

The Long Loneliness

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Summary: Eight excerpts from *The Long Loneliness* around the themes of community and work as envisioned by Peter Maurin:

- The meaning of liturgy in revolutionary times
- Peter Maurin's vision of community in farming communes
- A community of families as a lay form of religious life
- Mutual aid and giving to increase love
- Peter's emphasis on work over wages and ownership
- Importance of a philosophy of work based on being made in the image and likeness of God
- Self-sufficiency in food
- The difficulty of restoring community on the land

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(The following is an excerpt from Dorothy Day's new book)

One of the great German Protestant theologians said after the end of the last war that what the world needed was community and liturgy.

The desire for liturgy, and I suppose he meant sacrifice, worship, a sense of reverence, is being awakened in great masses of people throughout the world by the new revolutionary leaders. A sense of individual worth and dignity is the first result of the call made on them to enlist their physical and spiritual capacities in the struggle for a life more in the keeping with the dignity of man. One might almost say that the need to worship grows in them with the sense of reverence, so that the sad result is giant sized posters of Lenin and Stalin, Tito and Mao. The dictator becomes divine.

We had a mad friend once, a Jewish worker from the East Side, who wore a Rosary around his neck and came to us reciting the Psalms in Hebrew. He stayed with us for weeks at a time, for although mad, he had the gentleness of St. Francis. He helped Hergenhahn in our garden on Staten Island, and he liked to walk around in his bare feet. "I can feel things growing," he said. "I look at the little plants, and I draw them up out of the earth with the power of love in my eyes."

He sat at the table with us once and held up a piece of dark rye bread which he was eating. "It is the black bread of the poor. It is Russian Jewish bread. It is the flesh of Lenin. Lenin held bread up to the people and he said, 'This is my body, broken for you.' So they worship Lenin. He brought them bread."

There is nothing lukewarm about such worship, nothing tepid. It is the crying out of a great hunger. One thinks of the words of Ezekiel, condemning the shepherds who did not feed their sheep. I know that my college friend Rayna never heard the word of God preached and she never met a Christian. The failure is ours, and that of the shepherds.

Peter was not so much interested in labor as he was in work and community. He felt that as long as men sought jobs and wages, and accepted the assembly line and the material comforts the factory system brought, they would not think in terms of community, except for that which the union brought them. They might be gathered together in time of crisis, during strikes, but would they listen to what he said about the need for ownership and responsibility?

Every talk of Peter's about the social order led to the land. He spoke always as a peasant, but as a practical one. He knew the craving of the human heart for a toehold on the land, for a home of one's own, but he also knew how impossible it was to attain it except through community, through men banding together in farming communes to live to a certain extent in common, work together, own machinery together, start schools together.

He held the collective farms in Palestine up for our consideration. Since Peter's death, Martin Buber's book, **Paths in Utopia**, has told of the experiments in Israel, and Thomas Sugrue has written a book, **Watch for the Morning**, on these great adventures in building up a place in the desert for a dispossessed people. Claire Huchet Bishop has written about the communities in Europe in her books, **France Alive** and **All Things Common**, showing how men can become owners of the means of production and build up a community of work together.

But these books were not written when Peter started to talk, and he knew that people were not ready to listen. He was a prophet and met the usual fate of the prophet. The work of the co-operatives in Nova Scotia had attracted the attention of the world, but Father Jimmy Tomkins said, "People must get down to rock bottom before they have the vision and the desperate courage to work along these lines and to overcome their natural individualism."

Community—that was the social answer to the long loneliness. That was one of the attractions of religious life and why couldn't lay people share in it? Not just the basic community of the family, but also a community of families, with a combination of private and communal property. This could be a farming commune, a continuation of the agronomic university Peter spoke of as a part of the program we were to work for. Peter had vision and we all delighted in these ideas.

“But not a five-year plan,” he would say. He did not believe in blueprints or a planned economy. Things grow organically.

A parish priest in Canada, Father John McGoey, had a vision of a community of families. From a poor parish in Toronto, he inspired a number of families who were jobless and living on relief to band together and study the problems of getting back to the land. He secured a tract of land for them, obtained the co-operation of the city’s relief bureau, and moved the families out of the slums. A school for the children was started, a weaving project set up, gardens put in, small animals cared for, and the families got on their feet again. With the ending of the depression and the beginning of preparations for war, some of them moved back to the factory neighborhoods again.

Monsignor Luigi Ligutti, head of the Catholic Rural Life Conference, did the same with a group of unemployed miners in Iowa. He obtained land and funds from the government, and the settlement he established has prospered. In both these cases government help was needed. Peter did not wish to turn to the government for funds. “He who is a pensioner of the state is a slave of the state,” he felt. Neither Father McGoey nor Monsignor Ligutti felt enslaved, but they did admit there had been red tape and many headaches involved in getting the help needed.

Peter’s plan was that groups should borrow from mutual-aid credit unions in the parish to start what he first liked to call agronomic universities, where the worker could become a scholar and the scholar a worker. Or he wanted people to give the land and money. He always spoke of giving. Those who had land and tools should give. Those who had capital should give. Those who had labor should give that. “Love is an exchange of gifts,” St. Ignatius had said. It was in these simple, practical, down-to-earth ways that people could show their love for each other. If the love was not there in the beginning, but only the need, such gifts made love grow.

“To make love,” Peter liked to study phrases, and to use them as though they were newly discovered. (**Honest to God** was the title of one of his series of essays).

The strangeness of the phrase “to make love” strikes me now and reminds me of that aphorism of St. John of the Cross, “Where there is no love, put love and you will find love.” I’ve thought of it and followed it many times these eighteen years of community life.

Peter set much store on labor as a prime requisite for a new order. “Work, not wages,” that was an I.W.W. slogan and a Communist slogan too, and Peter liked it. During the days of the depression the Communists and our Catholic Workers often collided in street demonstrations. DOWN WITH CHIANG KAI-SHEK! said one of the posters, when they were demonstrating against evictions. WORK, NOT WAGES was another picket sign, when what the Communists were demanding was more relief, unemployment insurance, and every

other benefit they could get from the state. Packed in that one tight little phrase is all the dynamite of revolution. Men wanted work more than they wanted bread, and they wanted to be responsible for their work, which means ownership

I know that as this is read, it will be questioned. "This is how the people should be, but are they? Give them relief checks and they will sit back and do nothing for the rest of their days. When they do have jobs they see how much they can get away with in giving as little labor as possible for the highest pay they can get." One hears these complaints from householders and even from heads of religious orders, who complain that postulants enter without the slightest knowledge of any skills that will help the order. And girls do not know to cook or sew or keep house. With the lack of knowledge of how to work has come a failure in physical strength too.

Peter was no dreamer but knew men as they were. That is why he spoke so much of the need for a philosophy of work. Once they had that, once their desires were changed, half the battle was won. To make men desire poverty and hard work, that was the problem. It would take example and the grace of God to do it.

The word philosophy is banded around a great deal today. John Cogley, who formerly headed our house of hospitality in Chicago and is now an editor of **The Commonwealth**, told us about one of his professors at Fribourg who lectured on Russian philosophy. "In all their schools, whether of law, medicine, art, engineering or agriculture, philosophy is required study," he said. And that is right, because in order to achieve integration, the whole man, there must be an underlying philosophy that directs and lends meaning to his life.

During World War II, a French Communist wrote an article reprinted in the **New Masses** which emphasized the need for a Communist in the Sorbonne or any other college to teach history or science from a Communist point of view. The party never misses the dominant importance of philosophy.

Peter's Christian philosophy of work was this. God is our creator. God made us in His image and likeness. Therefore we are creators, He gave us a garden to till and cultivate. We become co-creators by our responsible acts, whether in bringing forth children, or producing food, furniture or clothing. The joy of creativeness should be ours.

But because of the Fall the curse is laid on us of having to earn our bread by the sweat of our brows, in labor. St. Paul said that since the Fall, nature itself travaileth and groaneth. So man has to content with fallen nature in the beasts and in the earth as well as in himself. But when he overcomes the obstacles, he attains again the joy of creativity. Work is not then all pain and drudgery.

All of us know these things instinctively, like Tom Sawyer whose example led others to covet his whitewashing job—or the workman, healthy tired, after a good day's toil like Levin reaping with the peasants in Anna Karenina.

Craftsman, not assembly line workers, know this physical, but not nervous fatigue and the

joy of rest after labor. Peter was never a craftsman but he was an unskilled laborer who knew how to use an axe, a pick and a shovel, how to break rocks and mend roads.

Peter and his slogans! “Fire the bosses” meant “Call no man master for all ye are brothers.” It meant “Bear ye one another’s burdens.”

“Eat what you raise and raise what you eat” meant that you ate the things indigenous to the New York climate, such as tomatoes, not oranges; honey, not sugar, etc. We used to tease him because he drank coffee, chocolate or tea, but “he ate what was set before him.” Had he been a young husband raising a family he would have done without tea, or coffee, as indeed such a disciple as Larry Heaney did. Larry was in charge of the Holy Family House in Milwaukee until he married and was able with another Catholic Worker family to buy a fine farm in Missouri.

Peter liked to talk about the four hour day. Four hours for work, four hours for study and discussion; but he didn’t practice it. Knowing that people could not fit into neat categories he would seize upon them whenever he could for discussion and indoctrination.

Everyone, of course, wished to indoctrinate. They no sooner had a message than they wished to give it. Ideas which burst upon them like a floor of light made the young people want to get out and change the world.

We always had the war of worker and scholar when the former accused the latter of side-stepping work. The joke went around the country that the Catholic Worker crowd lived on lettuce one bright summer of discussion at Maryfarm when students from ten universities around the country arrived for long visits. One young politician active in public life in Ohio spent months with Peter and then returned to the Midwest to teach, eventually starting the Christ the King Center for Men at Herman, Pennsylvania.

Farms like ours began to dot the country. In Aptos, California, in Cape May, New Jersey, in Upton, Massachusetts, in Avon, Ohio, in South Lyon, Michigan—a dozen sprang up as Catholic Worker associates. Many others consisted of young married groups trying to restore the idea of community.

Some were started and abandoned as too isolated, or because of lack of water, lack of funds, lack of people who knew how to work. Men found out the reasons for cities and relief rolls when they ventured onto the land and sought to do manual labor. How to work in an industry so as not to compromise oneself and yet earn a living for a family?