

**Dorothy Day**

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## **Introduction**

There are numerous books, both about Dorothy Day and written by Dorothy Day. Many of the publications belong to Marquette University and are available through their library. Dorothy herself wrote two autobiographical books and a number of books outlining her thoughts and the history of the Catholic Worker movement. I am fortunate to have knowledge of Dorothy through the eyes of some of Dorothy's family members. My husband is Dorothy's great nephew. John R. Day, my husband is the grandchild of John I. Day, Dorothy's younger brother. Dorothy's daughter Tamar attended my wedding, however I was unaware at that time of just how important Dorothy had been to some thousands, perhaps millions of people across the world. Unfortunately, the extended Day family has not remained close and my husband's immediate family does not have close contact with Tamar or any of her children, therefore I felt it inappropriate to make contact with her strictly for the purpose of writing this paper.

I have enjoyed the research for this paper immensely. While I was introduced to the life of Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker some years ago, I was unaware of Dorothy Day as the woman, mother, sister, aunt and humanitarian. My husband, who only met Dorothy once, was not a source for this paper. His father, Peter Day, who was born at the Catholic Worker and lived with Dorothy provided some insight. I also spent two hours meeting with Connecticut State Representative Patricia Dillon, who spent time at the Catholic Worker in the 1960's. This paper will not fully capture Dorothy Day or her many accomplishments. The scope of her work and life go far beyond what is written here. This is merely a snapshot of who Dorothy was and what she shared with the country.

## **Early Years**

Dorothy Day was born in Brooklyn, New York on November 8, 1897. She was the daughter of John Day, whose family was from Cleveland, Tennessee and Grace Satterlee, from Marlboro, New York. According to William Miller's book, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (1982) the Day family's lineage dates back as far as the Revolutionary War. This, in effect made Dorothy eligible for membership in the Daughter's of the American Revaluation. Given Dorothy's liberal and radical behavior in later years and her affection and advocacy for minorities and immigrants, it's interesting to note that her grandfather was a doctor in the Confederate Army, allowing her membership into the United Daughter's of the Confederacy as well. Needless to say, Dorothy never sought membership with either group. Grace Satterlee's family was also involved in the Civil War, her grandfather joining up for the Union when Lincoln called for volunteers.

The distinction between the Confederate and the Union may explain why the Day family did not keep in close contact with John and Grace after they married in New York City in 1894. The couple proceeded to have two boys, Donald and Sam Houston, and a girl, Dorothy, within three years of marriage. Two years following, the couple had another daughter, Della and the youngest child John was born years later in 1912. John Day senior was a writer. He began his career reporting on racetrack news. He was also a heavy drinker and not very affectionate with his children. Neither parent was religious and none of the children were baptized.

In the early years, the Day family moved a number of times, to accommodate John's career. In 1904 they moved to Berkeley and then Oakland California. While they were in Oakland, the San Francisco earthquake occurred. The paper that John worked for

burned and the family moved to Chicago. The family lived in tenement housing for a short time until John was hired as the sports editor of *The Inter Ocean*, a Chicago newspaper. The Day's moved while in Chicago at least four times, each time to larger, more prominent residences (Miller, 1982).

Dorothy recalls in her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (1952) that her childhood was full of happy memories. Her father was a traditional man for the times, allowing Grace to raise the children while he spent all day at work, came home for dinner and back out with the men in the evenings. She recalls that the family did not attend church but the children were made aware of what was a sin and what was not. Dorothy uses the example that sex was a dark, secret sin, not to be contemplated. Furthermore, Dorothy mentions out of wedlock births as a sin. Out of wedlock birth was held up by her family and all of society to be a sin in the eyes of God and society. The sin and shame fell squarely on the women and Dorothy recalls she and sister Della discussing the tragic heroines, such as Hester Prynne, who had to live with such disgrace.

Dorothy inherited her father's passion for the written word. She spent most of her youth reading. When Dorothy began to experience adolescence, she began questioning her existence and developed a passion for religion. She began to attend the Episcopal Church on Fullerton Avenue on the North Side of Chicago. The family was not attending and her parents did not comment on her new religious fervor. This was also time when Dorothy began keeping a journal. (Miller, 1982).

When the youngest Day child was born, Grace Day appeared to experience postpartum depression. As a result, Dorothy took care of little John almost exclusively for the first two years of his life. In 1914 Dorothy graduated from Waller High School.

She was honored at graduation when the newspaper The Hearst Chicago Examiner awarded Dorothy, one of twenty students from across the county, a \$300 scholarship to attend college. The award was based on a writing competition. Miller (1952) also speculates on whether or not John senior attended his daughter's graduation. He worked for the Inter-Ocean, the competing newspaper in Chicago and may have stayed away in protest of the scholarship.

For a woman who later became a comfort to the lonely, poor and disenfranchised, she describes her family's style as "austere". Her family, she describes in the *Long Loneliness*, as very "Anglo-Saxon" and unlike their Italian neighbors, there "was never any kissing and never a close embrace" (p. 35). She describes the Day children as always being alone and withdrawn. Dorothy describes her own desires to love and be loved, in a more physical sense.

Dorothy attend the University of Illinois is September of 1914. Having been an avid reader, she began reading a paper called The Day Book, which was given to her by her oldest brother, Donald. This paper reported on the labor movement in Chicago. She also began reading Dostoevski, a Russian novelist and joined the campus Socialist Party. She lived in a variety of settings during her two years at the University. She lived with families at first, providing housekeeping and childcare services for room and board. While the first World War was raging in Europe, Dorothy describes her increasing awareness of the class war raging at the University (Miller, 1982).

Her first goal, during the first semester of college was to win admission to the "Scribblers", a literary club on campus. Dorothy achieved this goal and developed the first of many friendships with interesting, intelligent and soon to be famous people. A

Jewish couple, who were Scribblers befriended Dorothy, Samson Raphaelson (who, in 1927 wrote the Al Jolson film, *The Jazz Singer*) and Rayna Simons. Becoming friends with Rayna and Samson, for Dorothy, was the introduction to a life that Dorothy craved, but had not yet experienced. Rayna and Samson took Dorothy under their wings, and introduced her to a life full of intelligent discussion, progressive ideas, literature and journalism.

During her second year at the University, Dorothy lived with Rayna in the boarding house for Jewish Girls. Rayna came from a wealthy family and provided access for Dorothy to cultural events, travel and literature. Dorothy describes her second year with Rayna as “idyllic”. This happiness did not last for Dorothy. During the summer of 1916, John Day moved the family back to New York to take a job with the *Morning Telegraph*. Dorothy, who could not bear to be separated from her family, especially Della and little John, moved with the family (Day, 1952; Miller, 1982).

### **Dorothy the Journalist**

Dorothy immediately began looking for a job as a journalist, much to the dismay of her father. John senior believed that journalism was not a profession for women. Dorothy nonetheless was determined find a job as a journalist. She notes in her book (1952), that she became very aware of the poverty and homelessness in New York and longed to live amongst the poor. She believed the cure to her own personal loneliness and sorrow was to live with the poor masses (Day, 1952). Dorothy often mentions in her autobiography her loneliness and sorrow, but after reading her biography, it is difficult to understand what the causes were. Her family, especially her dad, was stern and serious, they were a stable, middle class family with a loving mother. What was missing for

Dorothy? Later in her writings, she points to the lack of religion and God in her life as contributing factors.

Her first job was with the socialist newspaper *The Call*. She sold an idea about a story to the editor, who gave her the break she needed. The very next day, she moved into a room on the lower east side. She maintained a close relationship with her mother, Della and John, but Miller (1952) eludes in his biography that her father kicked her out of the house because she was employed. After speaking with Peter Day, John junior's son (my father-in-law), the characterizations of John senior are accurate. He was oppressive to his wife and female children. Peter describes him as a classic male chauvinist. Peter only had limited contact with his grandfather, but relays stories passed down from his father and mother.

Dorothy's first story was birth control and the hunger strike of Margaret Sanger's sister Ethyl Byrne, published in *The Call* on January 28, 1917. Miller (1982) quotes Dorothy as stating in her book *The Eleventh Virgin* "Of course birth control would solve all the troubles in the world. With birth control you wouldn't have any more children that you could afford to support and educate. Economic necessity would no longer be an excuse for the woman on the streets; and with education, a moral and social sense would be developed. No more poverty. And when women were not forced to have more than two children, they would have time to look into the laws. There would be a better educational system and a better industrial system" (p. 63).

While Dorothy Day had many causes and passions in her life, two issues dominate her work: a passion for workers and pacifism. During the year 1917 she attended rallies that recounted the Russian Revolution, she began going to meetings at

Columbia University to protest the United States potential involvement in WWI, and she attended the peace rally in Washington DC where Woodrow Wilson announced the U.S. involvement in World War I (Miller, 1982). Dorothy was also become close and familiar with the homeless, the poor and the disadvantaged people that she craved to know. While at *The Call*, Dorothy describes most of her stories dealt with human misery (Day, 1952).

Dorothy began working for *The Masses*, another socialist paper in spring of 1917. She was brought on as assistant editor, when Max Eastman, founding editor was traveling the country. *The Masses* employed and catered to what Miller calls the new American youth “who saw a new meaning for existence outside the traditional values with which they had been reared, who wanted to be free, as they would say, for they were of the age of Freud, whose catch-phrases came glibly to their tongues as they celebrated their emancipation”(p. 76). Miller describes this generation of wanting to be free from the traditional and “Puritanical” values of sex and morality.

Dorothy was part of this generation. She had friends, whose passions were her passions. She was involved with the Greenwich Village crowd, the “liberals” as she refers to them in *The Long Loneliness*. Miller describes a meeting that Dorothy attended in June of 1917 where Jack Reed spoke on the subject of freeing human beings of misery and making the world a “paradise”. Jack Reed, author of *Ten Days that Shook the World* was a prominent character in the Russian Revolution and socialist movement. With Max Eastman traveling and the other editor of *The Masses*, Floyd Dell writing a book, the newspaper, with Dorothy Day as the editor, published its last two issues (Day, 1952).

The year 1917 continued to be an exciting and educational year for Dorothy Day. In November, she accompanied a friend to Washington DC, at the spur of the moment to protest the women suffragist movement (Miller, 1952). Dorothy was arrested at this rally and jailed for 30 days. She maintains in her account of this time, that she was not a suffragist, but merely a young women “opposing the system” (Miller, 1952). Dorothy was affected by her stay in jail in a number of ways. She quickly lost her sense of consciousness for the cause. She concluded that suffragists were merely wealthy women, who given the right to vote, would do nothing different than men, for example, behave patriotically and support war. In addition, many of the suffragist did not support birth control, a cause to which Dorothy was committed. She also became depressed, hopeless and lost her feeling of identity while in jail. She describes feeling the pain and suffering of all the prisoners around the world, who were being punished for crimes that we were all guilty of committing. She also began reading the bible during this time and found comfort in the psalms (Day, 1952).

After returning from Washington, DC, she began working as a journalist wherever and whenever she could. She was also introduced to Eugene O’Neill in December of 1917. Many books, including Miller’s, allude to the possibility that Dorothy had an affair with O’Neill. Dorothy, however describes him only as a close friend. Over the course of the next few years, Dorothy’s life was consumed with the Village crowd of anarchists, journalist, intellectuals and artists. She fell in love for the first time, became pregnant and had an abortion, moved to Chicago and was arrested and jailed with members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). By April of 1924, she had published her book *The Eleventh Virgin* (Miller, 1982). During these years, she

describes herself as searching and learning more about the poor and the disadvantaged, of which she was not. She spent many nights in Greenwich Village restaurants and bars discussing politics, the labor movement, and women's rights with a colorful cast of characters (Miller, 1982).

### **Catholic Worker Movement**

In 1925, with the proceeds from her book, she purchased a small cottage on Staten Island and began to date the man who was to become her common-law husband and father of her daughter. It was news of her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter that solidified Dorothy's commitment to the Catholic Church. This is where the stories both written and told to me diverge somewhat. Forester Batterham, the father of Dorothy's daughter was a confirmed anarchist and was opposed to baptizing his daughter. Dorothy writes and both Miller's book and the motion picture, *Entertaining Angels*, depict Batterham as not wanting to marry Dorothy because of his anarchist beliefs. Peter Day adamantly disagrees. He claims that Dorothy would not marry Batterham unless it was in the Catholic Church, which Batterham was opposed to. Either way, the couple did not marry, but remained close friends until Dorothy's death in 1980.

Dorothy spent the next five years on Staten Island, raising her daughter, becoming very involved in the Catholic Church and supporting herself with articles written for a variety of publications. In 1932, while living on 15<sup>th</sup> Street in the lower east of Manhattan, she met a man named Peter Maurin. Dorothy, after taking in her brother John and his pregnant wife Tessa, had begun writing for a Catholic newspaper and speaking at Catholic universities. Peter Maurin found Dorothy after being referred to her by

Dorothy's old communist crowd in Greenwich Village (Miller, 1982; Peter Day, personal conversations, 2002).

Peter Maurin, a French peasant, was a homeless philosopher, on a mission. His goals were to publish a Catholic labor paper, open Houses of Hospitality for the poor, provide a forum for round table discussions on religion and social action and create farming communities to bring people back to the land. Maurin also believed that true Catholics must do as Christ did and live in poverty. Dorothy, at first was only interested in publishing the paper. To her, it was the answer to the nagging question of how she could mix her journalism, passion for the workers of the world and her newly found religion.

With the help of her brother, who was also a journalist, they published the first issue of the Catholic Worker, May of 1933 (Miller, 1982; Day, 1952). Dorothy Day's first article in the first issue of the Catholic worker began "For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight. For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain. For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work. For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight – this little paper is addressed" (Day, 1933). The Catholic Worker was referred to by Miller (1982) as "the intellectual Catholic's answer to communism". A side note, my father in law was born just weeks before the first issue of the Catholic Worker was published and lived at the Worker for a number of years.

During the 1930's and 40's Dorothy Day achieved incredible feats. Shortly after the success of the Catholic Worker newspaper, she and Maurin opened Dorothy's home to the homeless, the first Catholic Worker (CW) House of Hospitality. In 1935, they

moved the operation to 144 Charles Street, they purchased a small farm on Staten Island as the first farm community and they purchased a small farm in Easton, Pennsylvania as the second farm community (Miller, 1982). In 1935 the CW was given a building on Mott Street, in Little Italy by woman named Miss Burke and her widowed friends. They continued allow the Worker to operate from this building and paid the taxes and upkeep of the building through 1950 (Day, 1963). By 1938 the Catholic Worker paper circulated to 190,000, but circulation dropped significantly during WWI because of the pacifist stand Dorothy and paper took (The Catholic Worker Movement web site, 2002). The paper and the Workers supported strikes by both writing about them and joining picketers, for example the Orbach-Klien Department Store, Borden Milk Company and the International Seaman's Union in New York strikes (Miller, 1982).

While Dorothy Day appears to hold many social work values, she often criticized the State for lack of compassionate care of the poor. She also believed that society collectively should take responsibility for the care, shelter and feeding of the poor, not the State (Day, 1963). In fact, in 1935, there were some members of the Worker that challenged Dorothy and the movement on these very issues. They believed there should be paid, professional staff and that the "unworthy" poor and homeless should not be served. Needless to say, this small group did not prevail (Miller, 1982).

Dorothy was not always in good stead with the Cardinal of New York or the Catholic Church as an institution. Her pacifist stand, among other issues, was often challenge by the Church. The City of New York however, did recognize the work of the CW. Dorothy explains in her book *The Loaves and Fishes* (1963), that the New Yorker magazine described the CW's mission as serving the "undeserving poor". Dorothy

describes the Worker as “taking up the slack” for people in the city who did not fit anyplace. They sheltered anyone they had room for and gave out food daily to anyone who came. As a result of their work and its publicity through the Catholic Churches and the Catholic Worker paper, Houses of Hospitality began to spring up throughout the country. Today over 130 Catholic Worker communities exist in thirty-two states (The Catholic Worker Movement web site, 2002).

### **Ideas & Accomplishments**

Dorothy, by virtue of living at the CW and her commitment to the cause, developed a strong belief that she should live in poverty. The CW was run exclusively by volunteers. No one at the Worker received a salary. Dorothy learned early on that the key to success for the Worker, was the solicitation of funds (Day, 1963). She did this through her vast network of friends, many of whom were successful writers and artists. Representative Pat Dillon relayed a story that she heard while at the Worker that Dorothy was in need of money for operations in the 1960’s and with one phone call to Pablo Picasso, received \$5,000. While being committed to living in poverty, Dorothy also condemned poverty. She believed that society must constantly be reminded about poverty, “We must talk about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it” (Day, 1963).

Dorothy displayed a strong affection for immigrants and minorities. In 1934, Dorothy Day wrote about racism in the south, during a time when the issue was receiving little to no press (Miller, 1982). Dorothy wrote about the impoverished conditions of Puerto Ricans in 1963. She recognized and wrote about how Puerto Ricans were underfed and underclothed in New York City. She recognized that families were

doubled up, in vermin ridden apartments. She expanded these issues to all the poor families living in New York. She related how housing reform and gentrification caused many buildings to be closed down and families became displaced. She challenged her readers to do something about the class struggle, which “is of our making and by our consent, not HIS, and we must do what we can to change it. This is why we at the Worker urge such measures as credit unions and cooperatives, leagues for mutual aid, voluntary land reforms and farming communities” (Day, 1963).

Dorothy Day was a true pacifist. In the May 1936 issue, Dorothy’s article begins “The Catholic Worker is sincerely a pacifist paper. We oppose class war and class hatred, even while we stand opposed to injustice and greed. Our fight is not with flesh and blood but principalities and powers” (Day, 1936). In February of 1942 Dorothy wrote about how people were counseling her to not discuss pacifism, that it would jeopardize the good work of the CW. She retorted with a strong message that the country has been at war, a class war for years and society has been doing nothing to assist the victims. She described the victims as the “criminal, the unbalanced, the drunken, the degraded, the pervert” (Day, 1942). While one has to admire her commitment to the cause and her unwavering stand, the Worker movement lost many volunteers. According to Miller (1982), fifty percent of the Houses of Hospitality closed during the 1940’s due to the pacifist stand.

Not much is written about Dorothy in the late 40’s and 50’s, which the exception of her visits to jail for acts of civil disobedience (The Catholic Worker Movement, 2002). This may be because her daughter, Tamar was coming of age during these years and began having children (nine in total) (Miller, 1982; Day, 1952). The story of Dorothy

and Tamar could stand alone as it's own paper. As a single mother, who was providing an enormous service to thousands of people, one could say that her own daughter may have gone unrecognized, unprotected and perhaps emotionally neglected. Dorothy's writings however are full of affection and love for her daughter and grandchildren. Miller's book describes Dorothy's concern for her daughter's education and emotional well-being. The family stories in this area are emotional and mixed. I am choosing to not write in depth about this issue, out of deference to Tamar, who I do not have a relationship with and did not speak to about this paper.

The Catholic Worker farming communities came and went. The Easton Farm, was a popular spot in the early days of the Worker, attracting volunteers and intellectuals from all over the east coast. The farming communities struggled over the years to survive, with many closing down due to lack of structure. The most notable community however was in Tivoli, New York. This community in upstate New York was a place that many young, intellectuals gathered to discuss politics and social injustices. Tivoli was the site of many "peace conferences" during the 60's and 70's. Representative Dillon, who attended a number of retreats at Tivoli and discussion groups at the Worker in New York City. She describes having seen Saul Alinsky and Michael Harrington lead discussion groups. She describes the Catholic Worker as an alternative to the mainstream anti-war protests, that were often blaming of the soldiers and the police who controlled the crowds. The CW, as described by Representative Dillon was a spiritual and political center. It offered an alternative view of social justice, one based on service and personal responsibility, not just protest. To get arrested for a cause was not impressive to Dorothy, unless you also contributed your service and your time to that cause.

Dorothy's last major adventure, as described by Miller (1982) was her work with Caesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. She was seventy three years old, traveling the world speaking about the Catholic Worker Movement. Her health was failing and yet she was compelled to demonstrate with Chavez. Her picture was printed nationally when she was arrested during the protest. That was 1973. Dorothy continued to travel for a time, but began to spend more time at Tivoli. Her sister Della died in May of 1980 and Dorothy died on November 29, 1980, just after her eighty-third birthday.

### **Conclusion**

As I stated in the beginning, this paper only scratches the surface of who Dorothy Day was and what she accomplished. Many events, such as Dorothy's attendance at Martin Luther King rallies, being shot at in 1968 in Georgia for supporting an interracial farming community, the many famous scholars who she entertained at the farms and her meeting with Mother Teresa are not covered. She was a strong woman, who was not a Social Worker or a politician often publicly disapproved of both, effected so many lives in with her brand of political social work. Her medium was the church, the intellectuals and the written word. She influences many people in a variety of ways: the provision of services to the poor, women's rights, worker rights, religious ideology to name a few. Representative Pat Dillon stated that Dorothy and the time she spent at the Catholic Worker indirectly influenced her life as a politician. She received a sense of personal responsibility, that what she did with her life mattered and that she could make a difference. The Worker, according to Rep. Dillon directly influenced her drive to open a battered women's shelter in New Haven, prior to her political career.

While neither my husband nor I practice a religion, we are both committed to providing service to poor and disadvantaged people. Today I work with the homeless, providing emergency shelter and supportive housing. My husband, who happens to be an excellent writer, works as a juvenile public defender. His passion for insuring that poor youths receive a fair and equitable defense in the legal system parallels his great aunts. Perhaps the fact that John is committed to working with the poor and disadvantaged is coincidence, and not genetic. Nonetheless, I look forward to educating my daughter about her great, great aunt Dorothy.

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Personal Discussion with Peter Day, May 2002.