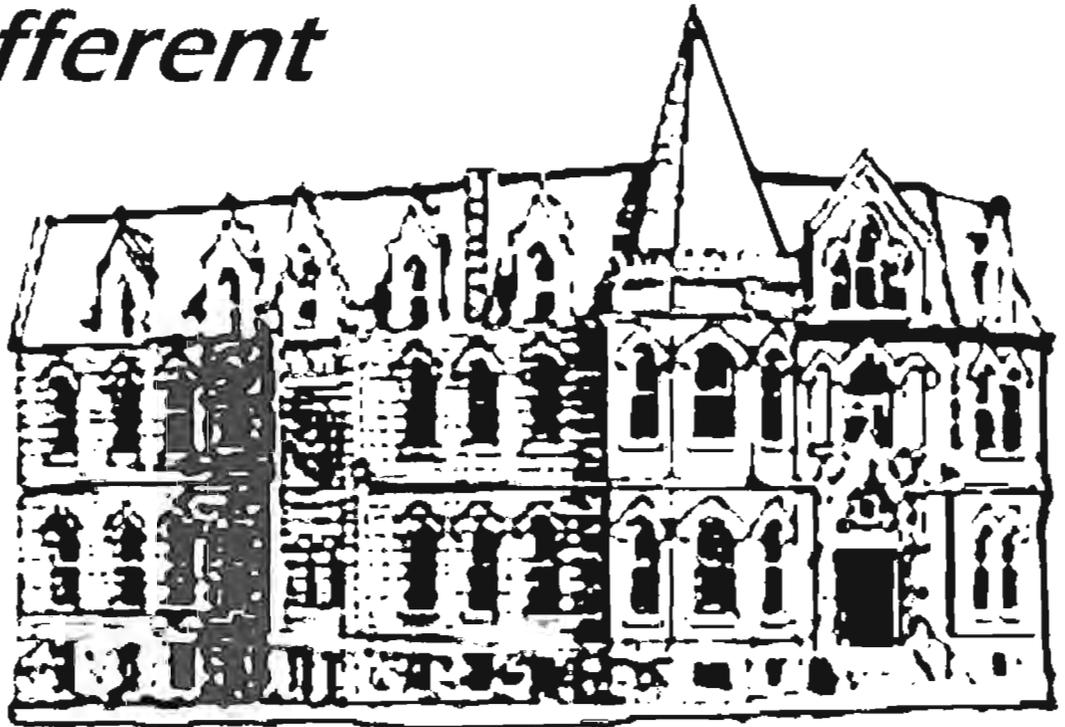


# THE Round Table

Spring  
2004

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." --Peter Maurin

*beginning to live  
in a different  
way...*



## **Karen House and The Catholic Worker Movement**

# Why This Issue?



*I am afraid of what is before us, because what we sow we will reap. It is an exercise in courage to write these words, to speak in this way when it is revolting to consider how much we profess and how little we perform.  
God help us.  
-- Dorothy Day*

“The aim of the Catholic Worker movement is to live in accordance with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ. . . This aim requires us to begin living in a different way.” This quote from *The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker* (published each May in the New York paper) expresses the vision of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, founders of the movement.

Inspired by their witness and desiring to see the dignity and beauty of each person, we members of the St. Louis Catholic Worker continue our efforts to live in this “different way”. With several new members joining the Karen House community this year, we spent time at the Armbruster’s place in the country and discussed the tenets of our movement: *Personalism*, a *decentralized society*, a “*green revolution*,” *nonviolence*, the *works of Mercy* (among them, hospitality), *manual labor*, and *voluntary poverty*. Volunteers come to Karen House and often ask us why we do what we do. So, continuing Peter Maurin’s tradition of the “clarification of thought,” we share our philosophy with you, our readers.

Melissa Brickey starts off the issue by describing Linda Carson’s practice of Personalism, noting how much of our philosophy we are generously taught by our guests. Julie Jakimczyk and Tony Hilkin describe the “Greening of Anarchism” and remind us, like Dorothy Day did in her postscript to *The Long Loneliness*, that it all comes down to love. Marc Leonard, one of our lovely new community members (but not new to community) portrays nonviolence as the essence of love and sees love as being the essence of nonviolence. Annjie Schiefelbein talks about the joys and wonders of offering hospitality and doing the works of mercy. She speaks of the conversion and revolution that happen when we allow ourselves to be “led by love.” Jenny Truax writes about labor and quotes another Catholic Worker who said, “You can’t do the works of Mercy without the work.” Jenny points out how the Catholic Worker belief in the dignity of work stands in direct opposition to society’s value—convenience. Carolyn Griffeth describes the embracing of voluntary poverty “as an act of love . . . and a path to forging authentic and just relationships.” Keeping in the tradition of Anarchism and Personalism, we vary from the theme of this issue to bring you an interview with a living embodiment of Catholic Worker tenets, Carl Kabat. Ellen Rehg interviews Carl, who recently left us, after bringing us such joy this past year and keeping even the most determined of us from taking ourselves too seriously.

We hope you enjoy this issue and as always, thanks so much for joining us in efforts to live out this vision and for making our life at Karen House possible. +

-- Teka Childress

Front cover by Marc Leonard

Centerfold by Jeff Finnegan

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# "Regarding Another's Dignity"

by Melissa Brickey

## *We Advocate...*

*Personalism, a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals. In following such wisdom, we move away from a self-centered individualism toward the good of the other. This is to be done by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than looking to the state or other institutions to provide impersonal 'charity.'*

*From the Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

"[Personalists] try to give what they have instead of trying to get what the other fellow has. They try to be good by doing good to the other fellow. They have a social doctrine of the common good. They are alter-centered, not self-centered."—*Peter Maurin*

Linda Carson was a guest at Karen House for about a year. She died shortly after she left, having been reunited with her family after many years of separation. Linda brought the gift of herself to our house – her humor, her energy, her kindness, her compassion, her hurt. Like many of the guests, Linda taught me how to appreciate "the freedom and dignity of each person," and challenged me to do the same. Her example was more instructive for me than anything I might read by Dorothy Day or Peter Maurin. I hope that Dorothy and Peter would agree that that's how it should be. There is hardly room for theoretical discussion when it comes to personalism. It is all about actively trying "to be good by doing good to the other fellow."

Linda practiced personalism subtly and naturally. I don't know that she had "a social doctrine of the common good," as Peter Maurin defined personalism. I do know that she made apple pies for the house every few weeks, because she knew people enjoyed them. Often she expressed to me how apple pies, cobblers or her famous cinnamon rolls brought comfort to those of us in discomfort. She took "personal responsibility for changing the condition" of fear and instability felt by her friends

at Karen House. Maybe she didn't make apple pies with that in mind, but I think she did.

As a role model for the personalist in all of us, Linda constantly moved "away from self-centered individualism toward the good of the other." I witnessed it many times – Linda babysitting rambunctious two-year old "G" (even taking him to the Dollar Store) as a favor for



Melissa and Khalel in deep conversation  
Photo by Jenny Truax

Melissa Brickey, married to David Kirtley in October, is currently under the rigorous tutelage of her new housemate Shameka, studying high school slang, and how to cook "for real."

Khristine, scrubbing Sunday morning brunch dishes (although barely able to stand), working as the unofficial Karen House fly eliminator (with weakened arms and a fly swatter hung around her neck), "shopping" for other guests in our clothing room while they were at work.

I was most moved by Linda's personalism when she and I had the opportunity to share each other's company. Several times I accompanied Linda when she ran errands. Linda owned a sporty blue pick-up and, when it was sunny, wore big seventies-style sunglasses. She was frail and spunky at the same time, and drove her truck like she was the only person on the road. "My eyesight's going so I just have to trust that they see me," she once said partly joking but mostly serious (as I knew, being the passenger).

One of our adventures together involved going to the Social Security office to apply for her Medicaid. She asked me to go with her as I had just gotten Medicaid myself (thanks to the help of another guest, Sherrye). It was imperative that she made her appointment as her health was dwindling rapidly and her cash flow had ended. The day of the appointment was cold and icy, a frightening combination for both of us, empathetic to each other because of our respective disabilities- Linda in her frailty, and me unsteady on my feet. We decided to go anyway. Although I was petrified, she assured me she would take care of me. In her hunchbacked, deteriorated state, she gave me her arm down the slippery stairs to the Karen House parking lot. Walking across the lot to the truck, she gave me her arm and her cane, and several times said "You're doing great."

We made it to the truck and as she drove to the Social Security office, I recall thinking: this is why I'm here. I have known what Dorothy Day called "the long loneliness," and so has Linda. I am vulnerable, sometimes confused, and often scared. We are all broken, and only in each other can we heal and become whole. Linda's gentle

personalism healed me that day.

Linda, like so many of our guests, showed me that to truly live out personalism, I have to not only humbly give but humbly receive - this is what regarding another's dignity is all about. It means trusting another person to the point of allowing oneself to be vulnerable to him or her. It means fostering relationships in which each person risks the same hurt and anticipates the same joy. For me, practicing personalism well, means being sad that our guest Sherrye is leaving Karen House, not

simply because I am concerned about her as a fellow human being, but because she is my beautiful, supportive friend and my heart will miss her. It means being able to let Linda Carson leave Karen House because she wants to see her family, knowing full well that her health might not be able to take it. It means crying from loss and grief when I found out that Linda had died.

I wish Linda were sitting here next to me because I would insist that she write this article. She lived personalism every day of her stay at Karen House. And she lived it not because Karen House inspired her to live it; she lived it because she truly believed in the action of love. I do not know what her life was like before Karen House; nor can I say what her life would have been like without Karen House. What I can say is I believe that Linda chose to make her life what it was because of love and compassion within herself. It would be disrespectful to Linda to credit any of her kindness to anything but her own choices. In the end, though, the questions of why and how she lived personalism don't really matter. What does matter is that her

grace, strength and selflessness, despite immeasurable heartache and physical pain, made her an amazing woman. I hope she left Karen House knowing what an honor it was to have her in my life. ✦



Our dear Linda Carson

# The Greening of Anarchism

by Julie Jakimczyk and Tony Hilkin

## *We Advocate...*

*A decentralized society, in contrast to the present bigness of government, industry, education, health care and agriculture. We encourage efforts such as family farms, rural and urban land trusts, worker ownership and management of small factories, home-standing projects, food, housing and other cooperatives—any effort in which money can once more become merely a medium of exchange, and human beings are no longer commodities.*

from the *Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

*A 'green revolution' so that it is possible to rediscover the proper meaning of our labor and/or true bonds with the land; a distributist communitarianism, self-sufficient through farming, crafting and appropriate technology; a radically new society where people will rely on the fruits of their own toil and labor; associations of mutuality, and a sense of fairness to resolve conflicts.*

Really, it all boils down to love. We have been asked to write about the Catholic Worker ideals of “a green revolution” and “decentralization,” and we will, as these are ideals that we both dearly uphold. But, we’d feel remiss without first acknowledging the foundation for all of it - for every aspect of our philosophy, that is. That foundation, simply put, is love.

We study the world around us and we see our current culture as our path to a quick demise. We see that the majority of the world’s population lives in poverty, often unable to meet the most basic of human needs, while a relative few live in comparative opulence. We notice the prioritization of profit in a now global economy that exploits human labor in the production of often useless, disposable, albeit salable goods. We witness the proliferation of ever more efficient “weapons of mass destruction,” and the casual if not callous dismissal of their murderous intent and, of course, use. And, we see our species whose blatant disregard for the earth and our dependence on it recklessly consumes its resources, carelessly pollutes our own habitat, and continues to develop and implement practices that so drastically alter our natural environs that the planet itself appears to be fighting back with its own desperate defenses of global warming, nutrient-poor, barren soil, contaminated

drinking water, air that is unfit to breathe, and, ultimately, our extinction.

This culture seems to us the antithesis of love. To participate in what we know to be direct causes of human suffering, to us, denies the very essence of what it is to be human, that is, to love. We believe that the only way to truly love is to counter this culture of destruction with a personalist response of accepting as our own the responsibility to change the conditions that oppress and kill. So, we, as Catholic Workers, offer as an antidote a life of resistance, nonviolence, hospitality, voluntary poverty, personalism, and community. We look to our own lives first to eradicate the choices that impose suffering and destruction, and we pool our efforts in community to move more purely toward a society based on love, and right relationship with each other as human beings and with the earth.

Peter Maurin chose to call this counter-culturalism a “green revolution”. He envisioned a society “where it [would be] easier for people to be good,” where human need and fulfillment would be of utmost importance His revolution was one of personalism led by the power of example where people would consent of their own volition to change their ways of life for the sake of each other, themselves, and the human

Tony Hilkin can often be found in our basement in the “Urban Bikes” coop, fixing up old bikes for Karen House and neighborhood kids and grateful community members. Julie Jakimczyk has been seen in our neighborhood honing her new quilting skills.

condition. Peter's "green revolution" stood in stark contrast at the time to the "red revolution" of the Soviets marked by violence, class warfare, and mandatory collectivism imposed by the state.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, too, of course, to the bureaucratic bigness of our own government and its then capitalistic economy (now arguably fascist<sup>2</sup>), Peter's revolutionary society would be classless, cooperativist, and decentralized.

As requested, we will discuss here for a bit the concept of "decentralization" in greater detail. Again, we can look to our present culture to examine the ills of a large society under centralized government, in the United States, the concentration of power conveniently supports the concentration of privilege. The pyramidal distribution of wealth mirrors the hierarchical structure of government, with the least powerful of our nation, the children, bearing the most poverty. Just as power rests in the hands of a few, so too the highest degrees of wealth, education, and privilege. In our so called "democracy," the voices of our guests at Karen House remain obviously unreflected in governmental policy. In addition to basic shelter, many also lack healthcare, fair-wage employment, and some, the ability to read, all while mega-businesses receive billions of dollars in corporate welfare. Furthermore, the self-promoting interests and incestuous relationships among government officials, corporations, and the uppermost echelon of wealth are illustrated clearly by the revolving door that swaps policy makers for



Julie and Carl bundled up to work

corporate lobbyists, profiteers for politicians, and even a back-scratching CEO for our country's vice president. Naturally, this extreme stratification of power and privilege requires extreme measures to protect its continued existence. Just as our overzealous military squashes opposition abroad, the police state at home is well trained to suppress dissent by brutal force. Centralization of government, even through an electoral process, inherently obstructs justice and equality. By nature, any system that hands power to a few, and removes it from many, fosters control, dominance, and competition. We, as Catholic Workers, oppose all forms of social, political, and economic inequality. Given our flawed nature as humans, we denounce the right of any person to have power over another. Instead, we believe that decisions toward the common good can best be made by consensus, which values equally the input and needs of each individual. These anarchist views lead us to choose not to receive government funding to assist us in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless. Donations and volunteerism from real people help us to welcome and care for the most wounded members of society rather than the tokenism of a system at the source of their afflictions.

So, we advocate decentralization. Decentralized society brings power back to the individual to meet and provide for his or her own needs and those of the community, allowing for systems of mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, and equality. A society of equals emphasizes personal responsibility rather than submission to, obedience of, and dependence upon the state. Further, decentralization shrinks society back to human scale, trading bureaucracy for personal relationships and hierarchical dominance for communal consensus.

Specifically, Peter's green revolution called for decentralized society in the form of small village communes. Human need would resurface in these societies as top priority, where hard work (not wages) and interdependence among community would be the means of provision. Competition for individual advantage, therefore, would be replaced by mutual responsibility and cooperation toward the common good. Of necessity, this prioritization of human need would result in a return to the land. Food cultivation, crafting, and manual labor would bring us back to what it is to provide for ourselves. This self-sufficiency would then be vitally linked to voluntary poverty so that we would relearn to use (and, thus, "need") only that which we could produce ourselves.

Furthermore, disgusted with his culture's separation of intellectual "white collar" pursuits and "blue collar" labor, and its subsequent devaluing of physical labor via low wages, Peter dreamt to reunite the mind and the body in what it means to be truly human. He insisted that this cultural division of mind and body breaches our humanness: that the intellectual detachedness of societal elites from physical labor truncates their wholeness as humans. Likewise, the overemphasis of manual labor within the working class can render incomplete existence by dulling the mind, where bodies too consumed by physical work fall short of fulfillment by suffering an intellectual atrophy. Therefore, Peter's society would value the whole person by exercising and conditioning both body and intellect so that scholars would become workers, and workers would become scholars.

Like Peter Maurin, we, Tony and Julie, feel especially

pulled toward a life of self-sufficiency and an emphasis on the common good. We feel drawn to many forms of resistance to the inhuman forces of our culture, but we believe the most pure and effective resistance is in the creation and attempted execution of a viable alternative. Indeed, thorough critique of the flaws of the world around us is essential, but actual change can only come from our non-participation in them. Now more than ever, we realize our limitations in achieving such a high aspiration, but we accept that the true challenges of love lie not in the recognition of problems alone, but in the risks and processes of actually trying to live the solution.

What seems to us the most loving approach toward humanness is to design our lives to the extent possible to nurture our bodies, our minds, and each other in harmony with nature. So, we attempt to extract ourselves from the systems and choices that destroy, and try to embrace instead a lifestyle that, potentially, if everyone were to join us, would reverse the destructive spiral of the dominant culture and land us instead on the path toward justice, peace, sustainability, wholistic health, and, ultimately, love.

Our current undertaking involves our recent acquisition of a condemned building and adjacent vacant lot just a half block from Karen House. Half brick and half wood framed, the dilapidated building had been abandoned at least twenty years ago. The rear west wall of the foundation had collapsed as had the roof on that side. Windowless and door-free, the structure had also been stripped of plumbing, electrical systems, and everything else of street value. The building had, however, received plenty of use, at least in recent years, as the neighborhood landfill and, sometimes, toilet.

While acquiring the property from the city we began the slow process of literally "building the new in the shell of the old." We began the laborious transformation of this decrepit, discarded structure into what we believe is our next step toward a more just way of life. To complement the already extraordinary work at Karen House in which we are fortunate enough to participate, we hope also to move more toward self-sufficiency, a deeper reliance on the land and our own toil, and, thus, a more globally accessible lifestyle.

After cleaning away the waist-deep layer of trash that covered the house's interior, we gutted the building of its crumbling, moldy, lead-laden plaster, rotted wood, and layers of past (also toxic) flooring. Over the summer we dismantled the wood framed portion, carefully cleaning up the poisonous, petroleum-based siding and roofing shingles, the rusted metal roofing, and the under-layer of lead painted wood siding. We managed to salvage approximately 80% of the wood from the structure's frame (from which our hero in many ways, Carl Kabat, has painstakingly removed every nail).

When we rebuild this spring, we will avoid the toxic, manufactured, wasteful, and mechanized processes and materials that typify conventional construction and use instead a combination of salvaged or secondhand materials and natural materials harvested directly from the earth. To minimize our support of the horribly destructive manufacturing of concrete, the new foundation will be built from concrete blocks obtained from a salvage yard. The wood will be mostly the original building's frame plus the now many boards we have saved from con-

struction dumpsters around the city. The floors will be bleacher planks salvaged from a high school gymnasium, some salvaged wood flooring and secondhand, baked clay tiles. Some of the ceiling will be boards rescued from discarded shipping pallets, while other parts will be woven from sustainably harvested reeds. The roof, unfortunately, will be manufactured, but we are choosing metal roofing which: has a much longer



photo of Tony and Julie's house by Teka Childress

life span than petroleum/asphalt products, will allow for the safe collection of rainwater, is made from partially recycled materials, and can eventually be recycled itself.

The walls of the building will be a mixture of mud and straw packed between the salvaged wood studs. We will be using the "light clay" method adapted from a centuries-old German technique in which loose straw is tossed by hand with mud and water then packed between wooden framing members. Straw is an agriculture byproduct that is abundantly produced in this region and which, incidentally, is highly insulative, cheap, and, of course, natural. The high clay content in the mud, dug directly from the earth, binds the straw together, provides thermal mass, prevents the straw from rotting, and is a natural fire-retardant. When the light clay walls are dry, they will be finished with earthen plaster on both the exterior and interior surfaces. This plaster will be a mix of sand, mud, water, and chopped straw that will add weather and wear durability to the surfaces of the walls. These walls will be functional, healthful for human habitation, and, in the end, one hundred percent biodegradable.

The brick part of the building now stands in good shape after much repair and tuck-pointing this summer. We freed it of its decayed (and hazardous to begin with) wall coverings and installed "new to us" windows. We will eventually insulate its walls with blown-in cellulose, consisting solely of recycled newspapers and boric acid (a natural fungicide and fire-retardant), then finish the walls with the earthen plaster described above. All of this work has been and will be done

with our own hands, with the help of an architect friend (who, fortunately, also has embraced “work not wages” volunteerism), and the help of community and friends.

Perhaps more important are the systems we are choosing to support our lifestyle once we move in. As mentioned above, we will harvest rainwater to minimize our use of municipal water, and we will recycle our waste water to conserve this precious resource. Many people have seemed surprised that we’ve successfully obtained a variance from the building division allowing us to omit running hot water, but we’re quite sure no one else has ever asked. The gadgets and resources required to heat running water are bourgeois luxuries that are far from sustainable and certainly not accessible world-wide.

We will heat our home with wood since discarded scrap wood is abundant in this city. We’ll cook with a wood-burning stove as well which will, of necessity, simplify our diets and increase our reliance on raw foods in the summer-time. Finally, we’ll have a very small electrical capacity, just enough to run a small energy-efficient refrigerator and three light bulbs for about three hours each per day. This power will be generated by the sun’s energy harvested by rooftop solar panels.

Most importantly, our food will come almost exclusively from the now parched, compacted, debris-filled, nutrient-stripped soil of our adjacent lot. Working with nature, we have begun to restore the earth of our future garden. The lot now overwinters, covered with a ten-inch blanket of horse manure, straw, and wood shavings, fittingly relocated from the stables of the city’s mounted police. Inspired by permaculture research and philosophy, we will plant to mimic naturally occurring ecosystems, gently coaxing the earth along to its mature, self-maintaining state. Unlike the soil-depleting, chemically dependent farms of conventional agribusiness, and even the human-reliant crops of many organic farmers, we envision a garden that, eventually, even in our absence, will continue to evolve, replenishing itself and enriching the soil on its own.

As for funding, we try our best to extract ourselves from the divisive, dehumanizing, war-driven economy and immerse ourselves instead in the reality of voluntary poverty. We minimize our costs by using dumpster-dived waste and locally harvested, natural materials. Rather than hire specialized contractors, we go to the do-it-yourself section at the library then get to work ourselves. We rely, too, on the volunteerism and manual labor of community and friends who pitch in when we need help. And, we continually simplify our needs. Unfortunately, though, the project has required money. Although the total cost will be nominal compared to the standard purchase or conventional rehab of a home. “work not wages” philosophy wasn’t going to make it happen alone. We have both taken on small amounts of paid work that contribute little to the economy. Unwilling to support the usurious practices of banks and lending institutions (though we wouldn’t qualify anyway), we have counted instead on loans and gifts from family, community, and friends. We are currently investigating as well land trusts in hopes of preventing any future profit (including our own) from this property and to return the land to more collective rather than private ownership.

Lastly, we look forward to withdrawing more fully from the economy with the high degree of self-sufficiency that we hope to achieve, and we dream of sharing our home, the food that we grow, our time, energy, and resources, to better realize in our neighborhood a more distributist, cooperative community.

It is through this experimentation and concrete application of our philosophical ideals that we grow in and experience their interconnectedness and the power of what Peter Maurin called the green revolution. Our resistance through voluntary poverty has forced us to rely on our own manual labor as a direct substitute for the money we simply don’t have. In turn, our reliance on manual labor has reinforced our voluntary poverty, helping us to keep this project small and simple. Our voluntary poverty and reliance on manual labor have increased our interdependence with community, teaching us to lean more on others when we need to and offer our gifts and support in return. Moreover, these efforts would be gapingly incomplete without the accompaniment of and participation in the loving hospitality and devotion to the works of mercy, day in and day out at Karen House. Finally, every decision seems to bring us closer to nonviolence - to a lifestyle that is less violent to our bodies, to our minds, to our neighbors, to all people, and to the planet.

Nonetheless, our limitations surface at each step along the way. We make compromises: paid work, mortar, driving, and bituminous damp-proofing (yuck) to name a few. But we make them with the best of intentions, always careful to weigh each decision in light of our philosophical ideals. Then, we forgive ourselves and persevere, knowing that the true challenge of love is figuring out how to live it.

So, however imperfect our attempts, we move forward in our quest to live the solution to the worldly problems of which we are so painfully aware. It is the purity of the day-to-day personalism that inspires us, and the hope that it just might spread. Perhaps love truly is infectious. Maybe, just maybe, everyone will join us, and the weight of this “filthy, rotten system” will collapse upon itself. Until then, we will be removing stone by stone our home’s crumbling foundation and mopping the ever-grimy floors of Karen House on our way to building a “society where it [will be] easier for people to be good.” ✦

1. Holben, Lawrence. *All the Way to Heaven*. Pine Hill Press (1997): p.74.
2. Chomsky, Noam. *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*. The New Press (2002): pp.73-76.

# The Essence of Love

by Marc Leonard

*We strive for practice of nonviolence. . .*

*'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.' (Matt. 5:9) Only through nonviolent action can a personalist revolution come about, one in which one evil will not be replaced simply by another. Thus, we oppose the deliberate taking of human life for any reason, and see every oppression as blasphemy. Jesus taught us to take suffering upon ourselves rather than inflict it upon others, and He calls us to fight against violence with the spiritual weapons of prayer, fasting and non-cooperation with evil. Refusal to pay taxes for war, to register for conscription, to comply with any unjust legislation; participation in nonviolent strikes and boycotts, protests or vigils; withdrawal of support for dominant systems, corporate funding or usurious practices are all excellent means to establish peace.*

*From the Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

Nonviolence is one of the means practiced by the Catholic Workers in what might best be described as an attempt at living out the Gospel without compromise. Naturally this manifests in different forms, depending on circumstances and personality.

Often nonviolence takes the form of active resistance to political evil, and this is perhaps the most overt Catholic Worker tradition. The opposition to nuclear weapons is an ongoing and historic mission. Catholic Workers are frequently arrested, and often imprisoned, for "ploughshares" actions, such as pouring blood on the Pentagon steps or hammering on missile silos or torpedoes, symbolizing the transformation of swords into ploughshares, and the transformation of society from one of war to one of peace. Catholic Workers also frequently protest at the infamous School of the Americas in Georgia (where torture techniques have been part of the curriculum), and attend marches and rallies opposing war and injustice. Catholic Workers have worked alongside unions (such as the United Farm Workers and Caesar Chavez) and were supporters of the draft card burnings during the Vietnam War. Catholic Workers often participate in witnessing for peace through the efforts of other organizations, such as the International Solidarity Movement and Voices in The Wilderness, both of which work for peace in war zones. Many Catholic Workers organize and participate in events that promote social justice, at home and around the world.

For those who suffer prison for the sake of a nuclear-free world, for those shot at for the sake of victims of war, for those who organize movements toward social justice, and for those who quietly serve in houses of hospitality, suffering



Annjie, Sarah, Brian and Bill "McCutie" leading song at the 2003 Forest Park Rally.

has been taken on for the sake of others – an important aspect of the Catholic Worker's nonviolence. The notion of "being part of a problem if not part of a solution" falls into play here as well, and that has something to do with why I left a relatively affluent and isolated intentional community, and came to Karen House.

Nonparticipation in oppressive systems and structures is a large part of nonviolence. I am thankful for my stipend, but I dislike those pictures of Andrew Jackson, with "in God we trust" written beside them, as if to remind me how far

Marc Leonard is new to our Community and comes to us from the Eastwind Community of peanut butter fame.

from God mammon is. Of course it is important to support more enlightened businesses than their destructive alternatives, but money remains money. I may not pay taxes, but odds are I'm giving my money to someone who does. Sadly, any participation in the economy is participation in injustice (though that is not all it is), if one's money is eventually circulated to those who will use it for nefarious endeavors – and, inevitably, it is. In my mind, “Buy Nothing Day” (celebrated on the biggest shopping day of the year—the day after Thanksgiving) should be every day. It's a challenge, but economic avoidance can help me come closer to nonparticipation in institutionalized violence, and is indeed a withdrawal of support for dominant systems – the most dominant and violent of which is the economy itself. It could be argued that the economy is the parent of our nuclear arsenal.

Karen House allows me to grow in love, that radical element of the personalist revolution. (By Love, I am speaking of holy tenderness, of kindness, not personal attachment, infatuation, or even necessarily affection). People crushed by society come to the door, and I can show them in, and give them soup or sandwiches. I can respond to the evil done to them with healing, and not rejection. I wonder what would happen if these men should go begging door-to-door in the suburbs – I suspect they would quickly be apprehended by the police. I am reminded of the adage that “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Working at Karen House allows me, a white man, to be of service to black women. It allows me the opportunity to do what I can to undo a system that goes back centuries, a system that is the cornerstone of American culture – that of the institutionalized violence of racism, of white hegemony. The long, tortured legacy of slavery is staggering to me. I am confronted with this legacy daily, and it is deeply, terribly humbling. How I wish it was not I writing these words about the Catholic Worker from the vantage point of education, but one of our guests. In my mind it is no coincidence that black women have the lowest suicide rate in the United States and white men the highest. The endurance of many of our guests to persevere in a society that regards them as expendable (if it regards them at all) is impressive to behold, and I am honored to be given the gift of serving these remarkable people. It is a chance to become aware of my whiteness, to be reminded of it, to unlearn racism. It is a chance to help the process of peace, to help facilitate America's redemption.



Carl approaching the gate of a Colorado Nuclear Missile Silo in his most recent “nonviolent public resistance to evil”  
Photo by Julie Jakimczyk.



Karen House kids at the 2003 MLK March by Jenny Truax

Life in the Catholic Worker keeps the practice of nonviolence at the forefront of our lives, and naturally this quickly comes into conflict with the blasphemous oppression so prevalent in our capitalist system. To consider ourselves not subject to any force but God alone, to reject any state but that which is dictated by love, is an important act of nonviolence, and the path of genuine revolution. Nonviolence is revolution – the government, protecting itself with guns, is inherently opposed to nonviolence. It is much easier for a government to respond to violent protestors with violence than it is for it to respond to nonviolent protestors.

Peacemaking is not only about stopping evil, it is also about not starting it in the first place. “For a Christian to promise to subject herself to any government whatsoever – a subjugation which may be considered the foundation of State life – is a direct negation of Christianity; since an individual who promises beforehand to obey implicitly every law that [humans] may enact, by that promise utters an emphatic denial of Christianity, whose very essence is obedience in all contingencies to the law which she feels to be within her – the law of love.” Leo Tolstoy reminds us in this uncompromising passage of the meaning of Christian anarchy – that love is anarchic, knowing no fetters, and that one cannot be a Christian if one obeys non-loving laws.

The Reign of Heaven – we might imagine an intentional community founded on love and communion instead of violence and division - has no guns, no bombs, no bank, no commerce with pictures of Grant or Hamilton, only the little way of personalism, starting from the law within the ribs of us all, the law of love. Only when we love the stranger will we be able to love ourselves, and only by loving ourselves will we be able to love strangers. Dorothy Day stressed that we can never love enough. Love is the only method of survival, and nonviolence is love. ✦

# Gentleness Emerging

by Annjie Schiefelbein

*We strive for practice of the works of mercy. . .*

*The works of mercy (as found in Matt. 25:31-46) are at the heart of the Gospel and they are clear mandates for our response to 'the least of our brothers and sisters.' Houses of hospitality are centers for learning to do the acts of love, so that the poor can receive what is, in justice, theirs, the second coat in our closet, the spare room in our home, a place at our table.*

*Anything beyond what we immediately need belongs to those who go without.*

*From the Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

An amazing thing happens when she walks through the door. I forget that the last few weeks of living with her were anything but perfect. I forget the amount of frustration I have been harboring about her. I forget everything but how beautiful her smile is as she says, "hello Annjie" with her sheepish grin. So enters Maria into the office of Karen House, two days after she has moved out. She has come begging for a ride. She has, in fact, walked further to get to Karen House to ask for a ride than she would have had to walk to her eventual destination. And we are unhesitatingly happy to see her (even if in the back of my head I am wondering if we will have to remind her that she doesn't live here anymore as she wanders around getting coffee and a snack!) I am in the middle of helping Maria problem-solve about getting a ride, mostly suggesting help from the people where she is now staying, when she interrupts me, smiling again, and says, "you are my people!" It's not a statement I take lightly, and I am humbled at her pronouncement, knowing how often I fail during the day to help people to feel at home and welcome here, although we try to hold welcome above all else.

Hospitality is the second part of what Peter Maurin called his "program" or "scheme". He combined it with roundtable discussions and a return to the land. Dorothy, as is my understanding, didn't so much *plan* for these houses of hospitality with Peter, as much as they themselves began *appearing* out of need. They wrote about the poor in The Catholic Worker newspaper, and the poor began showing up. Peter said we need houses of hospitality "to give the rich an op-

portunity to serve the poor" and to "show what idealism looks like when practiced". Angie O'Gorman and Pat Coy point out in *Revolutions of the Heart* that there is little danger in houses of hospitality of what Jean Paul Sartre calls "making abstract that which is concrete". The beauty of Maurin and Day's vision is that it is practiced idealism. The day-to-day reality of our guests makes responding concretely the necessary first step.

At Karen House we have practices in place to do the works of mercy. We have 13 *spare rooms* in which women and their children can find shelter, we have a clothing room where people can find the *second coats* of good people from all over St. Louis, we have a dining room and donated food



Karen House dance parties are not infrequent on Annjie's houseshifts.

Annjie Schiefelbein practices her Spanish as a Nurse, practices serenity in her new garden, and recently, practiced acrobatics off her bike in the Karen House parking lot.

+ COMFORT THE SUFFERING + BE PATIENT + FORGIVE  
+ SHARE KNOWLEDGE + GIVE INSTRUCTION WHERE NEEDED  
+ FEED THE HUNGRY + GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY

# Easy Essays

By Peter Maurin

## What the Catholic Worker Believes

- The Catholic Worker believes in the gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism.
- The Catholic Worker believes in the personal obligation of looking after the needs of our brother and sister.
- The Catholic Worker believes in the daily practice of the Works of Mercy.
- The Catholic Worker believes in Houses of Hospitality for the immediate relief of those who are in need.
- The Catholic Worker believes in the establishment of Farming Communes where each one works according to ability and gets according to need.
- The Catholic Worker believes in creating a new society within the shell of the old with the philosophy of the new, which is not a new philosophy, but a very old philosophy, a philosophy so old that it looks like new.

## The Case for Utopia

The world would be better off if people tried to become better.  
And people would become better if they stopped trying to be come better off.  
For when everybody tries to become better off,  
nobody is better off.  
But when everybody tries to become better,  
everybody is better off.  
Everybody would be rich if nobody tried to become richer.  
And nobody would be poor if everybody tried to be poorest.  
And everybody would be be what he/she ought to be if everybody tried to be what he/she wants the other person to be...

WE THOSE WHO'VE HURT + GIVE CORRECTION + PRAY... +

What Makes us Human

To give and not to take,  
That is what makes us human.

To serve and not rule,  
That is what makes us human.

To help and not to crush,  
That is what makes us human.

To nourish and not to devour,  
That is what makes us human.

And if need be,  
To die and not to live,  
That is what makes us human...

Tradition or Catholic Action

The central act of devotional life  
in the Catholic Church  
is the Holy Sacrifice of the  
Mass.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass  
is the unbloody repetition  
of the Sacrifice of the Cross.

On the Cross of Calvary  
Christ gave His life to redeem  
the world.

The life of Christ was a life of  
sacrifice.

The life of a Christian must be  
a life of sacrifice.

We cannot imitate the sacrifice of  
Christ on Calvary  
by trying to get all we can.

We can only imitate the sacrifice of  
Christ on Calvary  
by trying to give all we can.

CATHOLIC WORKER



Houses of Hospitality

We need Houses of Hospitality  
to give to the rich  
the opportunity to serve the  
poor...

We need Houses of Hospitality  
to show what idealism looks  
like when it is practiced...

THE HOMELESS + VISIT THE IMPRISONED + BURY THE DEAD

+ CLOTHE THE NAKED + VISIT THE SICK + SHELTER



Photo of Tiffany and Nautica by Teka Childress

where our guests (the women and children who stay with us) and neighbors can find *a place at one of our six tables*, and we have lots of volunteers coming from all over to *learn to do these acts of love* Karen House style. There are other things along these lines, perhaps not directly delineated from the Gospel, but indicated none the less. The Gospel does not particularly mention bicycles or art, but our community members Tony, Jason, Dan, and Christen do let the children come unto their presence in the bicycle co-op, art classes, and kids' activities. Jesus did not, per se, discuss taxi services, but Teka and Melissa do carry the burden of their brothers and sisters in a constant movement of persons and things for our current and former guests. The works of mercy may not mention beautification, but I imagine Jesus smiling on the efforts of Sarah, Jenny, and Marc to bring beauty into the house through music, interior design and cooking. The Bible does mention healing the sick, and Becky responds to that call. And while Jesus may not have known about the future of nuclear arms, I imagine he would be next to Carl in resistance and jail solidarity (and I hope Jesus would smile on Carl's assistance with our rodent problem too).

In all of these and other ways we have, over 27 years, created ways in which we can perform these works of mercy, and invite others to share in the work. It is a daily occurrence for us. We do not have to decide each day if today will be a day we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc., because seven women decided 27 years ago to create a place where it would be done each day. And people have come throughout these years, committed to taking their place in line to helping it continue. Dorothy Day says that it is by the works of mercy that we will be judged. Carl points out to us, however, the works of mercy are nothing for which to pat ourselves on the back. They are what we are all called to do everyday—mandates for all of

us, and so in doing them, we are doing nothing more than our minimum requirement. It is true, as Dorothy points out, that if everyone took the works of mercy seriously, places like Karen House would not be necessary. If, for example, a few thousand people in St. Louis would open their spare rooms, their closets, their kitchens, to people like Maria; if they could realize their responsibility to Maria is as great as to their own kin, then Karen House could change in mission from emergency hospitality to other things. And those people could feel what it is like to be transformed and evangelized by the poor.

But as it is, we do the work set out before us every day with gratitude and joy. Our hospitality is what we call emergency, because we don't invite people to stay with us long term. When people come, we tell them to expect to stay about 2 months. That decree in writing will cause a smile to anyone who knows Karen House very well. The two months is more of a guideline or suggestion that we feel very free to ignore in almost every case (Karen House anarchism in action!). Some of our families end up staying upwards of a year. One woman stayed for over three years (and our dining room has never been clean as when she lived here). What I tell people when they come is that as long as they are working toward something and are cooperating with other people in the house, that we will help them work on things even if it takes longer than two months.

Dorothy Day talks a lot about the need for recovery. This recovery often takes the full two months we promise people. At times volunteers ask (sometimes with innocence, sometimes with disdain): "Why you don't make the women DO something during the day? How are you helping anyone," they ask, "by letting them hang out and talk all day? Wouldn't it be more productive to make them go out, job hunt or something of the like?" They ask us what we 'do' for people to help them 'get out' and 'improve' their lives, as if upward mobility



This Poster of The Works of Mercy is available from the Tacoma CW.

was Oz, the point of all goodness, the very essence of divinity. We have found this to be a judgment that is difficult to quell, in ourselves as well. I believe that this is a judgment afforded to those like myself who have been born with privilege and not had to fight the daily, life-long battle of poverty, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism. Because of this, at Karen

not had to fight the daily, life-long battle of poverty, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism. Because of this, at Karen House we try to provide a space where women and their children can recover from this battle. Many shelters offer a bed and some food, but force women to continue the battle. This is perhaps the biggest distinction between shelter and hospitality. We don't assume that we have the answers for anyone who walks through the door. Nor do we think by virtue of needing shelter these women have something wrong that needs fixing. Sometimes women have apparent needs—mental health or dependency issues—that must be addressed immediately. If not, we let women recover and feel safe. To immediately forge into goals, lists, plans, etc, would be to further injure someone who is already so bruised and broken, and alienate the very people with whom we are trying to engage in relationship.

We see it again and again at Karen House. To imagine some of our guests now compared to when they came in, is to see gentleness prevailing. It is a beautiful process that requires very little besides a space to oneself, time to rest, some-



The Karen House Community in December 2003

one to listen, and the knowledge that for a little while, I will not have to fight to be fed, clothed, sheltered, or respected. This emergence of gentleness in our guests, community, and in myself, is what keeps me here and brings me hope. Last week, overwhelmed by the chaos of the house, I asked one of our guests to please help me with dinner. She reacted in a discouraged way at first, wishing to continue her book instead of preparing soup for the entire house. But as she cooked, I noticed a change in her. After we served the dinner together, she told me stories of things she used to cook. She told me she used to have a kitchen; used to have spices. She

looked wistful but happy. After five years going from shelter to shelter, she remembered what it was like. Softness overtook her normally harsh face, and it was amazing. Or I could tell you about Marsha, a difficult and cranky woman we lived with a couple of years ago who spent her first months with us grunting at our attempts to make conversation. Then without warning, at the gift of a donated robe, Marsha broke into tears. I have a photo of her still, holding up the robe with a smile we had not yet seen shining at the camera. The months after that were marked by her helping the other, newer guests find their way around our house. This amazing transformation would have never taken place without the gift of time, space, and love.

How is it that I can speak so freely and seemingly without humility at our work? It is because I think Karen House is amazing, and I know very concretely that its amazing-ness doesn't have a thing to do with me.

The life of the house is its own. I didn't purposefully try to get Maria to think of us as her people. I didn't intend for the robe to ease Marsha's defenses. But because of the space that has been created, and is sustained by hundreds of people, these miracles happen. It makes me wish that everyone could know what I know; see what I have seen. It is an amazing testimony to the human spirit and the fact that we, it seems, are not abandoned by God. It is much easier to feel abandoned in the

way we have created our lives to be sanctioned off from one another, devoid of spirit and terrified of vulnerability. It is this that I have learned at Karen House. The giving of a coat or a meal must be done—there is no question. But that is not even half the journey. The real mercy comes when I stand before the other and open myself to whatever happens after the giving. That is the conversion. That is revolution. It is, as Peter Maurin said, a way to "show what idealism looks like when practiced." And though Maria may not phrase it that way, it feels like an ideal world when she calls us her people. ✦

# Laboring to Resist

by Jenny Truax

*We strive for the practice of manual labor...*

*...in a society that rejects it as undignified and inferior. Besides inducing cooperation, besides overcoming barriers and establishing the spirit of sister and brotherhood (besides just getting things done), manual labor enables us to use our bodies as well as our hands, our minds.' (Dorothy Day) The Benedictine motto *Ora et Labora* reminds us that the work of human hands is a gift for the edification of the world and the glory of God.*

*From the Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

A comment made by a Bloomington Catholic Worker at our Midwest Gathering this fall struck me when thinking about the subject of manual labor. Asked what the ministry the Bloomington Worker involved, she bluntly replied, "I just move food from one box to another." We all laughed and nodded our heads in appreciation. What a simple but true statement about life in a Catholic Worker!

From its early beginnings, the philosophy of the CW movement included a deep respect for the worker, whether in the urban factory, or in the fields. It was the plight of the worker that first aroused Dorothy Day's passion for social justice, providing the inspiration for much of her work as a young author. The merging of her worldview with the vision of Peter Maurin further developed the idea of the 'dignity of the worker'. To Maurin, very much of an intellectual and scholar, manual labor was an indispensable element of a dignified life. Maurin recognized the value in scholars becoming workers, and workers becoming scholars.

In the New York newspaper, Day and Maurin wrote of the importance of *dignified* manual labor, exposing the darker side of industrialism and the reckless drive for technology. Day suggested that each of us should be able to say that our job contributes to the common good. CW philosophy recognizes that work has been compartmentalized (workers never seeing the product of their labor,) and associated with consumerism and greed (jobs that promote self-indulgence over selflessness, and that market disposable goods). Furthermore, labor has become entangled with oppression (sweatshop-produced goods, skyrocketing CEO salaries with concurrent cutbacks in worker benefits and wages).

The value of the dignity of manual labor stands

in direct opposition to what is becoming the supreme U.S. value: convenience. It is the mark of wealth and envy when a family can avoid the tedium of housework, childcare and yard work by hiring someone else. Whole industries are built on allowing the financially-able to avoid work. Why do it yourself, when you can pay someone else to wash your car, clean your laundry, and grocery shop for you online? The supreme value of convenience can be found manifest in the everyday sights of fast food chains, cell phones, laptops and mega box-stores (you can now get your hair cut, tires changed, picture taken, grocery shopping done, lunch eaten, new shoes purchased all at Wal-Mart. Now the world's largest private employer, Wal-Mart siphons billions in profits by using sweatshop labor internationally, denying domestic workers adequate health care, benefits, and wages, busting unions, destroying local businesses, and ducking taxes). This "Wal-Mart lifestyle" of convenience: to over-consume while ignoring the waste caused, to devour resources (gas, water, electricity) without second thought, and to disregard another's labor in order to save a few dollars, respects neither the worker, nor the consumer.

These values, within a capitalistic society based on acquisition, take on a unique manifestation for new college graduates. Owing \$25,000 or more to the student loan company after graduation makes the volunteer labor of moving food from one box to another seem trite and unrealistic. That is, the cost of college tuition (which is, by the way, prohibitive to the majority of Americans) leaves graduates with little choice but to enter, support and perpetuate the existing acquisitive system. It is difficult to consider an alternative lifestyle of volunteering while the interest alone on student loans climbs

Jenny Truax is our Jedi Round Table archivist, filling a role left vacant since Pat Coy left the Community.

into four figures. I find much more value and fulfillment at Karen House and in organizing work, but I almost can't afford *not* to be a Physical Therapist, because of the difference in pay. It's difficult to believe in the value of a vocation, of dignified work, when society places such high value on following the 'normal' way of life. Graduate from college, get married (heavens, to someone of the opposite sex of course!) buy a new BIG car (preferably an SUV), apply for more loans (why worry now? you've already got so many), and buy a house (in a safe neighborhood-where everyone looks like you). Resistance can seem futile, to be sure. I'm working on stepping away from this mindset of upward mobility, but it is ingrained in me, and I'm embarrassed at my occasional unuttered longing for a clean, always available (with gas gauge not on empty), car of my very own. It is only with community, with loving people of principle, humor, and forgiveness around me that I manage to resist this system.

Someone at a recent gathering of the Karen House Community commented that you can't do the Works of Mercy without the 'Work.' At Karen House, our hospitality for homeless women and children is completely dependent on the generosity and labor of thousands of people in the St. Louis community. Take, for example, the spaghetti dinner served last week. Student volunteers came from Cardinal Ritter High School to cook. A teacher organized, supervised, and transported the students. In the hours and days before they arrived that day at 4:30, Tony surveyed our food supply and created a menu for the cooks to follow. Teka went grocery shopping for essentials. Dozens of people brought us canned food, pasta, vegetables, juice and other donations. Several Karen House community members did 'food runs,' collecting donations of food from places like Whole Foods, Someone Cares (our neighborhood food pantry) and Souldard Market. On the same day, Carl and Annjie each (unbeknownst to the other,) dumpstered 50-lb bags of cabbages, (testing our cooking abilities to the max-how many dishes can one cook with cabbage?) It is truly manual labor that keeps our house running, and of course, this is just an account of getting the food through the door of Karen House, without even mentioning the labor involved in planting, harvesting and producing.

More than any fancy college degree, one needs a willingness to work to be a part of the Catholic Worker. We are not all skilled or physically able to do every aspect of manual labor, but everyone can do something. I can't fix toilets, but I love to paint rooms. Melissa can't take the trash out, but she cleans the office like nobody's business. Some volunteers organize food drives. Some organize our food storage room. Terrie comes like clockwork every Tuesday evening to wade through the trash bags in our Clothing Room, leaving it ready and accessible for guests and neighbors. High School and College volunteers help us organize our stock of furniture, appliances, and plates that women take when they leave Karen House.

What does a lived commitment to the dignity of the worker look like? Obviously it can take on many different forms. It can mean working for alternatives to such free trade agreements as NAFTA and the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) that allow multi-national corporations to relocate from country to country according to the weakness of

their labor and environmental laws. Supporting local groups that address these issues like St. Louis Jobs with Justice, the Worker Rights Board, the Interfaith Committee on Latin America, the Human Rights Action Service, and the Catholic Action Network for Social Justice can be part of this commitment as well. In terms of lifestyle, we can try to acquire things like clothes and shoes through dumpstering or the thrift stores to avoid supporting industries that use sweatshops. And for our community at Karen House, this commitment means humbly asking our supporters to donate Fair Trade- labeled coffee, which ensures that coffee farmers are paid a living wage for their labor.

For the record, manual labor is not exactly my favorite Catholic Worker value to put into action. I am a product of my suburban upbringing, and nine times out of ten would rather go out to eat than cook my own dinner. It's so easy for me, and all of us to say dismissively "manual labor isn't my thing." So when I'm tired, weary of sweeping, wiping and organizing, and am ready to activate my going-out-to-eat-three-times-a-day coping mechanism to make up for all this over-rated manual labor, I try to remember what Dorothy Day said about manual labor. Sure, it would give me, personally, a lot more time if we bought all of Karen House's food first-hand from Schnucks, but would it give me, and our community more love? I would make a lot more money (which, of course, I could donate to many worthy causes!) if I used my degree in physical therapy full time rather than spending my time 'moving food from one box to another'. Would it make this community and me more loving? And certainly it would be more convenient for us to buy everything (we think) we need at a "box store," but the resistance is in the question- is this a decision made for love, or for convenience? †



Jenny and Nicholas interior-ly decorating  
in the community room  
Photo by Annjie Schiefelbein

# Voluntary Poverty

by Carolyn Griffeth

*We strive for the practice of voluntary poverty...*

*'The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge and belief in love.' (Dorothy Day) By embracing voluntary poverty, that is, by casting our lot freely with those whose impoverishment is not a choice, we would ask for the grace to abandon ourselves to the love of God. It would put us on the path to incarnate the Church's 'preferential option for the poor.'*

*From the Aims & Means of the Catholic Worker*

Loraine, an African-American single mother of eight children and member of the Dorothy Day Co-housing Community, has many times expressed her utter incomprehension of our community's embrace of what we call "voluntary poverty." "Why should anyone choose to take on the humiliations and pain that I struggle every day to overcome?" is her sentiment. Her familiarity with the reality of poverty — slum housing, homelessness, poor schools, utilities being turned off, her family being torn apart, living in crime-ridden streets, standing in welfare lines, not finding employment, the kids not having glasses, no health insurance — is nothing she'd wish on anyone. And neither would I. So what then is this "voluntary poverty" which Dorothy Day notes in the closing words of *The Long Loneliness* is "for many people the most significant thing about the Catholic Worker"? I will attempt to answer this question, which Loraine has so rightfully posed, by exploring the meaning of voluntary poverty in the Catholic Worker tradition as well as its roots in Christianity.

For over seventy-five years Catholic Workers have followed Peter Maurin's and Dorothy Day's example by choosing to live with and take on many of the frustrations and humiliations of those who bear the greatest burden of unjust economic systems. These burdens include racism, the culture of acquisitive individualism, globalization, military spending, war, pollution, marketing of useless consumer products, etc. In doing so, Workers share in the reality of society's victims while working that there might be no more. Catholic Workers also become re-educated or conscientized by the poor themselves: those of privilege become aware of their partici-

pation (voluntary or not) in the oppression of the unprivileged, and recognize that their liberation is inseparable from the liberation of their materially poor sisters and brothers. Catholic Workers therefore embrace voluntary poverty not to say that lack of adequate provisions, dehumanizing jobs, exclusion, and hunger are desirable, but to say that these realities are a God-awful shame that we will not hide our face from, or abandon our destitute sisters and brothers within. Instead, strengthened by community and compelled by the taste of liberation, Catholic Workers take a wee-bit of it upon themselves.

Voluntary poverty must therefore be distinguished from the unchosen, and often inescapable, dehumanizing conditions which so many are forced to live in; this Maurin called destitution. Rather, voluntary poverty is a privilege of the privileged and therefore not deserving of great admiration unlike the many heroic mothers who come through the doors of Karen House: homeless and jobless yet managing to smile at the baby in their arms. It is our admiration for these women, our general malaise over the supposed benefits of affluence, and our awareness of the great violence upon which such "comforts" are built, that lead us to voluntary poverty. We embrace it both as an act of love and as a solution which provides an alternative to participating in systems of oppression and exclusion. It is a means of building communities based on mutuality and interdependence, and a path to forging authentic and just relationships.

Yet there is another reason that Catholic Workers embrace poverty: We can't deny its centrality to the gospel mes-

Carolyn Griffeth is finishing her degree at Aquinas Institute of Theology in May, and garden plans abound.

brace poverty: We can't deny its centrality to the gospel message or the call to self-giving love, detachment, and nonviolence found within all great spiritual traditions. Rather than being a Catholic Worker innovation, voluntary poverty is rooted in the Christian tradition beginning with the early Church where possessions were held in common. Comfortable Christians can not help but feel challenged by Jesus' teachings which have at least as much to say about the sin of riches as any other: "Woe to you who are rich . . . You cannot serve God and money. . . It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than a rich person to enter heaven . . . Do not lay up treasure for yourself on earth . . . If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor."<sup>1</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount itself, the cornerstone of Jesus' teaching, begins with the shockingly counterintuitive declaration: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20b). The original meaning of such a declaration is revealing. The Greek word, *ptôchos*, from which poor is translated, denotes "beggar," which within the honor-shame centered society of ancient Israel implied great shame.<sup>2</sup> Jesus declares the poor blessed, which might be translated as "how honorable," because God has chosen to live among them, to struggle for their liberation, and ultimately they, those now suffering (as Jesus did on the cross) will receive the highest honor in God's reign.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the first beatitude in Luke, which is directed at the poor themselves, the first beatitude in Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," is directed to Matthew's predominately middle-class community. Matthew's term "poor in spirit" alludes to Isaiah 61:1-4 which describes the *anawim*, a marginalized community whose poverty was an economic reality chosen for spiritual reasons: to preach good news to the poor and bring liberty to the oppressed.<sup>4</sup> Matthew uses this phrase therefore not to spiritualize poverty in order to make it more palatable to the privileged, but instead to call his community, in an especially provocative way, towards solidarity with the poor. By embracing voluntary poverty, Catholic Workers head the call of Matthew and become the "poor in spirit."

Voluntary poverty is thus an essential corrective for those of privilege whose faith and/or simple love of human-

ity requires them to renounce participation in systems of violence upon which affluence is built, and to instead place the full weight of their lives on the side of those struggling for a decent life. In the Dorothy Day Co-housing Community, we strive to achieve this ideal by building a community composed

*To love is to be happy, and yet to love is also to suffer. To love the poor, one must be one with them. We must show our love for Christ by our love for the poor, so how can there help but be a rejoicing at the chance to show this love?*

*Love means voluntary poverty...It also means non-participation in those luxuries manufactured by the exploitation of others.*

*Dorothy Day*

of individuals from diverse backgrounds in terms of race and opportunity, within which we love and support one another, so that all may have more fulfilling lives. By living simply, and even frugally, we have been able to share our resources with each other and send some of our children to better schools. We humbly realize that much of our voluntary poverty consists of the things poor, struggling families have long taken for granted like getting our clothes from thrift stores or donations, eating inexpensive and home-grown foods, centering our social life around pot-lucks (as in many African American churches), going without the latest conveniences, and sharing our homes with friends and family in need. Yet we also take on other "experiments in truth" according to our individual abilities and joys such as communal housing, the practice of dumpster diving, heating with scavenged wood, going without air conditioning or appliances, sharing bedrooms, sharing vehicles, and choosing to bike rather than drive.

There are no hard and fast rules to voluntary poverty; it is more about discerning what steps toward solidarity, justice, and right relationships one feels called to at a particular stage in one's life. For myself, and I believe for most in our community, the particular form of "voluntary poverty" which we embrace is ever changing. Not surprisingly, becoming a mother (and becoming married, but to a much smaller extent) has deeply challenged my ideals of poverty, as has struggling with chronic illness. Once I lived in a bedroom shared with homeless woman, didn't drive but instead rode a bike, ate strictly vegan, managed to almost never support multinational or otherwise corrupt corporations, and by living below poverty level, resisted paying federal taxes that go towards war. Today, my husband and I own our own house (which is shared with others); have health insurance (which is undoubtedly a system of violence and exclusion); get prescriptions at Walgreen's (since it has successfully put nearly all independent drug stores out of business); buy rehab.



supplies at Home Depot (which is destroying old-growth forest); and sadly, I drive daily, since I am no longer physically able to ride a bike. If ever I felt "pure," I don't anymore. Nonetheless, my life is continually enriched by struggling to share and to resist consumerism, growing food and practicing manual labor, doing without, attempting to rely on God and community rather than savings, avoiding first-hand clothes and toys, and cooking for many while spending as little as possible.<sup>5</sup> Yet voluntary poverty, like love itself, is not without costs: cars and homes are broken into, nature areas are far away, hauling and cutting wood for heat is a constant project, laundry without a dryer is labor-some, the lives of the poor are often "messy." On a more personal note, my son and I have both developed asthma (like nearly 1/4 of the children living in N. St. Louis) from the high levels of air pollution due to suburban sprawl and resulting commuter traffic.



Art by Jason Gonzales

Despite the costs, I believe it is this commitment to voluntary poverty, however expressed, which most significantly distinguishes the Catholic Worker. It is not only the basis for forging right relationships (both with the people of the world and with the earth itself), but also for creating bonds of community, for offering the Works of Mercy at a personal sacrifice, for being vulnerable before others in hospitality, for nonviolence, for a decentralized economy, and ultimately for expressing faith in a loving God. It is for all these reasons that although injustice and impoverishment are social sins, the poor are truly blessed. And it is for all these reasons that we chose, as so many spiritual pilgrims before us, to strive to become like the *anawim*, "the poor in spirit." ✦

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Holben, *All The Way to Heaven*, (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, Inc, 1997), 33f.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Hrrington, S.J., *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce J. Malina, and Ricard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 640.

<sup>5</sup> Come to Friday meal at Kabat House

# Singing and Dancing

## An Interview with Carl Kabat

*Peter Maurin said that the truth needs to be repeated every twenty years. If we think back to about 20 years ago, in the early 80's, the truth being proclaimed then was the necessity of nuclear disarmament. Ronald Reagan had been elected President in 1980 and proceeded to build up the United States' military budget. U.S. officials began to talk seriously about the possibility of using nuclear weapons in a "first-strike capacity". Peace activists from all over the world marched in the largest demonstration in U.S. history with purportedly a million people. But the decade started out with a much smaller, yet perhaps more profound action. In 1980 a group of peace activists calling themselves the Ploughshares Eight poured blood and hammered on the nose cones of Mark 12A warheads at a GE nuclear missile plant in Pennsylvania.*

*One of the Ploughshares Eight was Carl Kabat, an Oblate priest and already by 1980 a veteran non-violent resister of nuclear weapons, having begun his public witness in 1976. Radicalized by his mission work in Brazil and the Philippines, where the oppression of the poor can be directly related to the U.S. weapons sold to governments there, Carl had returned to the U.S. in 1973 unable to resume a comfortable "First World" life. He felt compelled to resist the evils of war and the instruments of war. His convictions led him to, among other things; spend three years living at Jonah House in Baltimore with Philip Berrigan and others. He participated in numerous non-violent protests, accumulating roughly 15 years in jails and prisons along the way.*

*After his last release from prison in 2002 he came to Karen House. At the time of this interview, he was preparing to leave in order to do, as he put it, "a non-violent public resistance to evil peace witness". At a farewell service for Carl, it became clear that he has completely endeared himself to the community, many of whom were probably just starting elementary school back in the days of his first Ploughshares action. The many charisms he has shared with the community include wood chopping lessons for the 'ritually challenged', a sympathetic ear to the stressed and lonely, the performance of the more formal sacraments when called upon, dumpstering with the best of them, and overall encouragement to the down-or only average-hearted. That Carl has won such a large place in the hearts of the community is a tribute to the integrity of his love.*

RT: You are getting ready to leave Karen House. And you are planning another action?

CK: Yes, on Good Friday I intend and hope to have a non-violent public resistance to evil peace witness at a missile silo in Colorado again. As I see it now, this could alter between now and then, basically [it will be] just a presence, unlawful entry into a missile silo enclosure.

RT: Tell me about some of your non-violent witnesses.

CK: Way back when, in 1984, we had in your state here, Missouri, Minuteman I's that were approximately 60 - 100 times more powerful than the ones we dropped on the Japanese. You had 100 of them between Colombia and Kansas City. The four of us, my brother Fr. Paul, Whitefeather, a Native American, and Helen Woodson plus myself acted there and we got 18, 18, 10 and 8 year sentences. They were reduced later on. But all of the missile silos from your state here are gone. They were Minuteman I's. There are Minuteman III's and MX missiles in Colorado, Kansas and Wyoming.

RT: So the ones here are gone because you all...

CK: No, no, no! (laughs) They were probably out of date. These had been in the ground 30 - 40 years. And there was SALT I or II and they were taken out.

RT: In Colorado, are the missiles out in a rural area?

CK: Yea, kind of like, basically, rocks in the field. They've been there so long that people don't even notice them. The only thing is there's a chain link fence around them but they're just out there. They're not guarded as such, except there are like, for every 10 missiles there's a control center. They're all sensitized so that if you get within 25 feet of the fence these motion sensors pick up and they send it back to the control center. If you're within 25 feet of the fence you're on federal property and could be charged with trespassing.

RT: So is that what you do? Continue to walk toward the fence?

CK: Oh no, no, no. Last time, in the year 2000, a man named Bill Sulzman from Colorado and I went into a missile silo. I had gone across the fence. Bill had two hip replacements so I had to crawl up one side and down the other. Bill stood right next to the gate within the 25 feet. They arrested both of us but they finally dropped charges for Bill. In Missouri in 1984 Whitefeather, Helen Woodson, my brother Fr. Paul and myself went into M 5 with a van - an old, what we called a "yellow bomber", with a compressor and jackhammer.

See the whole business is that the Old Testament says

Ellen Rehg is thinking of expanding her repertoire to include C.W., mother, philosopher and now, electrician.

that they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. So we called ourselves the Silo Pruning Hooks. So we snapped the lock on the gate and drove this thing in there. Of course we had the thing running before we arrived there. The compressor was running, hooked up with the jackhammer, and if we could have stayed there a month, night and day, 24 hours a day...These are six foot concrete reinforced lids.

RT: You were trying to drill through the lid.

CK: Well, symbolic, but real. We used sledgehammers, bolt cutters, jackhammer, etc. and did \$40,000 worth of damage to the insane, ungodly things. In my judgment it's very much like mauling the gas chambers. If you're old enough, like I am, you remember World War II where the gas chambers or crematoria killed five or six million.

Well, your missiles here in Missouri, Minuteman I's, were 100 times more powerful than the bombs we dropped on the Japanese and those killed approximately 100,000. If you multiply by 100 that would give you 10 million people per bomb. That was the Minuteman I, one bomb on one missile. The MX was supposed to be made to hold eight to twelve bombs. This almost makes Hitler look like a piker. Really insane.

RT: So tell me, how many times have you done one of these actions?

CK: (laughs) I really...uh. I go back to '76. The first peace witness was in Plains, Georgia with Jimmy Carter. So that's almost 30 years. So I'd really have to sit down and try to figure it out. I know approximately how much actual time I've had in jail. Since 78 - 79 I've had approximately 15 1/2 years of jail time for non-violent public resistance to evil and nuclear insanity.

RT: Why do you keep doing these actions?

CK: My question is, what else can you do?

Sixty-five percent of so of the American people say that they should be gotten rid of, well, we still have them. And I'm not really up on the day-to-day of SALT II, SALT III. We've negated it because at some time, I don't know who was head of this country but we have pretty well said we won't abide by anything. We'll do whatever we want to and that's it. So why do you keep doing it? What else can you do? You can write to the President, write to your Congressperson, Senators, etc, etc. Have rallies, have this, have that.

Basically I base [what I am going to do] on the non-violent public resistance to evil that Jesus did. The same thing with Gandhi and King. At one time, this was 2000 or 2001, in Florence Colorado when I was in jail during Black History Month they invited me to speak to the group and my theme was that Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King are the three most important people known in the last 2000 years. Because they used non-violence - and it's very important to be non-violent - they resisted evil openly and clearly. And of course they suffered because of it. So you ask, why do I keep doing it? If anybody could figure out a better thing, well then do it!

You don't have to check with me or anyone else! I don't know anything else.

RT: What good have you seen come out of your actions?

CK: It's not a matter of some good coming out or not coming out; in my judgment it's a matter of faithfulness. God is the head person, and certainly these are anti-God, in fact, they're insane. Again, in comparison with the gas chambers and the crematoria, what should the German people have done? In my judgment - of course, they would have been killed - [they should have] take[n] a bulldozer and crush the gas chambers and crematoria. These [weapons] are basically the same thing.

RT: I wanted to ask you about jail time. How do you survive it? Is it life giving in any way?

CK: Well I would say it's really not life giving at all. First of all the prisons are all crowded. We're number one in the world with the number of people per 100,000 with longer jail sentences. And in jail I'm not Carl Kabat I am 030230045. That's who I am. It's impersonal and it's so jammed, so many people that I don't think you could get any prison official to say that they are attempting to rehabilitate any person. It's just basically punishment. If you want evil people, put them in jail. They will make them.

RT: So how do you handle it?

CK: Well, all kinds of ways. First of all we [protesters] are the only real threats to the system and the structure. The rest of [the prisoners] are just cooperating with the system. If you want to make money, sell drugs. We know Enron; we know all kinds of other things. I'm there for a good cause, a good reason. And so that makes it all worthwhile. I'm trying to be a follower of Jesus, and to carry the cross everyday so that in many ways I feel more free in there than I do out here. And more, if you want to use a term, fulfilled than out here. I've

been out a year plus, year and a half, whatever it is and I probably feel I should have tried to make a non-violent public resistance to evil statement about all kinds of things: racism, sexism, thisism, thatism, nuclearism. We've had two wars. Just yesterday we had six boys killed. So how do you try to say this is wrong?

RT: How has jail been fulfilling to you?

CK: Well I work off the principle, you do what needs to be done and then sing and dance.

RT: That sounds like a good principle! I like that!

CK: That's why I kind of liked when your daughter was dancing at Mike and Teka's wedding! That was the touch of God as far as I was concerned. Well, just like raising kids, you do what you can do and you hope! Sing and dance. ✚



Photo of Carl by Christen Parker

# Further Reading on the Catholic Worker

## General CW Titles

- \* The Long Loneliness -Dorothy Day
- \* Loaves and Fishes - Dorothy Day
- \* Selected Writings of Dorothy Day- Ed. Robert Ellsberg
- \* Easy Essays- Peter Maurin
- \* Peter Maurin: Prophet in the 20th Century - Marc Ellis
- \* Love is the Measure - Jim Forrest
- \* A Radical Devotion - Robert Coles
- \* A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker - Ed. Pat Coy
- \* Dorothy Day: Portraits by Those Who Knew Her -Rosalie Riegele
- \* A Penny A Copy: Readings from the Catholic Worker - Ed. Thomas Cornell, James Forest

## Two CW Websites

- \* [www.catholicworker.org](http://www.catholicworker.org)
- \* [www.catholicworker.com](http://www.catholicworker.com)

## The Decentralized Society

- \* The Indispensable Chomsky -Noam Chomsky
- \* Anarchism: Left, Right and Green - Ulrike Heider

## The Green Revolution

- \* Toxic Deception - Dan Fagin & Marianne Lavelle

- \* Our Ecological Footprint - Mathis Wackernagel & William Reese
- \* The Natural House - Dan Chiras
- \* Crashing the Party - Ralph Nader

## Nonviolence

- \* Uprooting War - Brian Martin
- \* The Essential Gandhi - Louis Fischer
- \* A Testament of Hope: Essential Writings and Speeches of MLK - Ed. James Washington
- \* Peace Be With You - Eileen Egan
- \* The Universe Bends Towards Justice - Ed. Angie O'Gorman

## Personalism, Works of Mercy

- \* See General CW titles
- \* Community & Growth -Jean Vanier

## Manual Labor

- \* Fair Trade: [globalexchange.org](http://globalexchange.org)
- \* Jobs With Justice: 314-644-0466
- \* The Catholic Action Network: [catholicactionnetwork.org](http://catholicactionnetwork.org)
- \* The Downtown Teens: (our neighborhood youth work group) 314-621-0079

## Karen House Needs:

100% Juice  
Used Bicycles  
Money for House Repairs  
Tools- please call first  
Summer Housetakers & Cooks  
BOX FANS !!!

## Announcements:

After many months of discussion and negotiation,  
the Karen House community...  
NOW OFFICIALLY OWNS KAREN HOUSE!!

We plan to put the building into some kind of land  
trust. Many thanks to all who have supported us  
through this process.



St. Liborius and Convent  
taken sometime before 1955

*The Round Table* is the quarterly journal of Catholic Worker life and thought in St. Louis. Subscriptions are free.  
Please write to *The Round Table*, 1840 Hogan, St. Louis, MO. 63106. Donations are gladly accepted to help us  
continue our work with the poor. People working on this issue include: Joe Angert, Teka Childress, Carol Giles, Rehg,  
and Jenny Truax. Letters to the editor are encouraged; we'll print as many as space permits.

## **The Round Table**

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