

Wisdom Archetypes

Dorothy Day

April 30, 2019

Common Thread

*“You are vitally important
to the history of the Universe.”*

Controversy

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him,
then He will sit on His glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another,
as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;
and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

“Then the King will say to those on His right,
‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat;
I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink;
I was a stranger, and you invited Me in;
naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me;
I was in prison, and you came to Me.’

Then the righteous will answer Him,
‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink?
And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?
When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

The King will answer and say to them,
‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine,
even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

Dorothy Day: Born: November 8, 1897 Died: November 29, 1980

Pope Francis, in his speech to the Congress of the United States, highlighted four Americans who “shaped fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people....

Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.”

Dorothy Day’s social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.

By profession, Dorothy Day was a journalist. She wrote prodigiously. So, as much as possible, we will tell her story in her own words. Her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, offers insights into her inner journey.

Even as a child she recognized the need for a new type of saint. She describes her first childhood encounter with the lives of the saints, recalling how her heart was stirred by the stories of their charity toward the sick, the maimed, the leper. “But there was another question in my mind,” she said, “Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place?... Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?”

Introduction

I met Dorothy Day in my freshman year of college and the impact she had on me has remained ever since. In her lifetime she became an icon of Catholic social justice and nonviolence. To the poor and disenfranchised, she was the heart and hand of Jesus' compassion. As a prophet, she never let us avert our eyes from the painful truth.

In this *Wisdom Archetype* session, I will focus mainly on Dorothy Day's evolving image of God in her life. And I hope you will find in her a mentor for the *seeker* in you.

Robert Ellsberg saw as “her primary gifts to the church:
her joining of charity and justice;
her vindication of gospel non-violence;
her role in advancing the lay apostolate; and
her explication of the social implications of the Incarnation.”

The intertwining of social justice and religion:

These two threads crossed Dorothy Day's life from her earliest years until her death. However, they were not always closely bound with each other; they were threads Dorothy had to resolve and synthesize during her life. It would be a task that took up half her life; the rest was carrying out this vision.

The Incarnation was the basis of her synthesis to integrate a traditional style of Catholic piety with a radical style of social engagement.

Her mission was rooted in the radical *social* implications of this doctrine – the fact that God had entered our humanity and our history, so that all creation is hallowed, and whatever we do for our neighbor we do directly for Him.

The Catholic Worker Movement and its newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, were co-founded by Dorothy and her enigmatic, French peasant mentor, Peter Maurin.

Peter's social philosophy and religious conviction and Dorothy's instinct of solidarity with all the poor were the main vehicles of her synthesis. These brought her to her radical living of the Gospel message for our times.

Searching

As a result of her reading and being aware of the plight of the workers, Dorothy Day became aware of her vocation. “I had received a call, a vocation, a direction in my life.”

“I felt even at fifteen, that God meant man to be happy, that He meant to provide him with what he needed to maintain life in order to be happy, and that we did not need to have quite so much destitution and misery as I saw all around and read of in the daily press.”

At age 17 ... “Both Dostoevski and Tolstoi made me cling to a faith in God, and yet I could not endure feeling an alien in it. I felt that my faith had nothing in common with that of Christians around me.”

“I felt at the time that religion would only impede my work. I wanted to have nothing to do with the religion of those whom I saw all about me. I felt that I must turn from it as from a drug. I felt it indeed to be an opiate of the people and not a very attractive one, so I hardened my heart. It was a conscious and deliberate process.”

“I read in the New Testament – 'Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the forward'; and on the other hand there was that call to action: 'Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.'”

“Jesus said, 'Blessed are the meek,' but I could not be meek at the thought of injustice. I was in love with the masses.”

Life as an Early Adult

In her early twenties, Dorothy begins a journey of personal misery. She meets a young veteran and falls into what she describes as a “fatal attraction” with him. She becomes pregnant. In a vain attempt to keep his love, she agrees to have an abortion; but he leaves anyway immediately after the abortion.

After some years of restless journeying she moves into a beach house on Staten Island. There she meets Forster Batterham, “an anarchist, an Englishman, and a biologist”. They agree to live together and she learns much from him about love of nature. He loved her and she shared that love; it brought her much natural happiness. “It pained her that he was so set against 'the institution of family and the tyranny of love' and that he would never let her forget 'that this was a comradeship rather than a marriage.'

Now in a loving relationship with Forster Batterham and living contentedly at the beach house on Staten Island, “I was an indefatigable novel reader and spent those first few winters on the beach with Tolstoi, Dostoevski and Dickens. I did little real studying but I began to read the Bible again and the *Imitation of Christ* [Thomas à Kempis].”

Yet by this time her own belief in the existence of God had become definite.

“I had known Forster a long time before we contracted our common-law relationship, and I have always felt that it was life with him that brought me natural happiness, that brought me to God.”

In June of 1925 she found that she was pregnant. She was in blissful joy because she had thought the abortion had left her sterile. Forster did not share her joy; he didn't believe in bringing children into a world like this.

On March 4, 1926, Tamar Theresa was born. She becomes the turning point in Dorothy's conversion. She wanted for Tamar what she hadn't had for herself.

"I was surprised that I found myself beginning to pray daily. I could not get down on my knees, but I could pray while I was walking. If I got down on my knees I thought, 'Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?' A terrible doubt came over me, and a sense of shame, and I wondered if I was praying because I was lonely, because I was unhappy.

"Then I thought suddenly, scornfully, 'Here you are in a stupor of content. You are biological. Like a cow. Prayer with you is like the opiate of the people.' And over and over again in my mind that phrase was repeated jeeringly, 'Religion is the opiate of the people.'

'But,' I reasoned with myself, 'I am praying because I am happy, not because I am unhappy. I did not turn to God in unhappiness, in grief, in despair – to get consolation, to get something from Him.'

"And encouraged that I was praying because I wanted to thank Him, I went on praying.

"It is so hard to say how this delight in prayer grew on me. The year before, I was saying as I planted seeds in the garden, "*I must* believe in these seeds, that they fall into the earth and grow into flowers and radishes and beans. It is a miracle to me because I do not understand it. Neither do naturalist understand it. The very fact that they use glib technical phrases does not make it any less of a miracle, and a miracle we all accept. Then why not accept God's mysteries?

“I began to go to Mass regularly on Sunday mornings.”

“She knew association with any church, and especially the Catholic Church, would be objectionable to Forster and to nearly every friend she had. But Dorothy's attraction was based on her own experience and need, not on history or argument.”

Tamar was baptized in July 1927 and in December Dorothy was baptized and went for confession.

“But the long-awaited event gave her no consolation.

“Participating at her first Mass as a Catholic the next day, she felt wooden. 'I felt like a hypocrite as I got down on my knees, and shuddered at the thought of anyone seeing me.' [Am I] not betraying the oppressed and the radical movement? 'Here I was, going over to the opposition, because the Church was lined up with property, with the wealthy, with capitalism, with all the forces of reaction.'”

She “longed to make a synthesis reconciling body and soul.”

Yet religion could not be just a personal thing. She writes “I had heard many say that they wanted to worship God in their own way and did not need a Church in which to praise Him, nor a body of people with whom to associate themselves. But I did not agree to this. My very experience as a radical, my whole makeup, led me to want to associate with others, with the masses, in loving and praising God.

[The two strands begin to twine together.]

Characteristic teaching:

“Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other's faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatred that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.”

“She did not believe holiness was just for a few – or for those dedicated to formal religious life. It was simply a matter of taking seriously the logic of our baptismal vows – to put off the old person and put on Christ – to grow constantly in our capacity for love through the exercise of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.”

Gratefulness:

Robert Ellsberg observed, “if there is any quality I particularly associate with Dorothy it was gratitude. It was such gratitude and happiness at the birth of her daughter that first turned her heart of God: 'No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship and adore.' It was this gratefulness that led to her decision to have her child baptized and to follow by joining the Catholic Church, even though this entailed great personal sacrifice. Appropriately, the words on her gravestone are DEO GRATIAS.”

***Journalism* – awakening to Catholic social agenda:**

She read *Rerum Novarum* [On the Condition of Labor, 1891] of Pope Leo XIII and it seemed a very fair exposition of the Church's social teachings. However, she paid no attention to it at the time. Catholics were a world apart, a people within a people, making little impression on the tremendous non-Catholic population of the country.”

“There was no attack on religion because people were generally indifferent to religion. They were neither hot nor cold. They were the tepid, the materialistic, who hoped that by Sunday churchgoing they would be taking care of the afterlife, if there were an afterlife. Meanwhile they would get everything they could in this.

“On the other hand, the Marxist, the I.W.W.'s [Industrial Workers of the World] who looked upon religion as the opiate of the people, who thought they had only this one life to live and then oblivion – they were the ones who were eager to sacrifice themselves here and now, thus doing without now and for all eternity the good things of the world which they were fighting to obtain for their brothers. It was then, and still is, a paradox that confounds me. God love them! And God pity the lukewarm of whom St. John said harshly that God would spew them out of His mouth.”

Activism:

She details her experiences and reflections on 10 days in jail in 1917 in Washington DC for Suffragist demonstrations. They were not only protesting for women's vote, but also against the treatment of previous Suffragists had received in jails. The women had determined that they would go on a hunger strike if they were arrested. After the most difficult experience, the group was moved to a city jail with much more humane treatment. Now that she was in better conditions . . .

“I had no thought of religion these last days [after the most difficult times in the workhouse]. I was very much in the world again, talking with others, reading and writing letters, and I no longer thought of the depths I had been in. To be so degraded was to be shamed and humbled, but I rejected the humiliation. I had seen myself too weak to stand alone, too weak to face the darkness of that punishment cell without crying out, and I was ashamed and again rejected religion that had helped me when I had been brought to my knees by my suffering.”

Jobs and Journeys

She learned of the plans for a national march on Washington [1932] and she was contracted by *The Commonweal* to cover the story..

“How little, how puny my work had been since becoming a Catholic, I thought. How self-centered, how ingrown, how lacking in sense of community!”

“When the demonstration was over and I had finished writing my story, I went to the national shrine at the Catholic University on the feast of the Immaculate Conception [December 8]. There I offered up a special prayer, a prayer which came with tears and with anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.

“As I knelt there, I realized that after three years of Catholicism my only contact with active Catholics had been through articles I had written for one of the Catholic magazines. Those contact had been brief, casual. I still did not know personally one Catholic layman.

“And when I returned to New York, I found Peter Maurin – Peter the French peasant, whose spirit and ideas will dominate the rest of this book as they will dominate the rest of my life.”

Peasant of the Pavements

“When I walked into my apartment, I found waiting for me a short, stocky man in his mid-fifties, as ragged and rugged as any of the marchers I had left. I like people to look their part, and if they are workers, to look like workers, and if they are peasants, to look like peasants.

“I am Peter Maurin. George Shuster, editor of The Commonweal, told me to look you up. Also, a red-headed Irish Communist in Union Square told me to see you. He says we think alike.”

“I remember several things about that first meeting, characteristics of Peter that were to impress themselves more and more on me during the years that followed. He spoke in terms of ideas, rather than personalities, and he stressed the importance of theory.”

“Lenin said, ‘There can be no revolution without a theory of revolution,’ so I am trying to give the theory of a green revolution,” he said.

“Indoctrination” was his word. He not only wished to give me a Catholic outline of history—but he also wished to repeat over and over again his program of action; round-table discussions, houses of hospitality and agronomic universities.

Pacifism:

“If Christ was present in the disguise of our neighbor, this was also true in his most terrible disguise – in the face of the one who is called our enemy.”

“By his death and resurrection he had converted the cross, a sign of defeat, into a symbol of life and hope. And he had come to substitute the cross for the sword or the bombs as an effective instrument of liberation and justice.”

If it is remarked that pacifism places too much of a burden on the ordinary Catholic it can then be replied in truth that it places not so much a burden as does Catholic sexual morality with its day to day difficulties and the heroism it requires of many in these days. And yet the Church will not compromise in this regard. It would seem that the day must come when we refuse to compromise on this matter of war—otherwise we will sink to sub-human bestiality and will most certainly stray far from the spirit of Christ.

It is a matter of grief to me that most of those who are Catholic Workers are not pacifists, but I can see too how good it is that we always have this attitude represented among us. We are not living in an ivory tower.

Vatican II

Dorothy and several women companions made trips to Rome during the Second Vatican Council. They brought with them several hundred copies of a special issue of *The Catholic Worker* on “The Council and the Bomb.” The third and final session of the Vatican Council was about to open. Its agenda included completion of a text, passages of which had aroused active opposition from the American military establishment: Schema 13, as it was called in the drafting stage, finally published as *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.*”

These women fasted and prayed for ten days and met with the bishops to try to influence the passage of the draft.

“She [Dorothy] made no claim that this almost invisible act of witness had influenced the council. But she was convinced that prayer and fasting had a power that even believers rarely imagine. In a hidden but significant way, the fasting women had participated in the work of the council.

“She had reason to rejoice in December when, on the next-to-last day of the council, the *Pastoral Constitution* was passed, complete with its many controversial passages, by the overwhelming majority of bishops. The text included the only specific condemnation produced by the Council: 'Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with inhabitants is a crime against God and humanity, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation.'”

An Order to Change the *Catholic Worker* Name

March 1951 Dorothy was told by the New York chancery to cease publication or change the name of the paper.

“We recognize and accept the authority of the Church as we do that of Christ himself.”

In her reply she noted that the *Catholic War Veterans* were not being required to change their name and they were free to express their opinions.

She argued that closing a paper with a worldwide circulation of 63,000 would create a scandal and would be a formidable argument in the hands of the enemy of the Church.

She pointed out that Catholics were not by definition capitalist or committed to capitalism and that the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osseatore Romano*, had criticized not only the Soviets but also the American economic system.

Ultimately, she stood with the other members of the staff in refusing to change the name after eighteen years of publication.

“The order from the Archdiocese was dropped. A change on heart in the chancery office? A tactical withdrawal? Perhaps a little of both. As for the content of *The Catholic Worker* following Dorothy's letter, one finds no change, though Dorothy took a more active part in reading submissions.”

Relevance for today:

Robert Ellsberg says, “In these times we are living through, once again the Gospel narrative seems somehow foolish and irrelevant in the face of terrorism and endless war. Once again we confront a situation in which massive violence is proffered as the only realistic solution to our problems, and national security is invoked to justify virtually any means.”

Prompts for reflection and discussion:

What does Dorothy Day have to teach us about the mantra

– *“You are vitally important to the history of the Universe.”?*

What ideas of Dorothy Day do you find most challenging? Most meaningful?

How are you living the Gospel life?

Further readings:

Day, Dorothy, *The Long Loneliness*, Harper, 1952 ISBN: 978-0-06-061751-6

Day, Dorothy, *On Pilgrimage* (dairy 1948), Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997, ISBN: 0-8028-4629-7

Ellsberg, Robert, *Finding the holy in the ordinary*, Interview Feb. 1, 2008, NCR ON-LINE

Ellsberg, Robert, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Saint*, lecture as reported in *Houston Catholic Worker* Vol. XXVIII, No. 5, Sept-Oct 2008

Zwick, Mark and Louise, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins*, Paulist Press, 2005, ISBN: 0-8091-4315-7

Forest, Jim, *Love is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day Founder of The Catholic Worker*, Revised Edition 2006, 1986, 1994, Orbis Books ISBN 0-88344-942-0

Forest, Jim, *On Defining Dorothy Day*, talk given by Jim Forest as reported in *Houston Catholic Worker* Vol. XXVIII, No. 4 July-Aug 2008

Allaire, James and Broughton, Rosemary, *Praying with Dorothy Day*, St. Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 1995 ISBN: 0-88489-306-5

Coming Attractions:

May 28th:

Jim Carrey