

% Dorothy Day

1939, Chapter Seven, pp. 121 - 136.

*Summary: Fighting melancholy and overwork she wavers between justifying and blaming herself. Includes a mock dialogue with a "Critical Inquirer," examples of their arguments and conflicts, and sustaining quotes from spiritual writers. Sets a rule of life for herself and affirms that "those circumstances which surround us are the very ones God wills for us." (DDLW #442).*

## 1

MELANCHOLY fall days. Teresa went back to school Wednesday and I brought her to the beach Friday night for the week-end, coming into town myself Saturday to see Loretta and the new baby who was born on Wednesday. Went to tea at the de Aragon's' and then to Don Bosco's Church for confession, then to the beach feeling very grateful to God for His blessings. I had been harsh and impatient interiorly with those dependent on me. I must be more kind and patient.

Then down in the country, Peter brought Carney—the mysterious, silent, nervous case—bent over with cramps and very ill indeed.

The atmosphere was anything but cheerful. Joe Bennett also very ill indeed, with his heart, flat on his back after three months on Welfare Island.

John Renaldo got me cornered to discuss his rights to have doubts, be an agnostic occasionally, how he didn't see much proof of the existence of God, etc.

All in all, a sad day, aside from the relief of Mass, and I was much oppressed both by the talk and lack of talk.

Then coming in on the train, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of our blessings. Are there not always direct indications of God's will as to the work we should do? Caring for the sick He sends us—that is a most necessary work. A sick person is a blessing to a house, it is said. We are greatly blessed then by these opportunities.

So today was a good day. Charlie could have written a perfect Jeremiad for it. He will not be content until he sees us "bowed in tears, with broken hearts, walking with bleeding feet." I believe in being joyful in the Lord and often argue with Charlie but I was rebuked in reading Caussade where he says: "Souls who walk in light sing canticles of joy; those who walk amid shadows sing anthems of woe. Let one and the other sing to the end, the portion and anthem God assigns them.

And Tina and I have been criticizing Charlie for his Jeremiads, perhaps not so much for them as for his desire to see others wail under the blows of this life.

I must not be critical of others.

## 2

Here is a conversation with one of our critics:

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Critical Inquirer—Are you\*\*not participating in the class war when you go out on picket lines and on the street corners? Are you not siding with the workers, one class against another class, thus taking part in class war?

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Catholic Worker—No,\*\*we are trying to bring the Gospel to the man in the street, and if we find ourselves caught between two opposing forces, God help us, the police won't.

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C.I.—Are you not inefficient and lax in that you are not an organization with rules and regulations?

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C.W.—We are trying to work out the doctrine of gentle personalism, to live a life in which people do not do things by compulsion, but of their own free will. Karl Marx said:

“From each according to his ability and to each according to his need.” And St. Paul said “Let your abundance supply their want.” Abundance we take to mean an abundance of physical, mental and spiritual energies. We try not to make rules, but look for individual initiative.

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C.I.—While supping at the Catholic Worker office, I heard an argument as to who should do dishes, who had done dishes, who would do dishes and who ought to do dishes. Some of this was in fun but there also seemed to be animosity.

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C.W.—Undoubtedly with the teasing there is also a feeling of criticism. In trying to put over this idea of the workers becoming scholars and the scholars workers, there is bound to be conflict in the transition stages. The worker will complacently watch the scholar empty the garbage cans, wash the dishes, scrub the floor, and will prefer to take the nice clean work of filing or typing cards and envelopes. Some scholars will work, and others lacking in physical co-ordination and ashamed to show their lack of ability along those lines do not co-operate in the manual labor. And the worker, showing no recognition of the work of some of the scholars, will jeer at the idle scholars. And some of the scholars will be complaining of the noise and heckling of the workers.

The same difficulties take place in regard to the lack of rules save those set forth in the Gospel, (See the rule of St. Francis). Because there is no compulsion,

some will refuse co-operation. Those who co-operate scorn those who do not, as well as those responsible for not making rules to force the non-cooperators to cooperate. It is a good-natured scorn, perhaps, but it is a critical attitude just the same.

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C.I.—But would it not be better then to have rules in order to facilitate the work? Wouldn't it be better to kick out those who do not help?

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C.W.—Things might run a little more smoothly on the surface—the office might be cleaner, for instance, and the kitchen floor washed more often, but the criticism and the lack of co-operation would go on. Let your abundance supply their want. There are always those who can do more work or who can do one thing better than they can do other things. And after all we are working with the lame, the halt, and the blind.

In the Catholic Worker Community, things do get done. People are housed and fed. More people are housed and fed because there is no red tape or so-called efficiency.

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C. I.—But don't people take advantage?

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C.W.—Of course. And don't we take advantage of God? Cannot we put up with others? Does not God put up with us?

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C.I.—But wouldn't even more get done if each one were allotted his separate task and expected to do it?

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C.W.—Some more efficiency! Some more compulsion! And after all don't we get a good deal done? Considering that we are on a voluntary basis—that no one is paid salaries—it seems that a great deal is done. Of course we do not stop to count the pieces of clothes that are distributed, the number of people fed, the quarts of milk consumed by the children. Though we may try to make a rough estimate, since people love figures and we might encourage ourselves by so doing. And after all, we do get out a newspaper, 100,000 copies, mailed to all parts of the world, which is no mean job. Most papers employ a mailing house to do the work. Volunteers do it in the office and from amongst those volunteers who come to do something simple like addressing envelopes we have gained many a friend. And after all we do have a division of labor, tasks divided up and voluntarily accepted.

C.I.—But to go back to the criticism at the supper table as to who does what, I thought you Christians all loved one another.

C.W.—As we indeed do. All Christians do in time of persecution. When things are going along smoothly there is bound to be friction of one personality against another. The apostles wrangled a bit in regard to who was going to sit on the right side of the Lord, and St. Paul\*\*\*\*was not accepted at first by the disciples (and who would blame them), and there was argument about bringing the light to the Gentiles, etc. And isn't there friction in religious communities? And in families? After all, there is always a war between nature and grace. I am afraid we are not always as edifying as we should be. But we don't believe that rules and regulations would help much.

After the critical inquirer had left, I began to feel guilty for justifying myself and others. After all I am a bad leader—we are all at fault—everything could be done much better. If things go wrong it is the fault of the leader.

### 3

Distributing papers at the power house over in Brooklyn between four and five on a hot afternoon. The Hudson Avenue plant supplies all Queens, Brooklyn and lower Manhattan. It takes 700 men to work it and 600 are organized. At the offices of the Edison Company there are 5,000 working. There are in addition, seven district offices. For the actual generating of electricity there are two hundred in the plant. The men work in three shifts and some of them work eight hours straight and have no time off for eating. They eat while working. The mechanics work from eight to five and have an hour off for lunch.

Before the men started the Brotherhood of Edison Employees, the pay was \$23 to \$36. Now it is \$27 to \$46. The men are supposed to get a pension at 65 but usually long before this the pay is lowered to \$25 and the pension amounts to about \$7 a week. Or perhaps they get fired for mistakes.

While we distributed there was a steady roar of the machines in our ears which filled the air unbearably. The men work in the midst of this roar all the time. We could look out over the river while we waited for the men to dribble out of the plant, over a field of weeds, burdock, dandelion and grass growing cheerfully in the shade. There is a bend in the river there and we watched the tugboats and the barges going by. The overhanging bridge was like a poem. To one side there is a gantry.

This, one of the workers said proudly, is the largest generating plant in the world.

### 4

Went with Margaret to the Welfare Department. The waiting room was small, and so crowded by nine-thirty in the morning that fifteen people already were

standing up. The investigators came out into this crowded room to interview their “clients”. It is hard to watch people trying to achieve some privacy, speaking behind cupped hands, their faces working. The investigators tell them to speak up. There were many children in the room, underweight, pale and sad. It is hard to see grown people crying and young children with set sad faces terrified at the sight of adult despair.

There is a Negroe there with crucifixes in her ears. A young girl whose trembling baby has an old white face. There is a strange contrast between the impassive faces of the investigators and the twisted, anguished faces of those investigated.

## 5

Stanley is down for a few days to help with the wood chopping and gathering driftwood on the garden commune. Even so we have just had to buy two more tons of coal which make five for this year already. It will be good when we are on the farming commune and have our own wood. One of the best things people can do, the very people who are with you—is to criticize the management and lack of economy though God knows\*\*\*\*what else you can do.

The difficulty to look forward to on the farm is everybody living under the same roof and getting along together, so strange a conglomeration of people as we all are.

Miss B., a former school teacher and now on PWA, is a nervous wreck, spending all her time complaining about her debts and insurance. She tries to while away the time reading voraciously and knitting, and tries to be helpful as much as possible. But recently she washed up the kitchen floor which was covered with clay which everybody has been modeling, dumping the water down the sink and stopping it up so it has not been used for the past two weeks. To get away from the contemplation of the sink, she has taken refuge with some friends in Jersey.

Francis took offense last night at sleeping in a room away from Stanley and walked out this morning without breakfast. So there are general grievances in the air. And generally grievances against me. For having such people around, for instance, and, “What’s the sense of talking about a farming commune when you haven’t any farmers? It’ll never come to anything. There was all that talk of a summer school and nothing was done.” Past failures are not forgotten or excused.

If you are discouraged, others will relapse into a state of discouragement and hopeless anger at circumstances and each other. And if you are not discouraged, everyone tries to make you so and is angry because you are not. It is hard to know what tack to take. The only thing is to be oblivious, as Peter is, and go right on.

We have meetings every Thursday night in the two big offices, but Friday night there was an impromptu meeting which lasted until twelve. Everyone seemed to drop in at once, visitors from half a dozen other cities, members of other groups, and our own crowd. We started at the dinner table, continued through the dish-washing, adjourned to the office and everyone had his say. We discussed the relationship between the corporative, the co-operative, the distributist and the communitarian movements. Some talked of the need of a positive program, others said that anyone who claimed to have a solution to world problems was a liar. Some talked of the educational approach and others the spiritual. Peter talked of the need of injecting the spiritual into the material.

The discussion was heated, as it usually is, everybody speaking with vehemence and bobbing up and down from the floor. One of the visitors, not acquainted with Peter, said he thought we were giving too much attention to the material. He criticized the disorder of our surroundings, our lack of efficiency, and advocated the liturgical life, which to him meant recitation of Prime and Vespers and Compline and a dialogue Mass every morning (the attendance of all at these hours being obligatory).

When he said that Peter paid too much attention to the economic side of things, I jumped to my feet and protested that “you can’t preach the gospel to men with empty stomachs” (Abbe Lugan) and that if they had been down to the Municipal Lodging House and seen 12,000 men being fed at South Ferry, they would decide that it was necessary to put some emphasis on the material. Which convinced our critics that I was an externalist, I am sure.

Most of the time when people talk of efficiency and organization, they are thinking of order, outward order. What they are really criticizing is our poverty, the fact that we spend money for food instead of for paint and linoleum. We are crowded as the poor are, with people sleeping in every available corner. We have no separate room for the clothes that come in; they are packed in boxes around the dining-room and hung in one hall closet and in another closet off the dining-room. We are often dirty because so many thousands cross our thresholds. We are dirty ourselves sometimes because we have no hot water or bath, because we have not sufficient clothes for changes,—even because we are so busy with the poor and the sick that it is hard to take time to journey to the public baths to wash.

But what am I talking about? Why am I justifying myself and my family? I am ashamed of myself for getting indignant at such criticism. It just goes to show how much pride and self-love I have. But it has been hard lately. Not only outside criticism but criticism from within, the grumbling, the complaints, the insidious discontent spread around by a few—these trials are hard to bear.

However, the thing is to bear it patiently, to take it lightly, not to let it interfere with the work. The very fact that it is hard shows how weak I am. I should

be happy, however, to think that God believes me strong enough to bear these trials, otherwise I would not be having them. Father Lallemant says that we must beware when things are going too smoothly. That is the time when no progress is made.

Oh dear, I am reminded of St. Teresa who said, "The devil sends me so offensive a bad spirit of temper that at times I think I could eat people up."

I'm glad that she felt that way, too. St. Thomas said there is no sin in having a righteous wrath provided there is no undue desire for revenge.

I'm afraid I am very stiff necked. I shall read the Office and go to sleep. But first to concoct a rule for the coming year. (I read in Tanqueray that a rule of life was necessary for all, laymen as well as cleric.)

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The Catholic Worker to be in the hands of St. Joseph, and Teresa and I to continue under our novice mistress, the little St. Therese, who alone can teach us how to do the little things and cultivate a spirit of humility. St. Joseph is also taking care of me this year.

"Can you not watch one hour with me?"

I shall remember this whenever I am tired and want to omit prayer, the extra prayers I shall set myself. Because after all I am going to try to pray the simplest, humblest way, with no spiritual ambition.

Morning prayers, in my room before going to Mass. I always omit them, rushing out of the house just in time as I do. If I were less slothful it would be better. Remember what Leon Bloy said about health. Not try too hard to catch up on sleep but to be sensible about sleep nevertheless.

Around the middle of the day to take, even though it be to snatch, fifteen minutes of absolute quiet, thinking about God and talking to God.

Read the Office as much as I can, if only Prime and Compline, but more whenever possible.

One visit during the day, always without fail.

rosary daily.

I do plenty of spiritual reading to refresh myself and to encourage myself so I do not have to remind myself of that.

The thing to remember is not to read so much or talk so much about God, but to talk to God.

To practice the presence of God.

To be gentle and charitable in thought, word and deed. (Most important of all.)

These last fall months have been hard ones, but hardest of all for Mr. and Mrs. J. who have had charge of the garden commune all summer and will be there all winter.

When the summer months were passed with their hosts of children, scores of young workers and students and all the visitors, over-running the place for weekends, and the quiet fall days came, even heavier responsibilities came. The summer was hard but the past few months have been harder. In the summer we were dealing with healthy, normal young people. In the fall there was not only one but half a dozen sick, mentally and physically, suddenly on hand to be cared for.

Father Coady, one of the heads of the Antigonish movement, said one time that we could all do ten times as much as we think we can do. It was certainly true in this case. I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. J. felt that they had all they could possibly handle during the summer. If anyone had asked them to take charge of a group of sick ones such as suddenly congregated with us, they would have felt utterly incapable of doing the work. As it was, it just drifted up on them. Adelson decided he would move in. Then another, then Carney. Peter brought Carney down, the others came by themselves. And since our policy is never to turn anyone away, there they were. They had to be accepted. But surely it was too much for one couple to bear. A household of sad afflicted creatures.

And then Joe Bennett came down to die. He had worked for the last year or so in the South, and when he became critically ill, the priest with whom he was working brought him north and put him on Welfare Island. Joe got in touch with us and begged to be allowed to go down to the country.

He was fatally ill, and felt that he was not going to recover, but he fought bitterly against death. He did not want to die and he knew that only a miracle could save him. He prayed frantically, almost rebelliously, for a miracle.

"How can God be good," he moaned every time he saw me, "to let me suffer like this. He must heal me. I don't want to die."

It was heartbreaking. Mrs. J. nursed him tenderly, brought him delicacies to tempt his appetite. He read, he had a little radio by his bedside. Outside the trees were turning red and gold. There was the sound of the waves crashing on the beach in the fall storms. It was too unbearably beautiful, he cried, and he did not want to die.

We took turns going down to see him to keep him company and to try to ease the strain in the house. But it was one day when no one was there but Mrs. J. that Joe took a turn for the worse, became delirious and began beating his head up against a radiator in bitter rebellion. Mrs. J. tried to hold him. Adelson ran to a neighbor's to phone for Father McKenna, the nearest priest. He was so unmanageable that the priest advised he be taken to a little private hospital



down the bay about a mile and there he died a few days later. I had been to see him the morning before as he lay there semi-conscious, no longer suffering, no longer rebellious. He had received the last rites and once when he opened his eyes clearly for a moment, he said goodbye. I kissed him as I left. The next morning he died. And for months now I have felt guilty, because I was not there with him, because he was alone in the hospital, and not with his friends those last terrible moments when the soul is leaving the body. We must be alone when we die, that I know, but I do know too that I would like to have friends beside me to hold my hand, to make me feel the strength of their prayers, their strong, happy prayers that would see where I could not see, the peace and light of the world to come. But I was not there—Joe died alone, and he was the first one to help me that May Day we started *The Catholic Worker*. There will never a day pass but that I remember him in my prayers, and I pray he remembers us now. And I ask you who read this to pray that he has found refreshment, joy and peace.

8

“The good of the soul does not exist in its thinking much but in loving much. And if you were to ask how is this love to be had, my answer is, by a good resolution to do and suffer for God, and by carrying out that resolution into act whenever opportunity occurs.”—St. *Teresa’s Foundations, Chapter V.2.*

Let people “not lay the blame on the times, for all times are times in which God will give His graces to those who serve Him in earnest.”—St. Teresa.

"It is so easy to pray . . . Prayer is the heart's desire, and the heart always knows how to desire. . . .

"Prayer is the great channel of grace. The two movements of prayer, to feel my misery and to feel the goodness\*\*\*\*of Jesus, are the two movements of aspiration and respiration. Set forms are sometimes needful to maintain the respiration and keep distractions away.

“O! my Jesus, give me all the graces that I should ask of you, if I knew their importance—give them to me just as if I prayed for them, for my intention is to ask You for them with love and reverence.”—A young Trappist who died not long ago.

I must recall the words again of St. Teresa—that the only way we can show our love for God is by our love for our fellows. And not an abstract love either. If I cannot remember and contemplate my own worse sins, hidden, and more subtle, then God help me! And if I cannot be patient under trials which the Lord compliments me by sending me, then all my other work is vain. It is not by editing a paper or by writing and speaking that I am going to do penance and achieve sanctity. But by being truly loving and gentle and peaceful in the midst of trouble. Lallemand says that when we are comfortable, beware. It is only when things are hard that we are making progress. God is good to send trials. They are a special mark of love.

Caussade says that those circumstances which surround us are the very ones God wills for us.

Dear Lord, keep us from pride and self will! Help us to love one another. It is easy to love saints. What do we know about each other's inward struggles.

"Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams."—Fr. Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*.