

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 8 - The Rigorous Life

Summary: Describes her year as a nursing student—the long hours, fatigue, and the discipline it brought into her life. She admires the Catholic faith of another student and attends Sunday Mass with her. After a year she realizes “my real work was writing and propaganda” and leaves the hospital for Chicago. (DDLW #208).

From the beginning I loved the work. I had been used to a great deal of physical activity, both at home and in school. I had been used to a good deal of manual labor, work that was hard and rigorous and which for that very reason made mental activities the more stimulating. Reporting on *The Call* and the daily “foot” work covering assignments kept me healthy. Life among the liberals and the artists I both enjoyed and despised. I was trying to write but my life was undisciplined. I longed for the rigor of those earlier years. I was just as much interested in the labor movement, but it was myself that I felt to be out of tune.

Writing alone did not satisfy me, and the labor movement went dead on me for that time. Workers were getting higher wages than ever before and were not interested in building up an industrial democracy. It was the heyday of the American Federation of Labor. Nobody cared that the great mass of workers was unorganized. A great number of Socialists throughout the country had thrown themselves into the war to end wars, “to make the world safe for democracy.” I saw another slogan recently which they will probably use in the next war, admirably vague, “to save humanity from itself.”

The A. F. of L. endorsed the war and was just as loud in its condemnation of those who continued to protest it. But it was not the radical movement which I felt had failed me. There were still such men as Debs, whose Canton speech will resound forever in the ears of the workers. On June 16, 1918, he made his famous speech and was sentenced to ten years for his anti-war stand. He said to the court before sentence was passed on him:

“Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one whit better than the meanest on earth. I saw then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it,

and while there is a soul in prison I am not free. I listened to all that was said in this court in support and justification of this prosecution but my mind remains unchanged. I look upon the Espionage law as a despotic enactment in flagrant conflict with democratic principles and with the spirit of free institutions. Your honor, I have stated in this court that I am opposed to the social system in which we live; that I believe in a fundamental change—but if possible by peaceable and orderly means. I am thinking this morning of the men in the mills and factories; of the men in the mines and on the railroads. I am thinking of the women who for a paltry wage are compelled to work out their barren lives; of the little children who in this system are robbed of their childhood and in their tender years are seized in the remorseless grasp of Mammon and forced into the industrial dungeons, there to feed the monster machines while they themselves are being starved and stunted, body and soul. I see them dwarfed and diseased and their little lives broken and blasted because in this high noon of our twentieth century Christian civilization money is still much more important than the flesh and blood of childhood. In very truth gold is god today and rules with pitiless sway in the affairs of men.”

“In this country, the most favored beneath the bending skies, we have vast areas of the richest and most fertile soil, material resources in inexhaustible abundance, the most marvelous productive machinery on earth, and millions of eager workers ready to apply their labor to that machinery to produce in abundance for every man, woman and child and if there are still vast numbers of our people who are the victims of poverty and whose lives are an unceasing struggle all the way from youth to old age, until at last death comes to their rescue and stills their aching hearts and lulls these hapless victims to dreamless sleep, it is not the fault of the Almighty; it cannot be charged to nature, but it is due entirely to the outgrown social system in which we live that ought to be abolished not only in the interest of the toiling masses but in the higher interest of all humanity.”

It was my great good fortune, one month after I began training in the hospital, that a Miss Adams entered and was given the room next to mine. She and I were the newest probationers so we worked together. She was almost thirty years old and had had to delay entering on account of the illness of her father and other family obligations. She was almost the oldest of the nurses in training and the fact that her vocation, as you might call it, had been delayed for so many years made her throw herself into the work with all the more intensity.

All that was necessary to enter training at that time was two years of high school. We supplied our own uniforms and textbooks for the first three months, but after that the hospital supplied both and paid us ten dollars a month. There

were not more than a dozen probationers and since the training was severe quite a few dropped out. The work was hard, but Miss Adams brought to it a joy and enthusiasm that was contagious. She was a Catholic, and I was in such close association with her for the coming year that I came to admire her greatly and to associate all her natural goodness and ability with her Catholicism. She didn't go to Mass more than once a week, she never spoke of her faith. She had no Catholic literature in her room aside from her prayer book, and she didn't use that except on special occasions. She was the average kind of Catholic whose faith was so solid a part of her life that she didn't need to talk about it. I felt the healthiness of her soul. I felt that it was strong and vigorous, but she did not discuss it any more than she would discuss the health of her body. I began to go to Mass with her on Sunday mornings even though it meant going without a few hours of much needed sleep. Mass was at five o'clock or five-thirty, and we worked from seven to seven with half a day off on Sunday and half a day during the week. We were supposed to have two hours off in the afternoon, but during those two hours there were classes.

Since so many nurses had enlisted for the Red Cross, often there was no more than one nurse to fifty patients. Even though we were probationers and not given very much responsibility, and there were ward maids and orderlies to take care of many of the disagreeable details, we had a great deal of physical labor. It was a city hospital and patients had to be very sick before they were admitted. We had to change each bed every day, bathe all our patients, rub them down with alcohol, dress bed sores, give out the medicines, attend demonstrations, and generally assist in the irrigations and injections, tappings for spinal and lung fluid, and all the other treatments for patients in the medical and receiving wards. I had my complete medical training during that year, but I had no experience on the surgical wards except a few months with fracture and tonsil cases.

My work was made happier by the companionship of Miss Adams. Sometimes we were on the same ward together or had adjoining wards. That was the year of the influenza epidemic, and we worked so hard that we fell unconscious into our beds at night and had to drag ourselves out of sleep in the morning. I had to take cold baths when I got up because if I got into warm water I fell asleep. Most of the nurses were keen and zealous over the work. We were all so busy we did not have time to suffer over the human misery we saw, although it was heart-breaking to see young people dying all around us of the flu. Often we had to prepare for the morgue as many as eight corpses a day.

Every morning we were expected to have our wards in order by ten o'clock, and it used to give me pleasure to see everyone cleaned and washed and neatly tucked under white counterpanes in the long rows. They were good patients because they were poor and did not expect too much. They were uncomplaining, and they accepted their suffering with stoicism. They did get good food and clean bedding. In the middle of the morning we gave everyone egg-nogs, and in the male wards most of the men who were in the habit of drinking got a good stiff drink of whiskey in the egg-nog. When they were well enough they used to help

us in every way they could.

I liked the order of the life and the discipline. By contrast the life that I had been leading seemed disorderly and futile. I thought of the hours it took most women to do their housework and keep their children in order and wondered why our schools did not have courses in home making to make people more efficient in this regard. One of the things that this year in the hospital made me realize was that one of the hardest things in the world is to organize ourselves and discipline ourselves. If there was a bell that rang at six o'clock, if there was a program for the day laid out and one were forced by community discipline, one's life fell into efficient, orderly lines. One could accomplish not only what work was laid out but more besides. One got into the habit, in the hospital, of consistent, sustained effort and of disregarding fatigue, both physical and mental.

Before the year was up I took to writing again in brief half hours in the early morning and in the evening. Then I became restless and began rushing over to New York on my half days off looking for intellectual stimulus. After all, I felt that nursing was not my vocation and that my real work was writing and propaganda. By November the war was over. I was working hard all Armistice Day and the constant shriek of factory whistles meant only that patients were being disturbed by the noisy exuberance of the outside world. A terrible wreck on the elevated lines, a gruesome airplane catastrophe in which all were killed, a man dying in the ward—these things had more reality for me than the ending of the war and the signing of the armistice. I would only see life in the things that were immediately about me so that it wasn't my craving to get back into active work in the radical movement, but my own immediate desire to write that led me to give up my work in the hospital.