

A Social Activist comes to Dorothy Day for Spiritual Direction in 2019

Dorothy Day (DD): Please come and be seated. I am glad you want to visit. Not many social activists would think of seeking direction from an old time labor activist like me, especially an old Catholic one at that.

Social Activist (SA): You became a Catholic social activist, but you started out as simply a social activist and I am coming to you because you never gave up.

DD: Tell me, my sister, what brings you here.

SA: I come because all the social activists that I know, who I think are all wanting to do good things are unhappy and angry. Some of them have egos so large it is hard not to trip over them when you meet them coming down the hall. I want to know how to follow in your footsteps in 2019. You had a combination of humility and perseverance that seems missing today.

DD: Well there is certainly a lot to be unhappy about out there in 2019. I don't see anger as bad as an energy. It wakes us up and gets us into action, but you are asking an important and deeper question which I might phrase like this — *What is the source of energy for change that is going to be most effective to bring justice to heal our world? Would that be fair?*

SA: Yes, very much so. Things really do seem bad. We have leaders who are racist, misogynist, and rapist and who turn their back on first world causes of global warming, which will most harshly affect the lives of the poor and those in third world countries. There is a lot to be angry about.

DD: As I say, anger is good if we use that energy to get us into the game, but it is not a source of energy to heal. Too many well-meaning people today come from a place of judgement that goes something like — *everyone should be doing something to make the world better, especially the things I think they should be doing.*

SA: I guess I might fall into the well meaning judgmental group. Everyone doing something to make things better may be a judgement, but it sounds pretty good to me.

DD: Yes it does sound good at first blush, but when you look at it more closely you see that it is coming from a place of critical judgement and superiority. Who gives anyone the right to decide what makes things better? If you start from that judgmental place of superiority, then you will end up being an angry person whose ego is all tied up in changing the world in the way you think is right. Usually our ego-fueled projects if they are not accomplished quickly lead to burn out.

These are good people, who get parodied by the right-wingers who project their assumed superiority on people trying to do good by referring to them as limousine liberals trying to impose their values on others. There is some glimmer of truth in this accusation, that is the reason it stings. The other reason it stings is because it is coming from a judgmental place of superiority – the much more burnt pot is calling the kettle black.

SA: Wow, I do feel that sting. You admitted things are really bad, so what energy do we harness to change things or is that wrong. I can't believe you want us to give up?

DD: You know from my life giving up is the last thing that I would suggest to anyone. Our desire to do good simply needs to start from a different place. We all landed here on this beautiful earth without doing a single thing to make that happen. Our life and this creation were all given to us. We did nothing to cause ourselves or the planet to come into being.

Regardless of your religious faith or lack thereof, we are recipients of the most incredible gifts imaginable. Our task is to show our appreciation and thanks by giving the earth and life, including all plant and animal life and human life, honor and respect.

We all are dependent upon thousands of other people for the things we eat, the clothes we wear and the many material things we enjoy. All those people who make these things possible are entitled to our respect and honor. When you start from this place you are starting from a place of love and not a place of judgement. What you do may look the same, but how it is done and the way you effect other human beings in the process is vastly different.

SA: Hmm. I think I see what you are saying. But what about protesting racism and discrimination against women. Isn't that being judgmental about past unjust treatment? Shouldn't we be doing that?

DD: Yes, of course, that is simply a natural way of honoring women and all people's humanity and dignity. We simply do it in a way that does not dishonor the other half of humanity. Seeking fairness is about as respectful as one can be to oneself and to others.

SA: Is there a theological base for this distinction you are making on where the energy comes from to work for social justice — between energy coming from I-think-I-know-better and working on a cause in order to honor the dignity of creation and every human being.

DD: In 2019, according to Contemplative Christian thinking, the former would be a dualistic approach to addressing a problem; it judges and divides. The latter would be seen as a non-dual approach, that tries to see in wholeness. Theologically you could say the second is an attempt to see with the eyes of Christ, to see through the eyes of love rather than seeing through the filter of what one's ego thinks is bad or good.

Let me be quick to say I am not suggesting some relativistic morality. We must discern good and evil in order to know how to honor creation and humankind, but we don't start from a place of judgement and superiority. We start from a place of goodness and wholeness.

SA: I don't know anything about Contemplative Christianity. Is it something new?

DD: Yes and no. It has been around a long time. It probably reached its zenith in the Middle Ages in the lives of mystics like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Contemplative Christianity is now in resurgence, so in that sense it is being re-discovered and is something new.

Thomas Merton might be seen as one of the modern teachers of the contemplative way of seeing the world, as well as current teachers like Franciscan Father Richard Rohr and Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault. Significantly, it is also one of the main vehicles for interspiritual dialogue, which is beginning to grow among people of different religions and people who are deeply spiritual but do not identify with a particular religion.

SA: That is interesting. At the time you are describing in the Middle Ages as the height of non-dual mysticism there were all these monasteries and convents. Would you want these revitalized to help energize this perspective of Contemplative Christianity?

DD: Yes, but I would retread them in a very different way. The church didn't require celibacy of priests and monks until the Middle Ages. It was done then for economic reasons, as a way to be sure that the church and not a priest's family inherited the priest's property. At this time the church was as much a secular power as a religious one, and it was eager to increase its economic power to preserve its influence over secular society. Required celibacy to lead a religious life is a bad idea. We all see the perversion it has led to in the church. It is truly a horrible sin against the Spirit, against our very life force.

But I think there is a place for monasteries and convents today, but not for people to become celibate and certainly not to be there for life. Monasteries and convents in Christianity should function in the same way they do in certain Buddhist traditions and Zen Buddhism. Most people don't go to these monasteries for life, rather they go there for a few formative years to grow up emotionally in a safe place and to have a place to learn the contemplative practices and disciplines that foster a non-dual way of seeing the world.

SA: Wow, that is a crazy idea. I have become aware of so many people under the age of 25 attempting suicide. The psyche wards are full of young people. Something is really toxic in our culture.

DD: Going to a monastery would not be for everyone obviously, but for those sincere spiritual seekers — wouldn't it be great if you could go to a Christian monastery for a couple of years just like young Zen monks do? We need to have places where a young person feels free to find out who he or she really is and learn basic tools to emotionally and spiritually become that person. Young people need a safe place where they can ask in healthy ways the kind of ultimate questions that, when not asked and discussed, make self-inflicted death for a young person seem a viable option.

SA: I mean it sounds crazy good. Do you think the Catholic church would listen to you now if you were here to suggest it?

DD: Probably not, they didn't do much listening to me when I was alive. But as rusty and leaky as those old pipes of religion are sometimes there is life giving water in them.

SA: What should I do to be the kind of social activist you are talking about?

DD: This is where the idea of a couple years in a monastery is so attractive. You would need to learn basic contemplative practices, such as Centering Prayer, to begin to experience seeing the world in a non-dual way. Once you have this radically different perspective on life you are ready to start bringing dignity and integrity to human beings in whatever social cause you feel led to.

Contemplative practices initially require a lot of self focus and discipline, but the result of the non-dual experience is that we realize we are not simply isolated human beings randomly moving about. We experience that we are all connected. Contemplation quite naturally leads to community and then social activism arises out of the community as a way to honor and respect the earth and all people because we are connected to everyone. So if the Catholic church did take my suggestion and turned monasteries and convents into opportunities for young people to mature in a contemplative atmosphere, before long we could have tens of thousands of young people, graduating from their monastic experiences and becoming social activists. I am giddy at the thought.

SA: So social activism, in your view, is not about learning how to help the poor, which is a judgement and movement, right at the start, to a perspective of superiority. Rather it is learning to be in touch deeply enough with the self that you realize you are connected to everyone else, as well as to all the natural world, and then your social activism simply is a product of showing honor and respect to all things.

DD: You are quick. You have it. The important thing to note is that this shift is not a matter of intellectual learning. You don't make this shift in perspective by studying a text book. Quite the opposite. You only make this shift in perspective by having the actual experience of connection with the natural world and others. Such experiences of connectedness are the

product of your contemplative practices. These create a non-dual perspective from an internal shift in sensibility.

SA: Well, right now monasteries and convents are closed to would-be activists like me wanting to come by for a period of time to bone up on contemplative practices. How should I start?

DD: In 2019, there are many centering prayer groups and workshops where you can learn about contemplative practices. Take your time. You want to figure out who you are first before rushing out to try to fix someone else. Only when you really know who you really are will you feel the rightness of bringing your gifts into the world to honor others and the earth.

All of the great religions recognize that in growing up, to be psychologically healthy, one needs to develop a sense of separate self. This occurs naturally. The next stage of development, however, takes time and effort and that is to realize one is both separate and an inseparable part of the whole mystery of creation. This second unfolding process is admittedly self-focused for a period of time, but the maturity it brings always brings a wider more connected and inclusive vision.

Most of the great religions teach the ideals of the second stage of growth, but they do so in a way that the ego feels it needs to learn them and achieve them through ego self-will. This way of trying to achieve emotional and spiritual maturity doesn't work, because it relies on the ego to get there, when the whole object is to move beyond experiencing the world as an individual ego self. Fortunately, this second process is also taught experientially, without being ego centered, by the mystical traditions of all the great religions. Humankind is at the stage now where we all need to grow in this way, if the planet is to survive.

SA: Thank you so much for our conversation. You have given me a lot to think upon. As I sit here and think about what you have said, it seems there is no down side to giving contemplative practices a try. If I find they work I will know from the experience itself.

DD: If you can do your social activism work grounded in contemplative practices you will be ahead of the game. As Jesus said, your yoke will be an easy yoke. You are not the superior being trying to change the world for good then, rather you are connected to everything and you are simply trying

to honor this amazing gift of creation and human life. On the other hand, not to do anything would in my mind be worst.

SA: So you think it is okay to plunge in even though I know nothing about contemplative practices.

DD: Many a good thing has been accomplished by the efforts of a young ego that later matured into a person of greater consciousness, which transformation allowed that person to thrive in a non-judgmental, deeply spirited way doing social activism work.

Anger, which is basically outraged ego, is often the booster rocket that gets one propelled into a life of honoring others. Nothing wrong with that. But to make it for the long haul the energy must mature to a more contemplative perspective.

SA: So even though I don't know anything about contemplative practices if I do social activist work in a manner grounded in honoring the earth and others I am starting from the better place.

DD: Quite right. I believe Jesus came to give us life more abundantly. A more abundant life is all around us, just like God's presence is always there. Having it is a matter of inner work that gives us a new perspective, seeing with the mind of Christ.

To have an abundant life, it is our job to open our awareness to this richer and more abundant perspective from which to experience life. The tools I know to do that are contemplative ones that teach us how to honor all people by allowing for the transformation of our consciousness so we see in wholeness.

Those tools were taught in the monasteries and convents in the Christian church in the Middle Ages and are taught today in the Christian church by many but especially contemplative followers of Father Keating, a leader of this movement, who died just recently.

SA: Do other religions have a similar contemplative perspective as a part of their social activism?

DD: Yes, and Christianity has gained much from learning about Eastern religious perspectives. Much of this learning has occurred in the West over the past fifty years.

Back in the sixties a number of young spiritual seekers, a lot of them Jewish, went to India seeking spiritual answers. Many became Buddhist. They returned to the United States and brought with them meditation experiences and practices that had helped them to acquire the ability to see with a non-dual perspective.

So the perspective that I am suggesting to you, which is so important if your social activist work is to be healing and create solidarity is not one limited to Christianity. I talk about it from that perspective because that is my faith.

The good news is that this perspective is out there anchored in the mystical perspectives of all world religions. As such it is the secret sauce which has the chance for us to address the problems of man's inhumanity to man and the earth with respect, honor and love.

SA: Thank you for your insights sister Dorothy. It is okay for me to call you sister is it not.

DD: (grins) I see you are getting it already. Thank you, sister.