

On Pilgrimage - March 1964

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Summary: Describes their move from the overcrowded Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island. Appreciates beauty in small things, especially water in streams and sea. Notes speakers, recommends books. Say she is meditating on the mystery of suffering. (DDLW #813).

One great reason for wanting our new place, aside from there being more room, is that it is on the Hudson River, “a stream of living water.” The water promised the sinful woman of Samaria, if only she wanted it, stood for Christ Himself, and the Holy Spirit.

This is one of the reasons why a place by ocean, bay or river is so fascinating,— we always have that symbol before us. Sigrid Undset in one of her essays said that when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, from that time on all water was holy.

It is a tremendous job we have before us, the moving of an entire household of thirty people and all their goods, the library, the chapel, and the loom room and so on. We have lived on Staten Island now for fourteen years and with the changes going on all around us, streets torn up for new water pipes, new roads being put through, new housing developments, roads a sea of mud, transportation as bad as ever, we do not regret the coming move. Even down at the beach the development goes on with two-family houses suddenly appearing as it were over night, just in back of us in the fields between the beach and Hylan Boulevard. Huge septic tanks dot the field like a small field of oil storage tanks such as Standard Oil has in vast array not more than a mile from the farm down by Arthur Kill. More and more the air is being polluted from the Jersey side and there is a prevailing west wind which brings with it sometimes foul odors, sulphur smells, and sometimes a good smell of witchhazel! When we have said, “we are going down to the country,” the folks on Chrystie Street laugh at us. Staten Island, —country! No more. But how we had loved Staten Island! I write this way to keep from being sad, and also knowing that Staten Island will soon be as crowded as the Bronx. Everyone is looking forward to our new home, and little by little we will describe it. There are three houses, all overlooking the Hudson. There is a porch on one, and Hans Tunneson and I are going to sit in rocking chairs on that porch and watch the tankers and freighters pass by, so close is the channel to the shore at this point, that one could almost throw an apple down to the decks of the boat. It is not too high up a bank, the road slanting down to the street which leads up to the village, where the church and the shopping is. Transportation will be a problem since the New York Central trains stop perhaps eight miles down the line. There is no bus coming up from New York nearer than Kingston and that also is eight miles or more away. But there is a station wagon and truck and bull dozer and garden tractor which goes with the place, and John the farmer is a good mechanic too.

Money

We need to raise more money to make the down payment since the sale of the farm is held up and we do not want to mortgage what we have and pay interest. Here we are engaged in all the complications which go with real estate and law suits, and taxes, and the selling and buying of property and it is an onerous job. We remember St. Paul however and his preaching of detachment, and are trying to hold property “as though we held it not,” if you see what I mean. That is, not to worry about these things, as I did last night, lying awake until three in the morning, thinking of pros and cons. Just the same, I think this is the right thing to do, considering present and future of the Catholic Worker. Our very crowded condition at Peter Maurin Farm means that there is only one room which can be used for sitting and living room, and this is also kitchen, dining room, library, conference room and so on. Downstairs some of the men have preempted the basement kitchen which was made from a dirt floor cellar by various people who dug it out and cemented it and put in tubs and pipes and sinks and stoves so that now it is a furnace room, bakery store room, kitchen and laundry all in one. Like the poor we suffer from over crowding staying indoors these cold days of twenty degrees with icy snow all around us so that it is hazardous even to walk.

But I think of the housing situation in the cities, all the overcrowding throughout the land, and not only because people have been herded in cities.

A Joke

One of my favorite jokes about Russia is that one about the children who had been given pictures of Lenin to hang in their homes, and when the teacher asked the children if they had hung the pictures, one little boy said “please teacher, we live in the middle of the room.”

And this is **no**joke, as the saying is. My old friends the Carmens when they worked in Russia in the thirties lived in a corner of a room. They even had space to put up Langston Hughes when he wandered into Moscow without papers or coupons for room or food. One of my favorite stories is Dostoevsky’s **Honest Thief** who also lived in the corner of a room and shared it with a drunkard.

Beauty

Yes, we are and have been crowded, in city and country, but how we have loved the place. And the ferry ride across the bay which takes only 25 minutes but which is always a joy. Writing as I go into New York, I note a beautiful white Israeli ship going into the Kill van Kull—white sea gulls coasting, a freighter going out, a ferry coming in, and we too, on the ferry, marking time, waiting the passage of this traffic of the sea, to get out into the cold bay where a wind of 25 knots, in gusts, makes pathways in the choppy sea. Today it is 14 above zero.

Paul

Maybe he will be angry at me for telling these things, but they will make you know him and love him, as I do.

Paul used to work in the flower market up in the thirties, where Mary Lathrop used to beg pounds of flowers every day for St. Joseph's House, and he said he worked from four A.M. to four P.M. until he could not stand it any longer. Pressure, he said, but he is on these people who has to work, and probably he did not belong to any union. I do not know when he came to us, but he has been with us for at least four years. He has his room some place, which he pays for by his work, perhaps as assistant janitor. He is Italian and he loved to cook, but it is hard on him, so we only let him cook two evening meals. It is a good arrangement and lets Ed and Chris have a break. They take the other days. Every night Paul takes the leavings from the plates of the eighty or so people who come to our evening meal and saves them in long cartons, much wider than flower cartons. Then three nights a week he disappears down the street, going north.

"He is going to feed the cats in Cooper Square," "No, the police won't let him. He goes to Union Square and feeds them there, them and the pigeons."

But last night, one of the other men told me, "He takes the subway to Pelham Bay station, gets out and walks two miles to a deserted point along the beach and there he feeds the sea gulls. When they see him coming they fly around him and welcome him. Then he strips to his shorts, and after building a drift wood fire, he takes a dip in the bay.

"What, in this 20 degree weather?" "Yes, in winter and summer. I went with him once, Jimmy and I." I confronted Paul with this tale and he smiled shyly and happily.

Oh, this longing for beauty and space, light and moving water, the desire for healing which comes with contact with the soil, with land and sea! The hunger for well being which is striven for by man in drink and drugs and sex, to go to one extreme of judgment, and also in fellowship and poverty and the sea and the air and the sun. How much mystery there is in these men amongst whom we live for so many years and yet know so little!

Tamar

Last night I called Tamar—60 cents after six p.m. and she told me she had been taking care of a neighbor's children, 5, 3 and a half and 1 and a half years old, while the mother had her last child, delivered at home up in the hills of Vermont. They had had three girls so they were rejoicing at the birth of a boy.

Tamar's voice sounded alive and gay, though she was tired, she said. One of the good things of the new place is that it is on the way to her home in Vermont, and in perhaps three hours, she can drive down to visit us with all the children. I am looking forward to weekend visits, and also to her setting up our looms, and trying to balance my Hutterite spinning wheel which I have been unable to use lately because it is out of line, warped perhaps by sea air.

I was reading some of Chekhov's letters and thinking of our new place when I read, "I am living on the banks of the Psel in the wing of an old country home. I hired the place sight

unseen hoping for the best and thus far have not regretted it. The river is wide, deep, teeming with islands, fish and crayfish, the banks are beautiful and there is much greenery. But its chief virtue is its sense of spaciousness. It seems to me my hundred rubles rent have given me the right to live amidst limitless expanse.” And in the story called **Happiness** he speaks of “that feeling of beauty in men, which cannot endure what is commonplace and trivial,” and which also ennobles the heroes of **Volodya** and **On the Road**. And in a letter to his uncle, “One must not humiliate people—that is the chief thing. It is better to say to man, ‘my angel.’ than to hurl ‘Fool!’ at his head, although men are more like fools than angels.”

Scott Nearing

At one of our Friday night meetings Scott Nearing very generously gave us his time to talk to us about Socialism and Latin America. There were so many young conformists upholding our American way of life that I did not get a chance to talk about the communitarian socialism of a Nyerere in Tanganyika, which I hope Father Felix McGowan will study and write to us about when he gets there this month, or about Martin Buber’s community of communities, and to stick closer to home, Saul Alinsky’s Back of the Yards movement in Chicago. His **Reveille for Radicals** should be read. Mrs. Scott Nearing’s **The Simple Life** as lived by her and her husband should also be read. I know of no more dedicated and disciplined people than the Scott Nearings. He made an interesting distinction between the socialism of Russia and the Communism they aim at. Under socialism a man is paid for work done, he said, and under communism he is paid according to need. “From each according to his ability and to each according to his need” (**Communist Manifesto**) and “Let your abundance supply their want,” **St. Paul**.

Scott Nearing’s granddaughter was there (she is about to have a baby) and she told me about Pete Schumann, her husband, who has a studio at 148 Delancey street which they call the Bread and Puppet Museum and where they have a show each Saturday night at nine.

Thinking of all those among us who are brought up with no religious affiliation, “they to whom it was not told of Him have seen; and they that heard not, have beheld.” And of how both Maritain and Mauriac have spoken of those who serve Christ, and follow Him, in following peace and justice and truth and love of brother, even though they seem to deny Him.

Suffering

This Lenten time of the year I have been thinking a great deal about the mystery of suffering and how it certainly does not of itself bring about faith, or grow into love. At a matter of fact, the sight of suffering caused all the apostles to be overcome by fear so that they abjectly fled and hid away. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that made them men of courage able to reach people and suffer with rejoicing. When you look at the faces of the young people who have just been released from prison in Albany, Georgia, after suffering practically forty days of fast as well as imprisonment in terribly cramped quarters, you can see the joy of spirit

that is theirs. Such suffering is fruitful. Dave Dellinger said he wept when he saw them (he too shared some of their imprisonment) but they might have said with our Lord, “weep for yourselves,” that we are not with them. And now these members of the Quebec-Guantanamo walk are resting for a few weeks at Koinonia community in Americus, Georgia. God bless them.

Books Read, or Being Read

The trouble with so many good books around the CW is that they get passed around and never reviewed. **Morte D’Urban** by J.F. Powers will be reviewed later. It is in paper back now and everyone can buy it. The story of a priest of good will, who didn’t have sense enough to put off the old man, who tried to make friends with the mammon of iniquity, and so the Lord took him in hand and did it for him, by means of a bishop’s golf ball and a loose woman’s slipper. This sounds almost like one of those idiotic blurbs that appear on every paper back. But to be able to state profound truths—our God is a consuming fire—in this way, and make us realize that the lukewarm God will vomit out of his mouth (and who ever returned to his vomit? as Fr. Faber said) makes us realize that we are engaged in mortal combat. The stakes are our immortal souls. Orwell said that one of the tragedies of our time was the loss of a belief in personal immortality.

A.J. Muste

Then there is Nat Hentoff’s book –**Peace Agitator**– the story of the life of A.J. Muste which is intensely interesting. The last time I saw A.J. Muste was on the anniversary of Hiroshima last August when he started the sit-down in front of the Atomic Energy Commission. Along the curb was a long line of peace lovers, pacifists who stood by, and faced by a barricade of policy, A.J. Muste sat, not too easily, cross legged on the ground, a small pillow protecting his thin shanks. He is a long lean man. Even so it must have been painful penance. I contemplated him as I stood for a while with the line, and thought of Churchill and of Muste, almost of an age, in the sight of God who stands higher? There is no doubt in my mind as to which is the more significant figure.