

From Union Square to Rome

Dorothy Day

Chapter 3 - Early Years

Summary: Describes her sheltered childhood and her voluminous reading. After being baptized in the Episcopalian Church and loving the services she disavows organized religion as her sense of social justice develops. (DDLW #203).

It seems to me as I look back upon it that I had a childhood that was really a childhood and that I was kept in the status of a child until I was sixteen. We had a very close family life. We knew little about community life, however. There was no radio at that time so the news of the world was not blared into the home a dozen times a day. Father was very particular, too, as to what books and magazines were brought into the home. We had Scott, Hugo, Dickens, Stevenson, Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe. We seldom were allowed to have friends in the house because it interfered with father's privacy.

I am grateful to my mother and father for this sheltered childhood, a disciplined childhood with so few distractions that books were our only release and outlook.

We went to the movies once a week on Sunday afternoons. That was the time of Wild West stories and mystery tales, and though nothing positively good was shown, neither was there anything bad. Whatever I learned of evil came from children I played with rather than from books or movies.

St. Augustine's remarks on childhood help me to remember the feelings and actions of even my earliest youth. I recall stealing when I was about six, not only once but on two separate occasions, and both times I was found out and felt dishonored and full of remorse. But whether the remorse was occasioned by my sin being discovered or by public opinion, I do not remember. I do remember, however, how it ate into my vitals, how I watered my bed with my tears, how disgraced I felt and how black the world seemed to me, laden with guilt as I was. I do not think St. Augustine's words were too strong when he wrote as he did in his confessions.

My mother had great natural virtues and a delightful temperament that helped her through much hardship and uncertainty. She refused to worry when things were going badly, or when the family had its periods of poverty. There were days when she had to do the family washing, the sheets, blankets, and all, and

after a day in the basement laundry, she used to bathe and dress as though she were going out to a dinner party.

She reigned over the supper table as a queen, powdered, perfumed, daintily clothed, all for the benefit of us children. She is still a woman who loves people and uses her charm to please them. She loves life and all the gayeties and frivolities of life; but when through poverty she was deprived of “good times” she made them for herself and got enjoyment from little things. When she felt low she used to go downtown and squander a little money, shopping for a bargain in a hat or a new blouse, never forgetting to bring home some little gift for us all.

For me, this childhood was happy in spite of moods of uncertainty and even of hopelessness and sadness. The latter mood only accentuated the joys that were truly there. Yet I knew that this happiness was a matter of temperament and disposition, too, because often on talking over past days with my sister, she could think only of her own moods of misery. From her own account she suffered far more than I ever did. She never had religious moods, she never felt the certainty of the existence of God. She had seen far more of the tragedy of life than I, as one of her school friends had died and for a long time after she was haunted by the fear of death. In all my moods of sadness, the thought of death coming to any of our dear ones never occurred to me. I feared death for myself, but the thought that my mother and my brother might die never entered my mind.

Much as I loved people, they did not make me suffer as they did my sister. My unhappiness always came from within myself. Looking back, I can see that it was not so much evil that I was protected from when the family kept us from shallow books, movies, newspapers, and other outside contacts, as it was that we were saved from the cluttered existence that people led. We were kept from the empty distractions that so many had to offer. We were more alone. Even education at that time was not so crowded. There were long study periods in school, and we had no homework until high school.

There were long hours and periods when I had nothing to do except what I chose to do. I can remember long, interminable Sunday afternoons, long, even sad, summer afternoons when there was “nothing to do.” Friends were away or we were kept in the house by the weather or by illness. And our parents did nothing to offer us distraction or entertainment. We were forced to meet our moods and overcome them. We were forced even to find tasks for ourselves, which may have been a good thing.

There were times when my sister and I turned to housework from very boredom. But those mornings when we awoke with a firm determination to turn to good account the daylight hours, when we scrubbed porches, swept the long rooms, and settled down to leisure in the afternoon over a book or a piece of writing, will ever stand out in my mind. There was time to think, to think about fundamental things.

A mood which came to me again and again after some happiness or triumph

was one of sadness at the fleeting of human joy. One afternoon, not long after I had won a scholarship of three hundred dollars and knew I was going away to college, I walked the streets at sunset gazing at the clouds over Lincoln Park, recognizing the world as supremely beautiful, yet oppressed somehow with a heavy and abiding sense of loneliness and sadness.

When I was twelve years old an Episcopalian minister, canvassing the neighborhood for his parishioners, came to the house and discovering that my mother had been brought up in that church, persuaded her to send me to the confirmation class that was being started. I had not yet been baptized so as I learned the catechism I was preparing at the same time for confirmation. I cannot remember being particularly affected by these formalities. I went willingly every Monday afternoon because my fourteen-year-old playmate went also. I did not like her especially but she was around our house a great deal. It was for the companionship of my elder brothers. She was a self-conscious, affected girl with a precocious interest in sex. She was a most unwholesome companion but none of our elders suspected it because her manners were pretty and she was always most respectful to them.

The godparents that were picked out for me were two parishioners, mother and son, whom I had never known before and whose names I do not recall now. I remember being much embarrassed at being baptized, tall, gawky girl that I was, and the fact that I was one of many being confirmed did not make me feel any easier. Going to the communion rail was an agony. Fortunately one did not have to do that more than a few times a year. What I did love were the Psalms and anthems, the rubrics of the church. When the choir sang the *Te Deum* or the *Benedicite* my heart melted within me. They expressed pure truth and beauty to me, and for a year or so I never missed Sunday service.

You, younger brother, were born when I was fourteen years old and the two years after were years of discipline for me. Up to that time my life had been a free one; but now mother was not so strong and much of the care of you devolved upon Grace and me. We were living, at that time, on the North side of Chicago near Lincoln Park in a house that was a delight to us. Our life up to then had been one of constant change. We had moved from New York to Berkeley, to Oakland, to Chicago; and in Chicago, we had moved four times. We children had attended about six schools. We had lived in houses and apartments, and none of them meant anything to us.

But the house that we were living in at that time did. There were large rooms, and the living room on the first floor had steps going up through it to the bedrooms upstairs. There was a grate fireplace in that living room and bookcases on either side. Carpet covered the parlor, the living room, the hall, and the stairs, a heavy brown carpet with black figures in it, and that carpet had to be swept every Saturday morning. Grace began upstairs in the halls and swept down, while I began at the front door and swept back. It took hours. It was back-breaking work, that wielding of brooms, before the day of the vacuum cleaner. We did not have electricity in the house—only gas. But we loved the house so we loved

the work. That house to us was “home.”

There was a round table in the center of the living room with a heavy cloth on it. Around the table were four or five comfortable chairs. On the center of the table was a green-shaded gas lamp that always leaked a little. Every night we sat there, my brothers, my mother, Grace, and I, and read before going to bed. There was sociability at meals but those hours in the evening were always given up to reading and no one was allowed to talk and violate that quiet.

Father was never home evenings because he was working nights on the *Inter Ocean*. The others went to bed before I did, but I stayed up as late as I liked, which was sometimes very late indeed. Mother knew that I knew that I had to get up around four with you when you first started chirping with the birds, so she trusted to my own good sense to get enough sleep. But I was in love with the hard life, then, and sat up, until after midnight, reckless of my strength.

I had a special seat by the fire with a pile of books beside me. It was never one book that engrossed me but a dozen. I was hungry for knowledge and had to devour volumes. In school I was studying Latin and Greek, history and English, and there was a good deal of homework. But I never thought of homework in the evening—those were my hours of freedom. In the cellar was a barrel of apples and we used to bring up a plate of them. I always peeled mine and ate them with salt as I read.

DeQuincey was my favorite author, and I read everything he wrote that I could get from the library. Spencer was another writer that I tried hard to read. I wanted to read him because I came across references to his work in Jack London’s books. Of course I read everything of Jack London’s and Upton Sinclair’s, and they had much influence on my way of thinking. With it all I still read Wesley, the *New Testament* and *The Imitation of Christ* and received great comfort from them.

How blessed was sleep after those late hours of reading! On cold winter nights how chill was the bedroom upstairs in the back of the house, and how warm the bed, warmed by Grace for some hours before I got into it. If I said a prayer at all, I probably fell asleep in the middle of it. I was so starved for sleep those days.

The hours in the afternoon were lovely ones, though I was often tired and dazed from lack of sleep. But I wandered along the paths, pushing your carriage, watching the changing seasons through summer and late fall and winter, happy in the beauty of the trees and the lake which changed from day to day. Sometimes Grace came with me and we talked for hours about the books we were reading, what we wanted to do and couldn’t do, of all our half-formulated dreams and desires. But more often she was at home helping mother around the house, and those hours were mine, with you before me in the carriage, to dream of what I was reading and of the evening before me.

When what I read made me particularly class-conscious, I used to turn from the park with all its beauty and peacefulness and walk down to North Avenue

and over West through slum districts, and watch the slatternly women and the unkempt children and ponder over the poverty of the homes as contrasted with the wealth along the shore drive. I wanted even then to play my part. I wanted to write such books that thousands upon thousands of readers would be convinced of the injustice of things as they were. I wanted to do something toward making a “new earth wherein justice dwelleth.”

I didn’t leave home until you were two and yet with the intense love I bore you, I do not remember once trying to teach you your prayers. You were a precocious baby and could talk early, but I never told you about God. We ourselves were not taught our prayers, so it did not occur to me to teach you. I must have thought, coming from the agnostic household I did, that religion was a private affair, that some people had faith and others didn’t. As a matter of fact, I don’t remember thinking much about it at all.

I left the Episcopalian church at this time quite definitely. Mother had taken up Christian Science to help herself, perhaps, and because I was suffering from bad headaches at the time, she had treatments for me too. There was a practitioner living across the street and I read *Science and Health* and some of the pamphlets and this new revelation seemed as convincing to me as the dogmas of the Episcopalian church.

The pastor of the church where I had been baptized two years before came to struggle for my soul and remained talking to me all one afternoon, but I was obdurate in my refusal to return to church. I was in a “free” mood and my reading at the time made me skeptical. My belief in God remained firm and I continued to read the *New Testament* regularly, but I felt it was no longer necessary to go to church. I distrusted all churches after reading the books of London and Sinclair. So from that time on I ceased going, much to the relief of my sister who complained when I dragged her unwillingly to services.