

On Pilgrimage - September 1974

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Summary: Writes of beauty in nature and the strange beauty of suffering, their difficulties with city planners, Peter Maurin and Ralph Borsodi on economics, and the importance of “abiding joy” and the “primacy of the spiritual” in the face of national crisis. (DDLW #543).

Tivoli, New York

A beautiful calm, quiet day. How beautiful silence is. How beautiful all nature around us, as the Queen Anne's lace in a brown vase on my window sill, made from a beer bottle by my grandson-in-law, John Houghton.

This morning my Scripture reading was interrupted by Tommy Turner bringing a large jar with something fascinating to show to Joshua, the small boy who has the room next to mine, with his mother. Joshua was already out and around, so his father, who was bringing me the **New York Times**, brought Tommy and his find in to me. It was the tiniest little snake I have ever seen, all curled up, not more than two or three inches long. A beautiful, perfect, little bit of life.

The world will be saved by beauty, Dostoevsky wrote, and Solzhenitsyn quoted it in his Nobel talk. I look back on my childhood and remember beauty. The smell of sweet clover in a vacant lot, a hopeful clump of grass growing up through the cracks of a city pavement. A feather dropped from some pigeon. A stalking cat. Ruskin wrote of “the duty of delight,” and told us to lift up our heads and see the cloud formations in the sky. I have seen sunrises at the foot of a New York street, coming up over the East River. I have always found a strange beauty in the suffering faces which surround us in the city. Black, brown and grey heads bent over those bowls of food, that so necessary food which is always there at St. Joseph's House on First St., prepared each morning by Ed Forand or some of the young volunteers. We all enter into the act of hospitality, one way or another. So many of those who come in to eat return to serve, to become part of the “family.”

I am at Tivoli. I cannot help but be mindful of St. Joseph's House and worry about Maryhouse on Third St., the new house for women which will be filled up as soon as we get a certificate of occupancy (God grant we can move in

before the cold weather sets in). Weeks pass and the building department of the gigantic city of New York has not found time to put the O.K. on the plans drawn up by our first-rate architect to turn the former music school back into a residence. More bathrooms needed, steel, self-closing doors on each bedroom. Now fire-retarded halls are required, and what is going to happen to those beautiful, wide staircases and banisters!

Patience, patience. I often reflect that the word itself means suffering. “Take up your cross and follow me.” But, “My yoke is easy, my burden light,” Jesus said. You learn what He meant only if you keep praying about it. “Oh God, make haste to help us!”

Economics

Mark was the first follower of Christ to sit down and try to chronicle all he remembered of Jesus’ words and deeds. He and Matthew both tell the story of Jesus feeding the multitude. (Mark tells of two occasions. John tells it once, and Luke not at all.) Reading the story again this morning about the loaves and fishes, my meditation was deepened by thinking of the work of Robert Swann and Ralph Borsodi, Americans both; Fritz Schumacher, the English economist; and Peter Maurin’s simple edict: “Make the kind of society where it is easier to be good.”

Peter with his new synthesis of Cult, Culture and Cultivation was our leader. He came from a family of 22 (two mothers), and daily spent his hour of meditation before the Blessed Sacrament in some Church where his walks throughout the city took him. Peter was unique in that he was indeed trying to change the social order by “appeals, not demands”—appeals to man’s intellect, and heart (mind and soul). He liked slogans, as we all knew who listened to him, declaiming like a troubadour the “new economics” and making fun of the old.

Peter Maurin was unique in his criticism, as in his life, and inspired thousands. He did not hesitate to go to Columbia University to talk to professors, who, in turn, came willingly to speak at our nightly meetings in 1933 and 1934. He also visited often on Wall Street and talked to Thomas Woodlock, an editorial writer on the **Wall Street Journal** (nicknamed Thomas Aquinas Woodlock by some of his confreres), and Thomas Moody, Catholic convert, who headed the Moody Investment Services. Peter talked to them about economics and money lending at interest (originally forbidden by the “Prophets of Israel and the Fathers of the Church”). None of us really grasped what Peter Maurin and his friend Ralph Borsodi were talking about at that time.

Recently Bob Swann told me of a visit he paid in England with the economists of Barclay’s Bank who were deeply troubled by inflation and the world crisis. In the “new economics” there is much talk of “constants.” In China the constant is rice. Among the Arabs it is oil. Yet one cannot eat gold or silver or oil. In the present inflation no 10% increase in wages will help the workers. Food, rent

and interest on mortgages and loans will go up even higher. The Arabs can accumulate their billions and buy jewels and gold (and armaments), but cannot eat them. Gold and silver or jewels and stocks and bonds cannot be “constants.” But rice is a “constant.”

We cannot talk of ecology and famine without talking of economics. Bob is director of the International Independence Institute, Ashby, Mass. He is also trying to get Ralph Borsodi’s latest book published. Talking to Bob has begun to help me see light on economics. Schumacher’s book **Small is Beautiful**, recently published in paperback (Harper Torch books), continues to do so.

I am writing this, thinking of all the young people who come as volunteers for a summer or for a few years to work with us, taking a year or more off from their universities to live with the destitute and feed souplines and live in dormitories. Many of them are taking courses in sociology. They need, I think, to major in the New Economics of a Ralph Borsodi, a Schumacher and Bob Swann. (For more information about Bob Swann, send for Life Style Interviews, a magazine of Alternatives, P.O. Box 1, Unionville, Ohio, 44088, No. 5, Summer, 1973.) We need a new economics with a strong emphasis on institutions on the land, decentralization, more study as well as more laboring at meaningful work. Small industries and hospices on the land mean more employment. There is no unemployment on the land, Peter used to say.

Old and young, around the country, are beginning to glimpse some astounding truths: 1) If all the population in the world were packed into the United States, it would not be as crowded as England. 2) “If it were not for government restrictions and controls, we could raise enough food in the Midwest to feed the world.” This I have heard in my travels thru the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota, etc. 3) Large families are an asset, not a liability. All this is food for thought and study. Why waste time on Watergate, outerspace, and rumors of war? We need to study and practice the Little Way.

Abiding Joy

This morning I was feeling the need of words of joy in the face of the world situation, and the political situation in this country. (I must give up reading newspapers in order to avoid any bitterness when I witness the destitution in our cities, the lack of housing, the humiliation of the poverty stricken, and on the other hand, the arrogance of some men of wealth. “Woe to ye rich!” And the talk is of pensioning ex-President Nixon, who with a life of crime behind him has the affrontery to name his successor, who in turn names his Vice President, a Rockefeller, who came back from a visit to Brazil to advise more subsidizing of that country to fight subversion. But “God is not mocked.” Attica is not forgotten.

Martin Sostre is back in Clinton Prison, our jails are filled with Blacks, Indians and Puerto Ricans. Puerto Rico itself is being taken over by oil interests. Its

harbors are deepened for giant oil tankers, and its interior farm lands are being taken over for refineries. Thank the dear Lord that the opposition to all these injustices goes on.)

In cleaning my room this morning I found an old diary in which I had written down bits from things I was reading at the time. Here are the lines I had copied from a book by Father Van Zeller, a Benedictine monk who wrote a series of small volumes on the prophets, and this was Daniel, Man of Desires. The sentence ran, "To say sad things cheerfully, was so absolutely necessary to the age in which he lived. . . His message, unlike Jeremias, Job, or Hosea, was clothed in words of joy."

St. Thomas said once he learned more by prayer than he did by study, and it is only prayer that will give us a full life of joy, a word which Bernanos and C.S. Lewis alike took as meaning more than **happiness**.

A deep, abiding joy can only be ours if we emphasize the "primacy of the spiritual," a phrase which Peter Maurin loved. We must grow in faith, in our spiritual capacity to "do all things in Him who strengthens us," even change the social order so that wars will cease and it will be easier to be good, to keep our sanity, be **whole** men, holy men, and truly love one another. If men can walk on the moon, why not?

If we were followers of Jesus, we too could multiply loaves and fishes and save the world. "It all goes together," Eric Gill wrote years ago.