . . It was by walking through the door of my intellect that I left him.”

And, once her journey was begun, she moved forward with an indomitable will. Throughout *From Time to Time* she writes on a personal level which expresses absolute certainty in the importance of her goals. “I fought,” she says, “for a conscious, personal self, though I always felt in danger of becoming the matter on which another person's mind fed. I fought for survival as an independent center. My desire was to become my own constellation.”

From Time to Time is a beautifully-written story by a woman who has lived her life with a passion few of us are able to capture. In a very real sense, Hannah Tillich has *lived* the theological concepts which her husband developed. In her search for the sweetness of life she took up the burden of sin and grace and said “yes” to her own being. ■