The stubborn love and inflexible mercy of Dorothy Day

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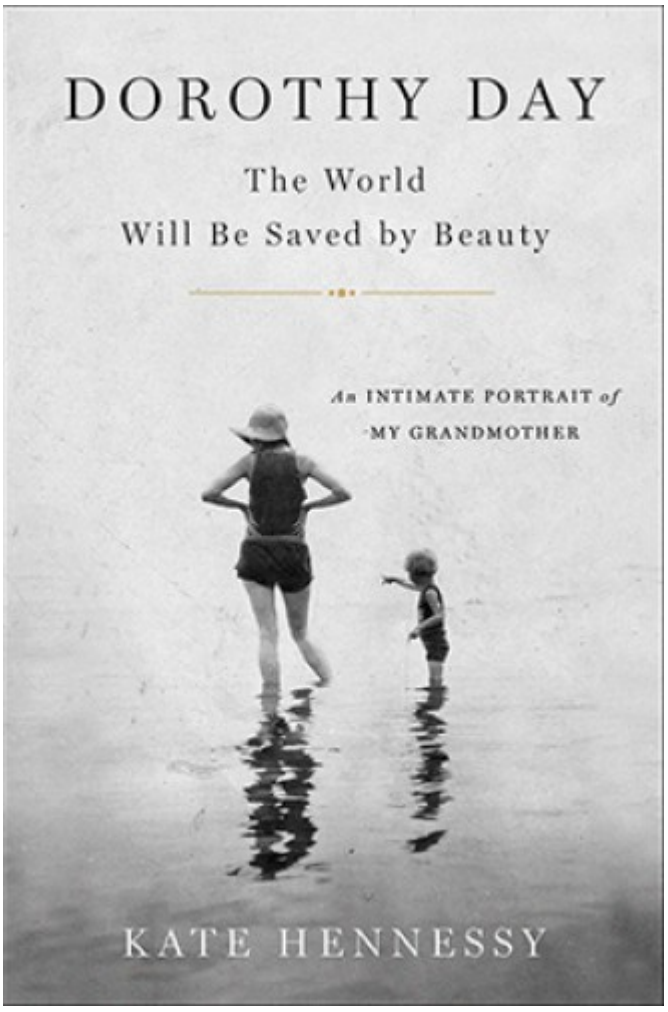
by Richard Lischer in the December 20, 2017 issue

In Review



Dorothy Day

The World Will Be Saved by Beauty: An Intimate Portrait of My Grandmother

By Kate Hennessy
Scribner

She has been called “the most significant, interesting and influential person in the history of American Catholicism.” A candidate for sainthood, praised by Pope Francis in the U.S. Congress, a working journalist with millions of words to her credit, an obedient Catholic and a disobedient radical—37 years after her death, Dorothy Day remains an outsider to both her Christian and secular publics. We still don’t understand her. The utter simplicity of her mission coupled with the complexity of her personal needs leaves us, her admirers, in constant need of reliable interpretive guidance. Fortunately, we now have it in a stunningly beautiful memoir by her youngest granddaughter, Kate Hennessy.

If the first duty of life writing is to render a life, Hennessy has succeeded admirably. More than a memoir, her book is a participant biography written from the inside-out, rather than the outside-in. Everything we learn about Day (and we learn a great deal) originates in her complex relationships with others. These include an unfeeling father and an ineffective mother; her fellow bohemians “Gene” O’Neill, Peggy and Malcolm Cowley, and Kenneth Burke; and her lovers, communist Mike Gold, free-booting journalist Lionel Moise, and the father of her child, anarchist Forster Batterham. Hennessy also provides details of the “awful intimacy” and debilitating conflicts within the Catholic Worker family, touching on but not exploring her grandmother’s sometimes difficult relationship with Peter Maurin. Much of that story has been told, albeit in softer focus, by Day herself in her classic autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*.

In fact, the first 60 pages of Hennessy’s book read like an insider’s commentary on *The Long Loneliness*. But with the coming of Dorothy’s only child, Tamar, in 1926 (and subsequently Tamar’s nine children), everything changes. There the narrative deepens and takes on a rich and eloquent texture as Hennessy begins the delicate job of midwifing the truth of Dorothy and Tamar’s relationship. She manages to succeed by following two of Day’s journalistic precepts: she speaks the truth, and she tells it with unfeigned love. As Dorothy often said, “Love is the measure by which we will be judged.” In Hennessy’s book, this measure is the complicated, tattered love familiar to anyone who has been nurtured and stifled by the

ambiguous blessings of family.

Tamar Batterham Hennessy, who died in 2008 at the age of 82, was the only child of the Catholic Worker movement. To tell her story is to tell the history of the Worker (as the author refers to it), both in its urban and rural phases. She inhabited both its worlds: the tenement houses of hospitality in Lower Manhattan and the rural cooperatives in Pennsylvania, upstate New York, and Staten Island. Just as Dorothy was the Worker's mother, Tamar was its daughter.

Tamar was the love child of Day and Forster Batterham, a biologist, fisherman, atheist, anarchist, and maddeningly free spirit with whom Day lived on Staten Island in the 1920s. To hear Day tell it in *The Long Loneliness*, they eventually split over Tamar's baptism and Day's resolve to raise her daughter to believe in God. Batterham disappears from the narrative after Day's heroic act of renunciation and never reappears in the autobiography. Shortly after he died in 1984, Tamar found folders containing 70 letters in her father's Greenwich Village apartment and showed them to her daughter Kate. They were from Dorothy. In the early letters she professes her continuing love for Forster and pleads for marriage, more children, and a conventional life of happiness. The letters give added meaning to "the long loneliness."

Hennessy's sensitive treatment of this relationship colors in one of several empty spaces left in Day's autobiography. She reveals that Dorothy and Forster maintained a caring relationship for years, planning birthday parties for Tamar and sharing a life modified by separation and schedule, as divorced couples often do. In their old age, they spoke by telephone almost daily. When Forster's lifelong companion was dying, it was Dorothy who cared for her, and it was Dorothy who valiantly tried to comfort and strengthen her former lover.

Day's granddaughter details the "awful intimacy" of the Catholic Worker family.

Dorothy loved to quote from her favorite author, Dostoevsky, "The world will be saved by beauty." She and Tamar shared this hope in different ways. Dorothy wrote movingly of how the beauty of nature brought her closer to God—and Forster, especially when he came to bed "smelling of seaweed and salt air." Even as her beloved Staten Island fell prey to ugly dumps, Dorothy could spy a patch of clover and exclaim, "Beauty in the city!"

But it was Tamar who truly lived at one with nature—keeping goats and chickens, gathering wood for heat, growing her family's food, and making their clothing and who, while Dorothy's hands were gnarled from writing letters, gave her hands to the loom. They had lived both urban and rural lives of abject poverty, "always verging on squalor," Hennessy notes, as they alternated between Chrystie Street in the city and Maryfarm in Easton, Pennsylvania. But when they had a chance to choose, Dorothy chose the Big Apple, and Tamar rural Vermont.

Despite their differences, the women's love for one another remained both firm and tender. Tamar's marriage ended, and she and all her children eventually left the church. As Dorothy grew older, she continued to drive up to Vermont to help in the kitchen, plant the garden, and care for grandchildren. Hennessy captures the caress of the generations in the simplest of observations: "Both Dorothy and Tamar were early risers, and as soon as Tamar saw light coming through the cracks of Dorothy's door, she brought her coffee and breakfast in bed—a soft-boiled egg in an eggcup and toast sliced in fingers for dipping, just as . . . Dorothy had done for Tamar. Just as Tamar did for me, and then I did for her."

And yet there is an irony in the book's title: a great deal of Hennessy's story is anything but beautiful. It tells the familiar story of the perils of holiness as the saints sacrifice those they love the most to the higher truths of their own vision. "Dorothy lives on buses," longtime Worker Stanley Vishnewski once said. When she embarked on four-month speaking tours in far-flung places, it meant that Tamar was left in the care of others in the movement. Tamar learned to love the ways of those who cared for her, especially on the farms, but she had nothing of Dorothy's articulate command of language. She was blunt, simple-seeming, and down to earth. Tamar would later accuse Dorothy of underestimating her intelligence by steering her away from high school toward crafts, agriculture, and the "household arts" and shipping her off to a vocational school in faraway Montreal. "Dorothy raised me dumb," she complained more than once. But she also said, shortly before she died, "You don't grow up until you forgive your parents."

Tamar was also raised to be poor. Hennessy says that voluntary poverty, more than any other virtue, became the cornerstone of Dorothy's mission. In her middle age, when dreams of love and home had vanished, she came under the influence of austere priests who helped her rethink her identity as a Catholic. Much to the dissatisfaction of Tamar and most of Day's associates at the Worker, she reconceived the communal farms as retreat/indoctrination centers and pressured

everyone to participate. The retreats drew an unremittingly dour picture of Catholicism as a religion of renunciation, penance, and detachment from earthly pleasures like coffee, radio, and, hardest of all for Dorothy, smoking. She began dressing in plain, semimonastic garb and restricting herself to bread and water one day a month. She streamlined her theory of journalism to “We write what we suffer.”

Even in her preconversion days, she had loved the poor and subjected herself to a secular life of renunciation—so much so that, like Mother Teresa, she endured long periods of ill health and depression. Dorothy needed voluntary poverty to make sense of her Christian faith. To Tamar, however, it was an idealization of poverty that led to involuntary poverty for her and her children. Perpetually pregnant and on welfare, Tamar was living a hand-to-mouth existence with nine children and a violent husband. But when she complained to her mother of hardship and loneliness, Dorothy “responded in either of two ways,” writes Hennessy, “accusing her of lacking faith or of being ungrateful for what she did have. She also said to Tamar, ‘Do without,’ but Tamar had never had the chance to do with.”

Day conceived her life as the achievement of the group—a community of love.

Hennessy’s account is so seamless in its integrity that the obvious questions of vocation versus family are not so much raised as embedded in the narrative. Braided into the story of the roach-infested houses of hospitality and the multiple failures of the farms—where jealousies, drug use, and thievery were but a few of the problems—is the woven steel of Day’s persistence or, as Hennessy terms it elsewhere, “the miracle of our continuance.” From the spark of her partnership with Peter Maurin came the phenomenal success of the *Catholic Worker*, a newspaper born of the Great Depression, published for and about poor people. After the first house of mercy was established on Mott Street in present-day Chinatown, independent houses of hospitality were founded across the United States—and about 200 exist today.

Day’s “continuance” included her antifascist stance in the Spanish Civil War which cost her thousands of Catholic readers, her defense of the black residents of Harlem, a partnership with farmworkers in California, several arrests (as an old woman) for antinuclear protests, opposition to the Vietnam War—all carried on in the context of prayer, fasting, daily mass, and obedience to the heart, if not the hierarchy, of the Catholic Church. And, as if to confirm Jesus’ prophecy, the poor she always had with her. She made sure they had a bed and a bowl of that “awful” Worker soup, with no

ideological strings attached other than the Christian's duty to give and receive love. Better than anyone, she would have understood her friend Daniel Berrigan's rueful comment about submitting to Jesus' commands, "I have spent my whole life looking for someone to obey."

It is misleading to seek a single principle or a theoretical position that drove her on. Not poverty, pacifism, beauty, nor even hospitality. In the *Confessions* Augustine personifies all such virtues and beauties: they say, "We are not God, but he made us." Day also tried to live solely from God. She once said, "If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God." She performed the works and fought the fights demanded of her because she was pretty clear on who *is* God and who and what is *not*. The latter included the government, the military, wealth, personal happiness, and selected cardinals of the church. Day never succeeded in creating a safe space in the world or a problem-free zone from which to launch her programs. She was always on Greyhound buses. If she turns out to be a saint (I'm betting yes), it'll be because she *continued* despite the many problems, most of which were created by her own stubborn love and inflexible mercy.

Kate Hennessy has brought all this and more to us in the communal spirit of her subject. In her autobiography Day credited Maurin for the inspiration of the *Catholic Worker* and often deferred to his ideas about the importance of work and community. This kind of collaborative spirit is relatively rare in a genre dominated by personality and the personal quest narrative. In the *Confessions*, for example, Augustine has many friends—but there is no Peter Maurin among them. Day, on the other hand, conceived her life as the achievement of the group. Her autobiography begins in the privacy of the confessional but ends in a communal kitchen, with a cup of coffee and the famous lines, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community. It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on."

A version of this article appears in the December 20 print edition under the title "Inside Dorothy Day's long loneliness."