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*By Littler and By Littler*

*Sharon Browning*

[sbrowning@JUSTlistening.net](mailto:sbrowning@JUSTlistening.net)

At the suggestion of my three young adult children, I recently started watching the now-completed five season HBO series, *The Wire*. I've been hearing about this show for a long time, but what finally convinced me to watch it was the report from the kids that in Season Five, the Baltimore Catholic Worker, Viva House, is woven into the story line and portrayed with apparent approbation. This, more than anything, piqued my interest; I'm not a Catholic Worker, but I am an ardent fan.

For those of you unfamiliar with *The Wire*, it is a gritty, searing, smart, and analytical look at the contemporary urban landscape. The show explores many of the pressing social challenges facing American cities: poverty, drugs, law enforcement, and failing schools. Set and filmed in Baltimore, it is painfully, almost unbearably accurate. In a program that is relentlessly critical of our failed social service institutions, it is significant that the Catholic Worker house is depicted sympathetically. The couple who live in Viva House were filmed playing themselves, doing what they do every day. The Worker is portrayed as a modest beacon of hope: a place of compassion, non-violence, and authenticity.

Interestingly, the place presented as delivering 'social services' with the most integrity in the show is not a social institution at all, but a home where love is seen in action: a highly personal, un-bureaucratic, non-judgmental delivery of "social services" in their most intimate and elementary form, the Works of Mercy. There is at least the suggestion in these scenes that the Catholic Worker approach to being with and meeting the basic needs of poor people is admirable. At the very least, the inclusion of a Catholic Worker community in a TV series of high caliber and visibility speaks volumes about the influence the Catholic Worker movement has had over the last 75 years. Is the little way of the Catholic Worker seeping into the national consciousness?

Perhaps. But as with the movement itself, it is not possible, nor even desirable to measure the impact the Catholic Worker has had. Like yeast, though, it is spreading throughout the social loaf, changing hearts and minds and lives. The untold numbers of poor and marginalized people who have been cared for by Catholic Worker communities over the decades represent a blazing fire of witness, an embodiment of The Word made flesh through human hearts and hands. But the ripples from this work extend well beyond Worker communities themselves. I wonder how many people have been clothed, housed, fed, and loved as and where they are by the thousands of people who are inspired, challenged, and changed by the Catholic Worker philosophy, even if they don't actually join up? How many have heard and responded to the call to live nonviolently? How many have expanded their own definition of community, even slightly, to include the life of

another previously on the outside of their circle? What unknown effects do these tiny, unseen activities have? These actions may not be completely consonant with the ideal espoused by Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, but as Maurin once observed about less-than-ideal manifestations of the Worker spirit, “At least it arouses the conscience.” “Which,” Day added, “is something.”

For me and countless others, the Catholic Worker is a source of both inspiration and practical guidance. Throughout my adult years, the Worker has always been on the leading edge of my own feeble attempts to live the gospel, poised there as a challenge, a prod, an invitation, a reminder of what is essential in the lived experience of faith.

Aside from a brief exploration of the possibility of opening a CW farm in the early 80’s, my relationship with the Catholic Worker has been primarily that of supporter and observer. In reflecting on my own tangential relationship with CW houses and communitarians over the years, I was surprised to note that I have been involved with equally as many communities of only brief duration as those that have endured. Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing, but even the effort itself to put love into action can create some rather harsh and dreadful scenarios! There is a comforting lesson in this, however: it’s not about succeeding or failing; it’s about being faithful. Trying. Living the questions, as Rilke advised

The CW has helped many to live the questions, and simply by virtue of BEING there, consistently poses the big one for me: What have you done for the least of these, my people? Have you fed the hungry, sheltered the homeless, clothed the naked, visited those in prison, cared for the sick?

If our appreciation of the Catholic Worker movement consists only of applauding the efforts of those who have been called and fully responded to the Worker life, then we are dangerously close to distancing ourselves from these “saints”, and as Dorothy admonished, dismissing them so easily. If we merely admire from afar and commend the lives of those who call themselves Catholic Workers (even though, as I have been reminded recently, they aren’t all Catholic and they don’t all ‘work’!), we let the rest of us off the Gospel hook which mandates nothing less than a life focused solely on love of God and neighbor.

Over the years, I have gleaned many treasures from the fields tilled by Catholic Workers, among them the following perspectives and beliefs that are sure guides for anyone trying to live a faithful life, whether identified as Catholic Workers or not. I apologize in advance for any misstatement of Catholic Worker values in this brief, personal re-formulation of a few of the Catholic Worker ideals.

- The most essential activity in the work of social transformation is prayer. All action is first and foremost rooted in our relationship with the Divine. Without this indispensable spiritual practice, we function on the level of ego and incur all the disastrous consequences of our failure to recognize who we are and Whose we are.

- There simply is no substitute for personal relationships with people who are poor. Writing a check is certainly a help, but as Dorothy Day observed, “It is not love in the abstract that counts.” Our common humanity and dignity require that we be closely connected to those deemed the least worthy and valuable by mainstream society. We ourselves are called, all of us, to be the source of both comfort and practical, personal assistance to the poorest of us. Institutions professionalize and depersonalize caring, This very intimate and human responsibility falls to each of us to do with our own two hands. WE anchor God’s Love to the planet.
- An unflagging commitment to non-violence is imperative in the birthing of God’s reign. In both personal and social life, the Gospel demands the unequivocal and steadfast cultivation of a peaceful spirit and the abjuration of violence in all its forms.
- Trust the small. God’s reign is birthed “by little and by little”. The temptation is to do the grandiose, or nothing at all. Every small act of Love births God into the world. Do the next small, tiny, insignificant thing, with great love.
- Justice and love are married; they are inseparable. Love demands justice for the beloved; the works of mercy and action for justice are both crucial elements of a faith-filled life.

On this 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Catholic Worker, it is fitting to remember and salute all of those who have been called to the Worker life, as well as to lift up in gratitude the great multitude of individuals from all paths and circumstances whose lives have shaped and continue to mold Catholic Worker communities and communitarians. From humble beginnings around a kitchen table so long ago to the thousands of tables where bread has been broken and shared in the remarkable expansion of that original spirit, the Catholic Worker movement has had a profound effect on the awareness and lived experience of people all over the world. Not all who are touched by the Worker’s spirit fully embrace the Catholic Worker life, but many water the seed of active love planted in them by this extraordinary movement.. The result may not be of any measurable significance. It might be a small act of personal kindness here or there, one tiny recognition of the divine in another, one halting effort to move beyond fear, a sandwich shared, a name exchanged, a room offered, a greeting whispered through the bars. No big thing. Not even by little and by little. Maybe just by littler and by littler. Which, as Dorothy might say, is Something.