

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

DOROTHY DAY
Spiritual Writings



Selected with an Introduction by
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PREFACE

Dorothy Day's granddaughter, Kate Hennessy, has said that to have known Dorothy is to spend the rest of your life wondering what hit you. That is certainly the case for me. It is nearly fifty years since our first encounter, when, in 1975 at the age of nineteen, I took a leave from college, intending to spend a few months at the Catholic Worker. As it turned out, that short stay stretched into five years. I had only been at St. Joseph House a few months when Dorothy asked me to serve as managing editor of the newspaper, a task for which I had no evident qualifications.

Nevertheless, one of the first things I learned about Dorothy was her ability to recognize and encourage people's gifts and possibilities—possibilities, I should say, that weren't at all evident to ourselves. And so, in ways I could not have foreseen, she set me on the course of my life, much of it spent trying to understand what had hit me, and to share her story with the world.

Most of what I have come to understand about Dorothy Day has come from editing her writings, of which this volume is the sixth. I began to work on the first of these, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, soon after her death in 1980. Most recently I edited her *On Pilgrimage* columns from the 1960s and 1970s. But without a doubt I learned the most about her from the opportunity

to edit her diaries and selected letters, *The Duty of Delight*, and *All the Way to Heaven*. From these volumes I learned in particular about the spirituality that was expressed in the ordinary events and encounters of her daily life.

Many people associate Dorothy Day with dramatic actions on the public stage—walking on picket lines; refusing to take shelter during compulsory civil defense drills during the 1950s; standing beside young men who were burning their draft cards during the Vietnam War; or being arrested at the age of seventy-five, while picketing with striking farmworkers in California.

From that final arrest, many are familiar with the famous photograph by Bob Fitch that shows her calmly sitting on a portable stool, offset by the outline of two burly, and well-armed police officers. It was that iconic image of “contemplation in action,” as much as anything, that first attracted me to the Worker.

Of course we also associate Dorothy with the daily work of the Catholic Worker—putting out a newspaper, living among the poor, practicing the works of mercy: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, comforting the sorrowful and afflicted.

But reading and editing her diaries showed me that those activities were only the public face of a life that was mostly spent—as it is for all great souls, as well as the rest of us—in very ordinary and undramatic activities. And it was especially in that realm of ordinary daily life that she expressed her spirituality, and found her path to holiness.

Now, through her writings, and particularly the *Spiritual Writings* collected here, anyone can know Dorothy in this way. But still there are things about her that I think you could only know from spending time with her.

For one thing: her intense curiosity and interest in life.

Part of this came from the habits of a journalist, accustomed to carrying around a notebook to jot down facts and details about the places she went and the people she met. She never seemed bored or jaded. She was endlessly fascinated by other people—where they came from, what they had read, what they cared about. “What’s your favorite novel of Dostoevsky?” she might ask. I think I told her *The Brothers Karamazov*—a book I had not actually read, though I was happy to learn that she agreed with me.

She had a great spirit of adventure. Always she seemed ready for something new, whether starting a house of hospitality for women, or standing up to the IRS when they took her to task for refusing to pay federal income taxes for war. When an exasperated IRS agent asked her to estimate how much she owed in taxes, she replied, “Why don’t you just tell me what you think I owe, and then I just won’t pay it.”

Regardless of how old she became, there was always a youthfulness to her. She loved the idealism and energy of young people, and what she called their “instinct for the heroic.” She urged us to “aim for the impossible,” noting that if we lowered our goal, we would also diminish our effort. Yet she was understanding of our mistakes and foibles. The memory of her own youthful struggles made her particularly sensitive to the searching and sufferings of youth.

She herself was always ready to be inspired and renewed. In her diary, she wrote, “No matter how old I get . . . no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks . . . with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my heart can still leap for joy as I read and suddenly assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart.”

For Dorothy, all of life was a school of charity and gratitude. Exercising the “duty of delight,” she always seemed to

look past the surface of thing to another wider dimension. "There is desperate suffering with no prospect of relief," she wrote. "But we would be contributing to the misery and desperation of the world if we failed to rejoice in the sun, the moon, and the stars, in the rivers which surround this island on which we live, in the cool breezes of the bay, in what food we have and in the benefactors God sends us."

Dorothy was an avid collector of picture postcards, and some of them adorned the walls of her room at Maryhouse. They included icons and works of art, but also images from nature: forests, the ocean, polar bears. Dorothy spent most of her life surrounded by actual images of poverty, including the hungry men and women who waited outside the Catholic Worker each morning for a bowl of soup. But one of her most distinctive qualities was her sensitivity to beauty.

She delighted in the beauty in church or listening to the Saturday afternoon opera on the radio. But she also noticed beauty in places that others might overlook: in a piece of driftwood, in the sound of a tanker on the Hudson, an ailanthus tree somehow clinging to life in the midst of a slum, the sunlight on the windows of a neighboring tenement building. But she also had an eye for moral beauty: the sight of someone sharing bread with a neighbor (the literal meaning of "companionship"). And hardest of all, she could see beauty where others did not, in the features of Jesus under the disguise of the poor and downtrodden.

She frequently quoted Dostoevsky's famous line, "The world will be saved by beauty." I often puzzled over what that meant. Once, when I was fasting in a jail in Colorado, she sent me a postcard with an aerial photo of Cape Cod with the message, "I hope this card refreshes you and does not tantalize you." It occurred to me that Dorothy believed that beauty itself has a moral dimension. To direct our atten-

tion to beauty, or even the recollection of it, while sitting in a slum or a jail cell or a hermitage, could inspire us to greater courage, hope, and love.

And that leads me to one last thing, which comes as a surprise to those who only know her through her dour expression in photographs. That is how much fun it was to be with her. She had a tremendous sense of humor, and a girlish laugh.

John Cort, who joined the Catholic Worker soon after graduating from Harvard in the early 1930s, was drawn to the movement after witnessing how much fun Dorothy seemed to be having. Here was a woman who appeared to be pretty old (at the time she was in her mid-thirties) who seemed to be having the time of her life, and he wanted a share of that.

The Long Loneliness ends with a meditation in which she says “we were just sitting around talking” when everything happened—when Peter Maurin came in; when lines of people began to form; when someone said, “Let’s all go and live on a farm.” She says, “It was as casual as all that, I often think. It just came about. It just happened.”

That is one of the things you had to experience for yourself, being around Dorothy: The unexpected things that could begin in a conversation as you just sat around talking; the way that history or your own life could suddenly take a turn as you were just sitting around the kitchen table over a cup of coffee or a bowl of soup.

It often seems that way for me, too, when I look back on my life. It just happened. And the talk, and the witness, and the daily acts of faith and love continued long after I had moved on. “You will know your vocation,” Dorothy once said, “by the joy it gives you.” It was not my vocation to remain serving soup at the Catholic Worker. But evidently

it was my vocation to become an editor—in fact, incredibly enough, Dorothy Day’s editor. And that has given me joy.