The Story of Three Deaths - Peter Maurin, Lawrence Heaney, Willie Lurye

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Summary: A loving obituary for Peter Maurin giving the details of his death and burial. Speaks of his last five years of illness, the day he died, his wake and funeral. Emphasizes the ways "He was another St. Francis of modern times." (DDLW #495).

I want to write all the details before we forget them,–not the kind of obituary which *Time* magazine is printing this week, nor the kind that appeared in the *Times* and the *Tribune*, and the *Brooklyn Tablet*, or the *Catholic News*. The kind of story I want to write will be a letter to all Peter's friends around the country who want to hear the details of his death and burial.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," and the details of such a death are precious.

Plato said: "Other people are not likely to be aware that those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead. But if this be true, it would be absurd to be eager for nothing but this all their lives, and then be troubled when that came for which they had all along been eagerly practicing."

And St. Paul said, "We will not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that are asleep, that you be not sorrowful, even as others who have no hope."

So it will be understood that it is with a spirit of joy that we write this month, because Peter is no longer suffering, no longer groaning within himself and saying with St. Paul, "Who will deliver me from the body of this death?"

No, we are sure that he welcomed Sister Death with joy, and that underneath him he felt the Everlasting Arms.

I am writing this in New York, up in my room on the third floor, and all winter before last, that hard winter, he waited up here for the weather to clear so that he could go to the country. He had to lie in bed much of the time, and the plaster is all picked off the wall by the side of my bed where he slept while I was down in West Virginia with my daughter. Marge and Joe took care of his needs and the children ran in and out of his bedroom. He must have been very weary of lying in bed, he who had travelled north and south, east and west in this vast

country. Up on the farm he had become worse these last two years. Everybody was always so reassuring, exclaiming how well he looked, how bright he was, but we who had known him these past seventeen years felt only the tragedy of the death in life he was living. Truly he practiced for death a very long time.

We have written this before, and we repeat it again. Peter was the poor man of his day. He was another St. Francis of modern times. He was used to poverty as a peasant is used to rough living, poor food, hard bed, or no bed at all, dirt, fatigue, and hard and unrespected work. He was a man with a mission, a vision, an apostolate, but he had put off from him honors, prestige, recognition. He was truly humble of heart, and loving. Never a word of detraction passed his lips and as St. James said, the man who governs his tongue is a perfect man. He was impersonal in his love in that he loved all, saw all others around him as God saw them. In other words he saw Christ in them. And everyone loved him, I am sure, though there were some strange criticisms.

He never spoke idle words, though he was a great teacher who talked for hours on end, till late in the night and early morning. He roamed the streets and the countryside and talked to all who would listen. But when his great brain failed, he became silent. If he had been a babbler he would have been a babbler to the end. But when he could no longer think, as he himself expressed it, he remained silent.

For the last five years of his life he was this way, suffering, silent, dragging himself around, watched by us all for fear he would get lost, as he did once for three days; he was shouted at loudly by visitors as though he were deaf, talked to with condescension as one talks to a child to whom language must be simplified even to the point of absurdity. That was one of the hardest things we had to bear, we who loved him and worked with him for so long,–to see others treat him as though he were simple minded.

The fact was he had been stripped of all,–he had stripped himself throughout life. He had put off the old man, to put on the new. He had done all that he could to denude himself of the world, and I mean the world in the evil sense, not in the sense that "God looked at it and found it good." He loved people, he saw in them what God meant them to be. He saw the world as God meant it to be, and he loved it.

He had stripped himself, but there remained work for God to do. We are to be pruned as the vine is pruned so that it can bear fruit, and this we cannot do ourselves. God did it for him. He took from him his mind, the one thing he had left, the one thing perhaps he took delight in. He could no longer think. He could no longer discuss with others, give others in a brilliant overflow of talk, his keen analysis of what was going on in the world; he could no longer make what he called his synthesis of *cult, culture and cultivation.*

It is a temptation to go on and on, but what I want to do is to give our friends an account of his death.

He was sick for five years. It was as though he had a stroke in his sleep. He dragged one leg after him, his face was slightly distorted, and he found it hard to speak. And he repeated, "I can no longer think." When he tried to, his face would have a strained, suffering expression. He had cardiac asthma, a hernia (as many hard workers have) and he was in pain when he coughed.

For the first couple of years of invalidism, he lived at Easton with us, and when we were about to move to Newburgh, New York, he went to stay for the winter months with Mrs. Teresa Weider, who was the first Catholic Worker of Rochester, New York, and who had always run a House of Hospitality of her own. When we finished the moving, I brought him to the farm at Newburgh. The house was too cold for him to live in in winter as we burned only wood in our furnace, so he lived in a rear house, a house of poured cement built originally as a chicken coop, and which was divided into three rooms, one of which Fr. Faley has, another Alan Dates, and the third was shared by Peter with Hans Tunneson. Hans was with him to keep the room warm and clean, and to watch over Peter at night, but also it was typical of Peter never to ask anything for himself, of course not privacy, that greatest of all luxuries. He had never had a bed of his own, really, until it came to his last illness. He just took what was available in the House of Hospitality.

He had always been a meager eater, getting along on two meals a day, never eating between meals. He used to say when he was offered anything, "I don't need it." But towards the close of his life, he was inclined to stuff down his food hastily like a child, and he had to be cautioned to eat slowly. Perhaps there was a hangover from the hunger of a childhood in a large family where there was never enough to eat. There were twenty-three children in all, over the years.

Other habits clung to him. When I'd go in to see if he were warm enough, I'd find him lying in bed with his pants folded neatly and under his head, and his coat wrapped around his feet, a habit I suppose which he got from living in flophouses where clothes are often stolen. And once I found him sleeping in the dead of winter with only a spread over him, in a dead cold room. Someone had taken his blankets.

One thing we can be happy about too, and that is that he felt he had finished his work before his mind failed, as St. Albertus Magnus' great mind failed. He used to say, "I have written all I have to say, I have done all I can, let the younger men take over." So he suffered but not with the feeling that there was much still that he could do.

We tried to make a record of Peter's voice on a wire recorder, and we had him read aloud all his essays on Houses of Hospitality. His voice strangely enough was louder and clearer as it came over the wire, than it had been for a long time. We spent quite a few days over this, Dave Mason and I, because Peter tired easily, and then, after we had triumphantly made a fifteen-minute spool, someone else tried to work the machine and erased it all.

We wanted to have Peter's book finished before he died, so that we could place it

in his hands, and though the galleys were all done and the page proofs are being set up now, and Ed Willock of Integrity is making the illustrations–that too, was denied Peter, and he never could hold this finished work of his in his hands.

For the past two months I had been at the farm while Jane O'Donnell was away at Grailville, and then while returning from the funeral of Larry Heaney, I received a telephone call about his death. Just before I had left, I had told him of Larry's sudden death, and he said yes, to my question as to whether he remembered Larry. He had loved him much, had sent him his quotations listed as cult, culture and cultivation over the years, and rejoiced in his total acceptance of his teaching, and when I said to him, "Now you will have someone waiting for you in heaven," his face lit up in a radiant smile. He had not smiled for months; there had only been a look of endurance, even of pain, on his face.

That was our goodbye. Over the telephone out in Avon, Ohio, at Our Lady of the Wayside Farm, we heard the news.

It was midnight and I had already fallen asleep. Dorothy Gauchat and Bill were not yet asleep. They had been saying the rosary for Ruth Ann and Catherine Reser, they said, because Catherine had lost another baby a few months ago, and Ruth Ann had lost her husband. When we hung up the receiver, Bill suggested we say Vespers of the Office of the Dead for Peter, so we knelt there in that farm living room and prayed those beautiful psalms that are like balm to the sore heart. No matter how much you expect a death, no matter how much you may regard it as a happy release, there is a gigantic sense of loss. With our love of life, we have not yet got to that point where we can say with the desert father, St. Anthony, "The spaces of this life, set over against eternity, are brief and poor."

Peter had been sitting up for supper that Sunday night, and had sat out in the sun all afternoon. There had been visitors from Friendship House that very day, and on Saturday Lydwinne von Kersbergen from Grailville had been at the farm, and had told Peter with love and reverence, all he had meant to the lay apostolate throughout the world. It was like a benediction from Europe, she might indeed have been representing Europe at that moment in saying farewell to him. His writings have been published there, he has been recognized there as perhaps he never has here in this, his own adopted country.

John Filliger had shaved him Saturday, he remembered, and Michael Kovalak had dressed and cared for him on Sunday, conducting him to the Chapel for Mass that morning, taking him to and from his room to rest. He had looked in again at Peter at nine Sunday night and found him sleeping rather restlessly on his side instead of on his back as he usually did. Eileen McCarthy had given him, as she did every night, a glass of wine, and I suppose Hans made his usual facetious gesture with the water pitcher, asking her to fill it for him. It makes me happy to think how everyone was caring for him. And honored to do so, Jane always said, when she spoke of Peter's needs. He was surrounded by loving care. Fr. Faley brought him communion the days he could not get up, and it

was impressive, day after day at that sick bed, to hear those prayers, to witness that slow dying. A King, a Pope, could have no more devoted attention, than Fr. John Faley, who has been with us this past year, gave Peter.

At eleven that night, Hans said, Peter began coughing, and it went on for some minutes. Then he tried to rise, and fell over on his pillow, breathing heavily. Hans put on the light and called Father Faley and Jane. Michael, Eileen and others came too, and there were prayers for the dying about the bedside. He died immediately, there was no struggle, no pain. He was laid out at Newburgh the first night, in the conference room where he had sat so often, trying to understand the discussions and lectures. Flowers were all about him from shrubs in our garden and from our neighbors. He wore for shroud a suit which had been sent in for the poor. There was no rouge on his grey face which looked like granite, strong, contemplative, set toward eternity. There was a requiem mass in our chapel sung by Michael and Alan and the rest.

The next morning he was brought to Mott street and laid out at the end of the store we use as an office. Tom Sullivan's desk was moved to make way for it, and all the tables taken down at which the paper is usually mailed out. The room had been scrubbed the night before by Rocky and Tony and they had painted the rooms only a month ago, so everything was fresh. (Rocky is a seaman, somewhat of a wandering monk, who had been with the Trappists for a while. Anthony Aratari is a writer, painter and craftsman who hopes some day to open a craft school in connection with the C. W. It is his painting of Peter which hangs on the wall of the office.)

All that day and night people came from all over the city, from the neighborhood, from different parts of the country and filled the little store and knelt before the coffin. Whenever we were sitting in the room, we saw them quietly, almost secretly pressing their rosary beads to Peter's hands. Some bent down and kissed him. My daughter, Tamar Hennessy, came from West Virginia. David, who had accompanied Peter on one of his last trips, stayed home with the three children, since Tamar had known Peter the longest; since her sixth year, in fact.

The neighbors, three of them, sent tremendous floral pieces, made up of carnations, gardenias and all around the coffin were the branches of flowering shrubs they had sent down from the farm. The sweet smells filled the room, and it was hot and fresh outside, clear weather, which was lucky, since the house overflowed all through that day and night. Priests came, from different orders, and led in the rosary. And all that night we sat with him.

The funeral was at nine at Transfiguration Church down on Mott street. Peter always loved the Salesians, and had always urged them to continue opening craft schools and agricultural schools throughout the country. He looked a bit like Don Bosco, their founder, himself. They were both peasants. The pall bearers were John Filliger and Joe Hughes, both of whom came to us during the seaman's strike in 1936, and have been with us ever since; Bob Ludlow, our chief editorial writer, who more than any other takes Peter's place here as

a thinker and man of vision, and David Mason, who is the editor of Peter's writings; and Arthur Sheehan, former editor of the C.W., and Hazen Ordway, both dear and devoted friends. Arthur had been one of the heads of the Boston group and St. Benedict's farm at Upton, and Hazen had been librarian at the Marist Seminary in Washington, when he heard me speak of the work there in 1937 and left immediately to join us, being associated with us ever since.

Everyone, of course, wanted to be pall bearer, the church was full of them, and the pall bearers themselves wanted diffidently to give way to others. I had asked Tom Sullivan and Jack English, but there was only room for six around the coffin.

Fr. Francis Meenan, Holy Ghost Father from Norwalk, Conn., sang the Mass, with Fr. Divisio and Fr. Faley the deacons, and they and a group of other priests, headed by Msgr. Nelson, met the body at the door and ushered it into the Church. Everyone sang the requiem Mass together, the organist, the priests, the seminarians, the parishioners, and all the crowd at Mott street and at Maryfarm, Newburgh, and Ade Bethune, and Jane O'Donnell and Serena and Stanley Vishnewsky and the group from Easton, Victor and Jon and Chris–you could almost hear their individual voices, and it was a loud and triumphant singing, with a note of joy, because we were sure Peter heard us in heaven, were sure that angels and saints joined in.

Peter was buried in St. John's Cemetery, Queens, in a grave given us by Fr. Pierre Conway, the Dominican. Peter was another St. John, a voice crying in the wilderness, and a voice too, saying, "My little children, love one another." As the body was carried out of the church those great and triumphant words rang out, the *In Paradisum.*

"May the angels lead thee into paradise; may the martyrs receive thee at thy coming, and lead thee into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive thee, and mayest thou have eternal rest with Lazarus, who once was poor."

Who Once Was Poor

Which brings me back to some of the criticisms, the most strange criticisms made of Peter–that he neglected the things of the spirit, that he was always thinking in terms of the social order. "Only one thing is needful, Peter," I heard one of his critics say brightly to him one day. But Peter never saw affronts.

"We need to make the kind of society," he said simply, "where it is easier for people to be good." And because his love of God made him love his neighbor, lay down his life indeed for his brother, he wanted to cry out against the evils of the day–the State, war, usury, the degradation of man, the loss of a philosophy of work. He sang the delights of poverty (he was not talking of destitution) as a means to making a step to the land, of getting back to the dear natural things of

earth and sky, of home and children. He cried out against the machine because as Pius XI had said, "raw materials went into the factory and came out ennobled and man went in and came out degraded"; and because it deprived a man of what was as important as bread, his work, his work with his hands, his ability to use all of himself, which made him a whole man and a holy man.

Yes, he talked of these material things. He knew we needed a good social order where men could grow up to their full stature and be men. And he also knew that it took men to make such a social order. He tried to form them, he tried to educate them, and God gave him poor weak materials to work with. He was as poor in the human material he had around him, as he was in material goods. We are the offscourings of all, as St. Paul said, and yet we know we have achieved great things in these brief years, and not ours is the glory. God has chosen the weak things to confound the strong, the fools of this earth to confound the wise.

Peter had been insulted and misunderstood in his life as well as loved. He had been taken for the plumber and left to sit in the basement when he had been invited for dinner and an evening of conversation. He had been thrown out of a K. of C. meeting; one pastor who invited him to speak demanded his money back which he had sent Peter for carfare to his upstate parish, because, he said, we had sent up to him a Bowery bum and not the speaker he expected. "This then is perfect joy," Peter could say, quoting the words of St. Francis to Friar Leo, when he was teaching him where perfect joy was to be found.

He was a man of sincerity and peace, and yet one letter came to us recently, accusing him of having a holier than-thou attitude. Yes, Peter pointed out that it was a precept that we should love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and not just a counsel, and he taught us all what it meant to be sons of God, and restored to us our sense of responsibility as lay apostles in a chaotic world. Yes, he was "holier than thou," holier than anyone we ever knew.

"Do not forget," Mary Frecon, head of the Harrisburgh house said before she left, "Do not forget to tell of the roots of the little tree that they cut through in digging his grave. I kept looking at those roots and thinking how wonderful it is that Peter is going to nourish that tree–that thing of beauty." The undertaker had tried to sell us artificial grass to cover up "the unsightly grave," as he called it, but we loved the sight of that earth that was to cover Peter. He had come from the earth, as we all had and to the earth he was returning. Around the grave we all said the rosary and after the Benedictus we left. Ade de Bethune will do a stone for him.