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The simple life of Jose Hobday

John Dear | May. 19, 2009 On the Road to Peace

With the global economy collapsing, wars still raging, the climate warming and nuclear arsenals threatening -- plus church folk arraying themselves along divisions ever more hostile -- the need to live according to God?s ways seems more urgent than ever. The daily reality of suffering keeps proclaiming that everything must change. It declares that we need God?s gift of peace, that ?we must be the change we seek.?

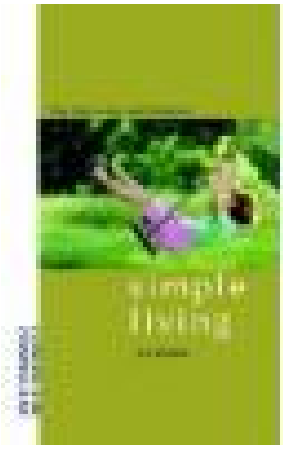
The world?s suffering calls to us to turn away from the fray of violence toward the Way of nonviolence. And that, dear friends, requires quality time for quiet prayer and peaceful relationships. It requires that we tend the earth, give alms to the needy, support justice and peace movements.

And enter upon the path of downward mobility. Downward mobility -- a clever term that overturns national presumptions and counters cultural aspirations. It names the process of simplifying our lives and forging solidarity with the meekest of the world.

This past Palm Sunday, April 5, we lost one of the great teachers of downward mobility, my friend Sr. Jose Hobday. She wrote the book on it, literally.

Sister José was one of the great spiritual teachers of our times. Born in Texas to a Seneca-Iroquois mother and a Southern Baptist father, José was both a Seneca elder and a Franciscan nun. She became a full time lecturer and for decades gave workshops across the country on prayer and spirituality.

She used her Native American insights about love of the earth, family, community and the simple life to inspire others to live a more authentic life of prayer, simplicity, poverty, peace and wonder.



In her classic book, *Simple Living*, recently republished by Continuum, she writes that simple living "is about freedom. It's about a freedom to choose open and generous living rather than a secure and sheltered way. ... Simple living is about moving through life rather lightly, delighting in the plain and the subtle."

She and I spoke at a conference together and I got to know her well. Later, while in her corner of the world, I paid her a visit in her ramshackle rooms in the back of a small home in Tucson. She wrote me and called me often, and I was amazed that despite her profound illnesses, her many surgeries, and her confinement to a wheel chair, she bubbled over with life, stories and joy.

Her deportment and presence dispelled most of my worries, especially about the church, and her infectious passion stirred eagerness in me to live more in solidarity with the poor and to know God better. The two are one and the same.

And her stories! I loved to be regaled by her. She told how Dorothy Day called her in the late 1960s, and asked to make a retreat with her. José was living in a poor slum of East Los Angeles, and Dorothy balked at seeking out a first-world retreat house or rectory. She wanted to pray in the thick of the heat, the poverty, and the noise.

José agreed, but under one condition: that every evening Dorothy allow José to cook a good dinner, and at mealtime each night Dorothy tell José her life story. Dorothy agreed.

I find this very moving. José gave Dorothy a safe place for her to reflect on her life journey. More, she offered a loving presence for Dorothy to tell her story and thereby to come to discern how God had been with her on the journey. It reminds me of the Visitation, when two other great women, Mary and Elizabeth, shared how God was at work in their lives. Such sharing always leads to the Magnificat, which is to say, the prophetic proclamation of God at work disarming the world.

And another story. The mid-70s rolled around, and organizers asked José to emcee the Eucharistic Conference in Philadelphia. In this particular sessions were some five thousand women. Two speakers were on hand: Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa, both close friends of José.

First, José introduced Mother Teresa -- on that day in a foul mood. She rose to the podium, all fire and brimstone, and excoriated the women in the audience. You nuns -- why aren?t wearing your habits? You mothers -- how is it you?re here and not home with your children? The women withered and blanched. Mother Teresa had left them hurt and angry, and she returned to her seat to the deafening sound of silence. Not a pair of hands offered applause. Mother Teresa seemed taken aback.

With tension now on the air, José introduced Dorothy Day. She sidled up to Mother Teresa and leaned in close and issued something in the nature of a rebuke: ?Mother, you know I love you more than anyone. But don?t you ever say anything like that again. You have alienated and hurt all these good women. They need our

encouragement!? As far as anyone knows, Mother Teresa never did.

?Did I tell you about Henri Nouwen?? she asked me once over grilled cheese sandwiches in her apartment. José and Henri had spoken together at a conference attended by thousands in the early '80s, not long after Henri?s mother had died. In tribute to her, he had written In Memoriam, published just that week.

Henri asked José if she would meet him between sessions. When they met, Henri said, ?I have a big favor to ask. I?m still trying to grieve my mother?s death, and I need someone to listen to me. Would you let me read my book out loud to you?? Henri let the book fall open and for the next several hours, read his tale slowly through tears as José listened on, a safe, gentle, loving presence.

José?s stories amaze me, but they shouldn?t. She was a source of strength, inspiration and compassion for many, a true Franciscan who lived a simple life. She had few possessions, loved her neighbors, served those in need, and always sought bring cheer and aid.

She loved outrageously. On Valentine?s Day when she was eight, she came upon the idea of sending a Valentine?s card to the beleaguered pope, a gesture she repeated every year. Her affection was requited. In the late 1950s a note came to her from Italy, all trimmed in gold.

?My dear José, I have never received a Valentine?s card in my life. No one has ever loved me enough to do this. Thank you so much. It means more than you realize. God bless you. Happy Valentine?s Day to you, too! Your friend, signed, John XXIII.?

In *Simple Living*, José writes that to achieve free-wheeling love, compassion and joy, we have to give away our possessions, try to be as poor as possible, let go of power and control, and seek radical dependence on God. Downward mobility and voluntary poverty not only remind us of our need for God, but counter the current reliance on corporations, fueled by greed, Wall Street values, and first-world consumerism.

Simple living means sharing what we have, relying on God and one another, and offering an alternative future of economic sharing and global equality. José teaches us how we can emulate Gospel economics in a time of economic upheaval. Instead of seeking money, possessions and job security, we seek God and one another, and live in solidarity with those in need as best we can. In the process, we relinquish our need for fear and violence, get disarmed, and become more and more nonviolent.

Her book offers practical advice. It outlines concrete ways to simplify as to food, clothing, shelter, work, transportation and recreation. She writes that voluntary poverty is rich with blessings, especially a profound sense of freedom and adventure. ?We are created for adventure and it is this spirit of adventure that simplicity nurtures.?

I called her late last year and found her busy with visitors. ?I?ve been thinking of you,? she said, ?and I have something for you to do. About twenty times a day, I want you to stop what you?re doing, and empty yourself completely. Let go of everything inside you that is not of God, that is not the Holy Spirit, that is not loving and peaceful. Then, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you from head to toe. Do that twenty times a day and you will be filled with peace and joy. Gotta go.?

Those were her last words to me. Not only did she offer typical helpful advice (try it!), she left a clue about her way toward freedom, peace and joy.

May we all catch her contagious spirit.

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© John Dear will offer a weekend retreat on the Sermon on the Mount at Loyola in Chicago on June 26-27. To register, contact, www.asrenewal.org, or email, aluther@luc.edu. St. Anthony Messenger?s Press has just published John Dear On Peace, by Patricia Normile. John?s two new books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). For information on his books and speaking schedule, see: www.johndear.org

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