

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1973

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Ruminations on the recent deaths of three loved ones: Jenny Moore, W.H. Auden and Franklin Spier, Day's brother-in-law. How each touched and influenced her emotional and intellectual development. In thinking about death, also ponders Heaven and the importance of the Transfiguration. (DDLW #534).

During the month of October there were three deaths, all within a week, which touched me very closely – Jenny Moore, wife of Bishop Paul Moore; W.H. Auden, the poet; and Franklin Spier, my only sister's husband. This is an October-November issue, and November is celebrated in the Church as the month commemorating the dead. So it is fitting I should begin my column remembering them.

As I begin to write, I hear the news of the death of Scotty, Cornelius Dalglish, who spent these last ten years of his life with us. (One of these days I'd like to write the obituaries of many of our dear departed. It would make a book.) But today I want to tell of Jenny Moore, whom I knew since the old Mott Street days in the Forties.

Jenny Moore

Jack English, our deceased Trappist, associate editor, introduced us. He had a great enthusiasm for people and was always bringing them together. She was about my daughter's age, and every time she had another baby she'd say, "I'm keeping up with your daughter." Tamar and Jenny both had nine children, and many of the Moore clothes were passed on, outgrown but never outworn, and my kids looked forward to the Moore packages. They knew each other personally because Jenny dropped by the Hennessy's on occasion.

But my closeness to Jenny came about because she and her husband were running practically a house of hospitality in a black section of Jersey City. She told the story of those days in a book she wrote later when the children were grown enough so she had time to exercise her fine talent as a writer. They lived, the Moores, very close to the poor in Jersey City. Then her husband became a Bishop, first in Indianapolis, then in Washington, and now in New York City. What united us in friendship was faith – the life of the spirit – and the fact that we were both mothers, and both committed to writing – and at the same time to hospitality, to the poor, from whatever background they came. When Paul Moore telegraphed me of her death, he added that her end was peaceful. I got to Washington, D.C., for the funeral services at the Washington Cathedral, a

service indeed a celebration, with readings, music, and a sharing of bread and wine. The “kiss of peace” was exchanged with tears of joy as much as sorrow.

It is hard to explain the fact that there is joy in truly religious ceremonies for our departed ones. One has to experience it to know it. They have run their course, they have lived fully, they have encountered and passed through death, that universal experience, that penalty for the Fall, which Christ Himself first paid for us all. It indeed can become an occasion of joy, even in anticipation, holding as we can do to our Father’s hand. Jenny contemplated her own death, and wrote down the way she wanted the service to be conducted. May she rest in peace and be praying for us now.

W.H. Auden

The death of W H. Auden was sudden and unexpected. He was only sixty-six years old, and had not gone through a long illness; it came as a shock to his many friends here.

My friend Dr. Basil Yanovsky first introduced me to Auden at a Third Hour meeting, an ecumenical group, and the two friends came to visit when I was ill once at the Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. Auden brought a poem for the next issue of the **Catholic Worker**. Later (when I had been fined \$250 as a slum landlord – although the Catholic Worker household was living in the best house we had ever had – and the incident had been reported in the **Times**), Mr. Auden showed up early in the morning in front of our house on Chrystie Street as I was distractedly hastening away to the court session in the Bronx. It was around eight a.m. when men gathered around our basement door to receive the warm clothes we passed out whenever we had them. Auden was diffident (and rumpled in an old tweed suit), and since I had only met him a few times, and this time was out of context, I did not recognize him. He pressed a slip of paper in my hand, murmuring, “Towards the fine,” and turned away. It was only when I went down the subway steps and got into a train crowded to the doors that I opened my hand to find in it a check made out for \$250, the exact amount of the fine.

How he warmed my heart, that dark day! All our hearts. The fine was commuted, but he made us keep the money as his contribution towards the expensive changes we had to make in the house.

Another interesting incident which he himself told often, it so delighted him! When Dean Mowrer and I (back in the Fifties) were serving a sentence in the New York House of Detention for civil disobedience, I found an old copy of the **New Yorker** in that barren jail containing a poem by Auden, a sonnet, which had the refrain, “One can do without love, but not without water.”

He lived not far from us here in the East Village, and we felt that there was another bond between us because he lived in the same building on St. Mark’s

place which housed the Russian magazine, **Novy Mir**, years ago. It was in that office that I had gone with one of the reporters from the Socialist **New York Call** to interview Leon Trotsky. I heard him also at Cooper Union just before the Kerensky Revolution broke out, which hastened Trotsky back to Russia, where, as head of the Red Army, he took part in the October Revolution (which we read of now in Jack Reed's book, **Ten Days Which Shook the World**). W. H. Auden lived in that same building for all the years he stayed in New York and I was part of the atmosphere of his home, he told me once. He returned to Oxford, England for good, last year. And now he is dead. His Memorial Service was celebrated with great music, and the reading of his poetry by other famous poets in the packed Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Franklin Spier

To the book world of New York the name of Franklin Spier is well known, but to me he was my sister's husband and the father of John, David and Susie. His name still heads the best known advertising agency for books in New York. To me he was a friend long before the Catholic Worker era, when he did publicity for the first book I wrote. He met my sister while visiting me one week end at the Staten Island beach house I wrote of later, and married her soon after. When they had a summer home in Glen Gardner, New Jersey, my daughter Tamar spent the summer of 1932 with them, which gave me time to cover the Hunger March on Washington, pray at the Cathedral there, meet Peter Maurin and accede to his proposal that I follow a program he laid down. These occurrences are all tied up with my sister and brother-in-law, because I talked over with them the feasibility of starting a penny-a-copy paper, for which project Franklin gave most encouraging advice. I can remember still sitting out in the apple orchard, the children playing around us, talking of Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard," the depression, the social order, and of my own writing, which made Peter Maurin's suggestion of starting a paper so irresistible. (I knew I had found in Peter a great teacher).

Over the years I have spent many weeks with the Spiers, always with good talks of books and music and painting. His library, and my sister's, was small but select, and lately, in connection with Watergate, we talked of Adams and Jefferson and the upright man. (My sister and I always were novel readers, and when she'd call and ask me up, she would add, "Perhaps we can take a walk in the shrubbery," the allusion being to a favorite author, Jane Austen, whose heroine in **Persuasion** took her daily walk "in the shrubbery."

It was wonderful to me that our friendship could be so close, so deeply he had been scarred by the genocide of the Hitler era. When they lived in Riverdale during that time, Jewish stores were marked with Swastikas. The local Catholic Church sold Father Coughlin's literature, and the pastor treated my sister coldly when she went to the rectory to protest. When I spent weekends with them

and had to be driven to Mass, whether in the suburbs or up in Massachusetts where they later had their country home, Franklin often drove me and waited outside reading the Sunday papers. And as for fast days, not only Fridays but even Ember Days, he saw to it that I kept to my religious practices when I was in his house.

When I expressed my joy at first reading Martin Buber's **Tales of the Hasidim**, and later Elie Wiesel's **Souls on Fire**, he pointed out to me that his people had been Sephardic Jews who had traveled from Spain to Holland, and from there to New York. And I suddenly remembered how Peter Maurin had been interested in the Sephardic Jews, their wisdom and culture.

Franklin Spier was a dear friend who was always trying to find concordances with me, though to all appearances we were miles apart religiously. But again I remember something. He was evaluating a book for some publisher, a bit of work he did after his retirement, and the book (on St. Paul) he had just read elicited from him the remark that he liked St. Peter better than St. Paul, because he had that controversy with him over Jewish ritual and abstentions from some foods. And I suddenly felt so close to him, because I, too, like those who are so disparagingly called traditionalists, sometimes miss the old fast days, the old rigor which seemed to me to add so much zest to our spiritual life. Not to mention the Tenebrae services in an unknown tongue! Of course I say now, "Thank God for the vernacular! Thank God for that morning cup of coffee, or some hot drink that helps us get out to early Mass. Thank God for the re-emphasis on **Freedom**." But there surely needs to be more "clarification of thought" on that word.

Death and Transfiguration

This month it is good to write about Heaven as well as Death. Someone is always putting a book or article in my hands that I need just at that moment, and the other night, when we gathered for Vespers in our office-library-stencil room, Mike Kovalak handed me a little book 90 pages long. The first paragraph of the first chapter gave me the definition of Heaven I needed.

"There we shall rest and we shall see;

We shall see and we shall love;

We shall love and we shall praise;

Behold what shall be in the end

and shall not end."

It is St. Augustine, of course, speaking with his mother just before she died. It is scripture also speaking to us, of a future life where we will know as we will be known. The very word "know" is used in Genesis again and again as the act of

husband and wife which brings forth more life. Abraham knew Sara, and she conceived and bore a son.

An Evangelist who sends me his comments on the Bible (with pamphlet Scriptures, easy to carry in the purse) once referred to death as a “transport,” an ecstasy. And indeed we **are** transported, in this passover to another life.

Jacques Maritain, our beloved friend, whose death this year we are also commemorating, said once that the story of the Transfiguration is a feast we should surely meditate on. Three of the Apostles, sleeping as they often do even to this day, awoke to see Jesus standing with Moses and Elias, transfigured, glorified. It is a glimpse, Maritain commented, of the future, of life after death, of the dogmas contained in the creed – in the “resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”

(And Peter, the Rock upon which Christ said He would build His Church, was confused as Popes have been many a time since, and wanted to start to build!) But let’s forget about criticism of Peter and find always concordances, as Pope John, the beloved, told us to.

I had the great privilege of standing by my mother’s bed, holding her hand, as she quietly breathed her last. So often I had worried when I was traveling around the country that I would not be there with her at the time, if she were suddenly taken.

And now I saw my little four-year-old great-granddaughter worrying about me. It was just after Rita Corbin’s mother’s death (another member of our family to remember this month). After Carmen’s death and burial in our parish cemetery, my little Tanya came and sat on my lap. It was after one of my weeks’ long absences from the farm, and stroking my cheek, she said, anxiously, “You’re not old – you’re young.”

Sensing her anxiety, I could only say, “No, I’m old too, like Mrs. Ham, and some day, I don’t know when, I’m going to see my mother and father and brother, too.” And accustomed to my absences, I am sure she was comforted. How wonderful it is to have a granddaughter and her little family living with us. A house of hospitality on the land can indeed be an “extended family.”

Meanwhile, in the joys and sorrows of this life, we can pray as they do in the Russian liturgy for a death “without blame or pain.” May our passing be a rejoicing.