

On Pilgrimage - May 1969

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reflects on the abilities of a woman to press on with the “business of living” even as life is mixed with joys and anguish. Details coming speakers at their Friday night meetings. Shares stories of time with her daughter and grandchildren in Vermont, what each is doing with their lives. Remembers two dear friends, Marie Langlots and Fred Lindsey, who have recently died. Key words: Peter Maurin, obituary, Tamar. (DDLW #898).

“Is it wicked to take pleasure in spring and other seasonal changes? To put it more precisely, is it politically reprehensible while we are all groaning under the shackles of the capitalist system, to point out that life is frequently more worth living because of a blackbird’s song, a yellow elm tree in October, or some other natural phenomenon which does not cost money and does not have what the editors of the left wing newspapers call a class angle?”

This is a quotation from George Orwell which comforts my heart. We are certainly all subject to guilt feelings when we contemplate the “military-industrial” complex and meditate on the fact that the United States is supplying arms for nine other countries, and when we see pictures of famine. Certainly sorrow and relief from sorrow make up our lives. Life and death go together. “As dying yet behold we live,” St. Paul said. Pain is an inbuilt thing in life. Anguish and joy go together. Father Thomas Berry, C.P., who is teaching courses in Buddhism at Fordham University was telling us these things at a recent Friday night meeting (the monthly PAX meeting).

I guess women know these things instinctively. A woman’s anguish is turned into joy when a child is born into the world. Henri Daniel-Rops once asked, after the crucifixion, when the apostles and disciples all hid in fear, what did the women do? “They went on about the business of living, pounding the spices and procuring the linen cloths in which to embalm the body.” They went on about the business of living. There are the three meals to get, the family to care for, “the duty of delight” that Ruskin spoke of, for the sake of others around us who are on the verge of despair. Who can say there is no delight, even in a city slum, especially in an Italian neighborhood where there is a pot of basil on the window sill and the smell of good cooking in the air, and pigeons wheeling over the roof tops and the tiny feathers found occasionally on the sidewalk, the fresh smell of the sea from the dock of the Staten Island ferry boat (five cents a ride).

Peter Maurin used to say, “Man is spirit, woman is matter,” and I knew what he meant by this obscure Thomistic utterance. Woman is close to the material things of life, and accepts them, this integration of soul and body and its interaction. St. Teresa of Avila said once that if her nuns were melancholy, “feed them steak!” She reminded us too—“All things are passing.”

Meetings

****The speaker this Friday night, April 25th, at St. Joseph's House will be a man who has worked in one of the kibbutzim for the past ten or more years. Peter Maurin, our founder, who died in 1949, used to speak of the kibbutzim as a way of life on the land which we should study deeply. "There is no unemployment on the land," he used to say, regardless of encroachments of the machine and resulting unemployment. "But where do we get the land?" his listeners would complain, "and the seed and the tools and the know-how. And besides, who wants to be a farmer?" Peter would painstakingly continue to speak of farming communes, calling them agronomic universities where the worker would become a scholar and the scholar a worker, and where there would be a philosophy of work which man seemed to have lost.

On May 16th, Helene Iswolsky is speaking on Berdyaev and on Friday night, May 23rd, Sister Francis Regis, head of the English department, College of St. Rose, Albany, and now working with us on leave of absence, is going to speak on "The Four Quartets" of T.S. Eliot. On May 9th, Arthur Sheehan and Ed Turner are going to speak about Peter Maurin and his Theory of Revolution. Later meetings in May will, I hope, be announced in the **Village Voice**.

Family Visit

It was not yet spring when I went to Vermont to pay a visit to my daughter and the five children who are still at home. Becky Hennessy Houghton is in Laconia, New Hampshire, Sue Hennessy Kell is in Sudbury, Ontario, Eric is in Vietnam and Nick, also married, is now on a construction job in the neighborhood of Springfield, Vermont. I missed seeing the two oldest girls and their husbands but I did see Nickie and his wife Brenda and their new baby Sheila Ann, born two months ago. Mary works after school (she is a senior in high school) but is always able to "cope," as far as one can see, and never seems tired. Marvelous youth. When asked how she feels, she always says "wonderful." I have decided that that is what we all should do instead of starting to exchange symptoms. Maggie is the one who always answers letters and is always ready to take on the ironing. Martha too is most responsible, and between the three of them there is a great work of sewing, washing, ironing and school work. They are all better at cooking than at dish washing, but I happen to like that simple job if I can get to it before my daughter Tamar, who swiftly disposes of disagreeable tasks before I can get at them. Katie and Hilaire are the youngest, nine and eleven, and are out of doors children, regardless of the snow on the ground. In fact, Katie was already fitting up a playhouse in the old chicken coop, even though she had to go through the deep snow to get to it. Hilaire was busy tapping trees for maple syrup and before I left there was a few gallons to his credit.

As to home crafts, in addition to her weaving Tamar has been making soap and I brought back some dozen cakes of it. Since the two towels I use are also

handwoven and hand-spun by my daughter, I have those samples of beauty in the midst of a city slum. Peter Maurin used to say that men make their money by the machine and spend it on handmade products. Certainly I treasure those towels and enjoy using them.

During the winter the grade school in Perkinsville which Tamar's children attend has had a course in skiing, two afternoons a week, the school bus taking the children to and from Mt. Ascutney. A number of other schools took part in this program too. There is a great turnover and exchange in ski's and ski equipment. Hilaire has his own, bought him by one of his older brothers, but Martha had a loan from a schoolmate. This was the last afternoon of the season, March 28th, and Tamar and I sat on the porch of the ski lodge and watched the children—except Hilaire, who was apt to ski on the more hazardous slopes on the other side of the lodge.

It was a lovely afternoon in the sun looking down over a long valley and up a great slope of mountain, where the figures of young people looked terribly small as they speeded down through the snow. Already it was melting and slushy, but I was so glad to be there. It was the first time I have watched skiers except on television. A few days later snow fell again.

Life and Death

This month has seen the death of two of our dear friends, Fred Lindsey and Marie Langlots, both of whom have been part of our family for many years. There is a picture of Marie in my book, **Loaves and Fishes**, as she sweeps out our dining room and meeting room at the end of a long day. But there are many more pictures of her in my mind and heart. She was my room mate for a time on Kenmare Street and when we moved to First Street she was already so ill that she needed the peace and quiet of an apartment of her own, and we settled her across the street so she could be close to us. She had to keep that fierce independence which had so long been her way of living. One could not give her an apple without her bringing you the next day half a dozen more. She used to get me a sandwich and a piece of fruit to take on my trips. "Lunch on the bus," she would say. She helped our Italian neighbors by bringing their littlest children to school, and she did a heroic job winter before last, helping our then landlady, Mrs. Vaccaro, clean the accumulated ice out of the gutters on the roof which melted into the top floor apartments. A dangerous job which made me shudder. But Marie and Mrs. Vaccaro were valiant women. Marie also kept us all supplied with newspapers and every Thursday she brought me a copy of the **Village Voice**. For a long time she refused to go to a clinic or to the hospital for her ulcerated legs, and help telling us of home remedies which her mother always used. She loved her family and the farm land from which she came, but an adventurous spirit brought her to the city, which fascinated her. However, she was looking forward to getting a round-trip ticket back to Missouri to see her sister and other relatives in the fall.

**** She finally consented to go to the Bellevue—every other nearby hospital was packed to the doors, and, although one could get clinic care at Beth Israel or St. Vincent’s, there were waiting lists at both hospitals and they had to send on the patients who came to them to the city hospital, Bellevue.

“How good they have all been to me,” Marie said to us, the last day of her life. “The doctors, not one, but many of them, come many times, and they answer all my questions. The nurses and attendants have all been so good to me. The meals are very good,” and she proceeded to tell us just what she had for breakfast, lunch and supper.

She was tired****that day, so Pat Rusk and I left about fifteen minutes before visiting hours were over. She was going to be operated on the next day and she wanted to rest. We kissed her goodbye. Tom Cornell had brought her a flowering plant and she had flowers from others. In a few days, she said, she would like some bananas, her favorite fruit. “Put the window up a little higher, the air is so sweet.” An hour later, she breathed her last, most peaceably. Dear Marie.

Her sister in Missouri was notified and the body was sent back to the Midwest to rest in that good farmland she so loved. She knew her scripture and quoted often from the Old and New Testaments. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me even if he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

Fred Lindsey

Fred, who had worked so long with us at the farm, doing everything from cooking, dish washing, painting, cleaning out cesspools and even nursing the sick—he is with us still in our hearts. But the picture of him which I love the most is that of his tender care of Agnes Sidney in her last days. Her hair had been long, done in a sparse knot at the back of her neck. She had a bright Irish eye and a jaunty way with her, even in her eighties. (She was the wife of a barge captain who had lived at sea for many years.) When it was impossible for her to manage her hair, Fred took over, not just with the combing of it. One day I came in to find that he had given her not only a haircut, but a shampoo. And it was either Fred or Mike Sullivan who brought in Agnes’ coffee at the crack of dawn each day. When I shared this morning service with her she used to look over at me with a twinkle. “The life of Riley,” she’d say.

Fred was a Mormon and had long lived away from his own family. We were his family, and when I recall all the little incidents of his stay with us over the years, I realize more fully how much like a family we are, with all its joys and troubles, the love and the stress of living together. That is what a house of hospitality should be. Fred rests in a little Protestant cemetery in New Jersey and we know, not only that “our Redeemer liveth, but that in our flesh we shall see God our saviour.” Even the tragic Job felt these things.

How easy it is to have this faith in the Spring, with new life bursting through the ground and buds appearing on what to all appearances is dead wood.

Traveling

Right now I am reading Daniel Rops' **The Church of Apostles and Martyrs**, an account of the first four centuries of Christianity. And I am enjoying very much the account of the travels of the apostles through the Mediterranean territories. I too enjoy travel and it is always a most enriching experience for me. This Saturday I go to the Newman Club at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and next week to St. Paul, Minnesota, to speak, I am delighted to say, on the same platform with Dr. Mulford Q. Sibley, whom I met the last time I was speaking in Minneapolis. He is the famous Quaker professor and his book, **The Quiet Battle** is a classic. I speak Monday, Wednesday and Saturday at St. Paul's Seminary, and other places. The meetings were organized by Father Ed Flavin of the Office of Urban Affairs.

When I return it will be to be present at the baptism of my first two great grandchildren, both girls, one born in April of Sue and Jorge Kell at Sudbury, Ontario, and the other of Nicholas and Brenda Hennessy at Barre, Vermont, in January.