

On Pilgrimage - October/November 1976

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Summary: Convalescing after a mild heart attack, she meditates on the beauty of nature and the joy of singing. Says she needs to work at being less irritable. Recommends an article on death someone sent her. (DDLW #574).

I had a mild heart attack in September, pains in my chest and arms and a gasping of fresh air. It is certainly frightening not to be able to breathe. My mother used to call for aromatic spirits of ammonia; Rita Corbin's mother took nitroglycerin pills and a few sips of hot coffee; I have been taking digitalis for some years. My dear friends, Dr. Leroy Holbert and his wife Cornelia, rushed down from Kinderhook (Where she is librarian), an hour's drive, bringing comfort and reassurance, as well as a huge family pillow with stuffed arms to rest on and support for head and shoulders. (Later, a morning at the hospital and an electro-cardiogram, x-ray and blood test.) Books have flowed in; the **Third Hour** memorial issue for Helen Iswolsky, **Paths in Utopia** by Martin Buber, **Ujamaa Villages** by Julius Nyerere and detective stories by Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie (I love Josephine Tey also).

My orders were – bed rest for four weeks here at Tivoli. I am sitting outside to write this (after the fourth week) in the sun, and with healing beauty all around me. St. Bruno, who founded the Carthusians, advocated for his monks beauty of surroundings as a help to contemplation. He also provided them each with a little house and walled-in garden. We do not have that privacy unless we flee to the woods and build our own. Our main house is always full and in the large living room we have movies every Friday night, obtained from the library by Marcel. Last week it was **Man of Aran**, the week before, **Grapes of Wrath**. The latter made me relive the time I spent in Memphis and Arkansas in the Thirties with the Mitchell brothers, who were making a valiant attempt to prevent the eviction of the sharecroppers by northern speculators and insurance companies who wanted their land.

It was exciting and painful. I reported these “pilgrimages” in 1934 in the **Catholic Worker** and had for many years, on my visits to the west coast, followed the attempts made to organize the farm workers up and down the San Joaquin Valley. Communists tried it and served jail sentences; the auto workers tried it and supplied money and organizers generously. The Reuther brothers, trained at the Brookwood Labor College (wasn't A.J. Muste there also?), did much to arouse the consciences of the country. But it was Cesar Chavez who got the drive under way which goes on now. Pope Pius XI said that the leaders of workers had to be workers themselves. And Cesar worked in the fields as a child, and his wife and children too. Support the United Farm Workers boycotts now!

Stanley Vishnewski and I get a great excitement over weather. “The wind is rising. The tide will be high tonight,” and sure enough there were hurricane warnings one day and tornado warnings two days ago. I sat in the chapel and contemplated the trees tossing wildly, especially the hemlock outside the window, the roots of which burrow under the house. If it were uprooted, one could imagine the house being uprooted with it, the tree being higher than our two-story house. The maples and sumac are brilliant in red, yellow and green, and they are stubbornly hanging on to their leaves.

All thru September I missed the colloquiums at Tivoli. Two doors separated me from the living room where evening meetings were held and it seemed to me I slept all through that time. I missed also the meeting with the Continental Walkers, twelve of them. (It was one of the “feed-in groups.”) After that there was a gathering of leaders from many of the Catholic Worker houses around the country.

It was especially hard to miss that gathering, but Peggy Scherer is covering it. She can also take my speaking engagements. Writing, speaking, working here at Tivoli, she has strength – and calm. Hereafter if I travel it will be for pleasure and as for writing – I will always write.

There is unanimous agreement here that no one is “in charge.” The expression “who has the house?” started at First Street. And the one who “has the house” is “**responsible**” whether at First Street or Third Street. (I would prefer, of course, St. Joseph’s House or Maryhouse, but the young are afraid of religiosity or pietism.) To be responsible means to be able to recognize situations and how to handle them, how to get someone to the hospital, or just to sit him or her down to a bowl of soup or toast or tea!

Three ginko trees on First St. have been uprooted by a maniacal drunk and innumerable windows broken by others. We have experimented with unbreakable glass (very expensive). Peter Maurin was always talking about the Thomistic Doctrine of the Common Good, so our young people know when to be firm and keep a troublemaker out of the house. Charles Butterworth, who “had the house” a great deal in some of our most troublous times, used to take the “disorderly” one for a walk until he found a more stimulating companion for him amongst his Bowery friends. One could not call Charles’ serious conversation as stimulating or as comforting as just one more beer.

All this talk about who is “responsible” is to hint, rather broadly of course, that many letters, inquiries, requests for “clarification of thought” could well be sent to our young and healthy editors in New York.

Today is Thursday and I began thinking this morning how the psalms on this day in the old breviary reflect such tremendous joy. Thursday is, after all, the night the Eucharist was celebrated first; holy Thursday, when Christ washed the feet of his apostles and gave them, the bread and wine which was to be their strength and nourishment. Here at the Catholic Worker farm, we use the short breviary and so have the psalms every night as our evening prayer. All the Thursday psalms are psalms of rejoicing.

All Nature Sings

Reading made me realize more than ever that we need a mid-week prayer meeting in our parish Churches. In the Renewal Movement, the attraction of music lifts up the heart with the singing, and I thought how great a loss to the Church is the lack of praising the Lord in songs and canticles. When I first visited Grailville, Ohio, there was a Dutch woman there, Joan Overboss, who pointed out how universal song is. The two-year old child starts singing, the little girl sings to her doll, all nature itself sings or has the equivalent of singing. To me the purring of a cat is a form of singing. Even in winter we have bird-song.

One line of a psalm is, “Be still and know that I am God.” You hear things in your own silence too. The beauty of nature which includes the sound waves, the sound of insects, the cicadas in the trees – all were part of my joy in nature that brought me to the Church. I don’t think we can overemphasize the importance of song. Psalm 97 begins, “Sing to the Lord a new song. . . Sing joyfully to the Lord, all you lands; break into song; sing praise. Sing praise to the Lord with a harp and melodious song. With trumpets and the sound of the horn sign joyfully before the King, the Lord. Let the sea and what fills it resound, the world and those who dwell in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains shout with them for joy.”

I recall many years ago when various peace groups undertook a fast in Holy Week in Washington, D.C. It included believers and non-believers. There were Hopi Indians, Quakers, people from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the War Resisters League there. We stayed at Inspiration House – I think the place was called – and it was far enough from a Catholic Church to mean I had to take a bus every morning for Mass. Some of my Quaker friends went with me and one of them said, “Now I know what the Mass is about – it is a meditation.”

She said this because of the complete silence of the worshippers. When I complained about this once, an Irish Catholic friend said, it is because the Church in America is so predominately Irish and they suffered so from the English who tried to stamp out their faith that they had to offer the Mass in ditches and hedgerows in silence.

But certainly the impulse of the heart is to throw up your hands, reach up and shout in adoration, even dance as David did and as the Hasidic Jews still do.

I certainly don’t want to downgrade the great value of silence in worship. At the August Eucharistic Congress when women spoke to 8,000 women, Eileen Egan called for a “minute of silence,” and after all the speaking and applause, that minute stood out with a profound effect. Even the **New York Times** mentioned it – one minute of silence in protest against the holocaust which we perpetrated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That day was the anniversary, August 6th.

The Lack of Love

The other thing I thought a good deal of this morning in my six o’clock meditation, is the lack of love, and the irritation of others, in the community. Fr. Henri Nouwen has written about hospitality and hostility. It will certainly mean for me an increase of bodily health

as well as mental and spiritual health to get rid of some of this irritation in me, this lack of hospitality and love. I must try working at it very hard. In the country we are much closer together. In the city there are more distractions, it is much easier to get away.

There is one person I think of as **The Friend of the Family** after Dostoevsky's novel of that name. And another who walks off with our belongings – books for instance. Who knows who it was who took my daughter's Hutterite spinning wheel! What a help Dostoevsky is! "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams," Father Zossima said in **The Brother Karamazov**. There is also the short story, **The Honest Thief**. Perhaps to read every Sunday the Sermon on the Mount would be best of all. We love to quote the Beatitudes. "If anyone takes your coat, give him your cloak too." Meditating on "This Then Is Perfect Joy," a story in **The Little Flowers of St. Francis** is helpful too.

The renewal groups also talk of the need for inner healing, without the literary references of course. There is an Arab saying, quoted by Thomas Doughty who wrote **Arabia Deserta** – "Community is swordgrass in the hand." (That book has disappeared too! It was a Christmas present from my sister.)

Book Reviews

This is turning into a literary column. Having been forbidden speaking and travelling by my doctor, and bed-rest ordered for four weeks – the column this month is a pilgrimage of another sort.

I must not omit the articles on death and dying which solicitous friends have sent me. God bless them. Catherine of Genoa, whose biography was written by Baron Von Hugel (another book which disappeared from our library), said that Purgatory is the next happiest place to Heaven. A cheering note – we all acknowledge the need for purging. And what a guide we would have in the noble Virgil who must be close in spirit to Peter Maurin, if we can judge by his **Bucolics** and **Eclogues**.

But best of all my readings on death is an article which appeared in **Worship**, published by the Benedictine monks at Collegeville, Minnesota, written by a great English scholar teaching now in the University of Toronto, J.M. Cameron. I laughed for joy as I read it. It came out in May, 1976 and is about 14 pages long and should be reprinted. It is "On Death and Human Existence."

He writes of different kinds of death – Falstaff's for instance, or prolonged death today in a hospital, or a sudden and unprepared-for death, noble death like that of Samuel Johnson (which, he adds, is the death of a Christian). An article like this helps us all, of whatever age. It is a mediation full of literary allusions, quotations from Shakespeare to Dylan Thomas, Yeats and Pythagoras, Plato to Milton, St. Paul of course and Scriptural too, throughout!

What a rich feast this article was when I found it. I recommend it for young and old, with deepest gratitude to the author for his having written it and St. John's at Collegeville for having printed it. What about a reprint, a pamphlet?