



Simone Weil

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The life of Simone Weil was a study in contradictions. She was a brilliant thinker who distrusted unmoored intellectual speculation; she chose to work in a factory for a time to experience at firsthand the grind of industrial labor. Passionately opposed to injustice, always on the side of the oppressed, she nevertheless expressed revulsion for her Jewish heritage at a time when to be Jewish was to be marked as a victim. Combative, fiercely unconventional, she remained closely dependent on her parents almost until her death. A Christian, she refused to join the Church. A writer whose works are studied throughout the world, she did not, in her short lifetime, publish a single book or even submit one for publication.

In *SIMONE WEIL: A MODERN PILGRIMAGE*, Robert Coles traces the outlines of Weil's life and explores in detail those contradictions. Weil was born in Paris in 1909, the second of two children in a cultured Jewish family. Her brother, Andre, now in his eighties, was a child prodigy who became a world-class mathematician. Weil herself compiled a brilliant record in the highly competitive French educational system and, upon her graduation from the Ecole Normale Superieure, appeared destined for a distinguished academic career.

Instead, the "hunger" (as Cole calls it) that, from early childhood, had distinguished her from her peers drove her to political activism (she was dismissed from several teaching posts, in part because school authorities regarded her as a dangerous leftist) and then to a religious quest that embraced yet also transcended her commitment to social justice. Allowed to emigrate with her parents to New York in 1942, she forsook the security of the United States for wartime London, where she worked for the Free French. In April of 1943, she was diagnosed as tubercular; she died in August of that year, having refused to eat. She was thirty-four.

Cole's account, sympathetic but far from hagiographic, is the best available introduction to Simone Weil. The text is supplemented by a chronology, notes, and a bibliography.

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