

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**KATE HENNESSY** is a writer and the youngest grandchild of Dorothy Day, a prominent Catholic, writer, social activist, and co-founder of a movement dedicated to serving the poorest of the poor. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** about her recent book *Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved by Beauty*.

**HEVELONE:** The title of your book, *Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved by Beauty (An Intimate Portrait of My Grandmother)*, is based on a quote by Dostoevsky that your grandmother really loved at the end of her life. Why did Dorothy Day believe that the world will be saved by beauty? How does that title help us understand both her and the story you're telling in the book?

**HENNESSY:** I'm reluctant to ascribe what it meant for her, because she never spelled that out. She oftentimes would wake up in the morning, and that phrase would come to her mind. She didn't talk about why; it was just what came into her mind again and again. I think I latched onto that phrase because it has great meaning for me, but I don't want to speak for her. I think that it's very easy to do that—to fall into that trap, thinking that you understand other people when you don't really have any proof. It speaks to me because she taught me about beauty, and how to see beauty under the most difficult circumstances.

She saw beauty in Staten Island. Staten Island was where she experienced her conversion, where my mother was conceived, and where my mother learned how to walk. Staten Island was the place my grandmother would retreat to whenever she needed to kind of go for some spiritual sustenance. But if you've ever

been to Staten Island, you would realize that it's not very beautiful. It's been trampled by many years of use and abuse. She would go out and sit on the beach, and she would be surrounded by garbage that had washed up on the shore. She would see the garbage, but she would see something deeper, and that was its fundamental beauty that you cannot lose, no matter what.



This is such a powerful way of looking at the world because we often get caught up in what isn't beautiful. That attitude can be wearing and despairing. To me, Dorothy's way of seeing the world is a way of switching our perceptions, turning them on their head, and recognizing the deeper integrity of beauty.

Another reason why "the world will be saved by beauty" speaks to me is that I think that beauty has to be interpreted differently by everyone. I can't define what beauty is, and I don't want to define beauty. I don't want to make judgments

on what is beautiful and what isn't beautiful. What I'm interested in is the visceral feeling of beauty, not saying, "oh, that is beautiful," but feeling transported by beauty, however that comes to you. I think we each have our own ways or things that happen that transport us in that manner.

I think this awareness of what I'm calling beauty, what Dostoevsky called beauty, what my grandmother called beauty, in a way it is the face of God, or it's the way we tap into the divine. It's the way we step out of ourselves, out of our intellectual selves, which gets us into trouble often. That's kind of why the title really affects me.

The story of my mother and grandmother is a powerful, difficult, sad, loving, and ultimately hopeful story. I think that there is beauty in that suffering, there is beauty in that love, there is beauty in that hope, and to me these are real topics. This is what I'm interested in, and this is what they were interested in. So it's kind of like: "the world will be saved by beauty." What more can I say, except that I believe it absolutely?

**HEVELONE:** It struck me as I was reading how much your mother struggled to define herself over and against your grandmother. At the same time, she was profoundly influenced by her as a mother

and then also as an activist. And then we get to you.

In a way you've reclaimed both your mother and your grandmother in identifying with them. Your mother had to push herself away, but it seems like you are now bringing them back together and putting yourself in the mix by writing this book. Do you think that's true?

**HENNESSY:** Absolutely. Just as my mother had to push herself away and discover who she is, I've had to do the same with both of them, because they both are such strong influences in my life. They are the most important influences in my life. When you have that kind of influence, you have to push both of them away. I had to step away from my mother's world, my grandmother's world, and I had to take off. I took off for a good ten years. Of course I visited my mother, but I had to find my own way, which is essential for anyone

In terms of reclaiming it, I think that I've absolutely been able to say, "yes, I understand my grandmother," and writing the book helped me in this. I see her in me. I will never be able to get rid of that. It's genetic. The same is true for my mother.

For years, I thought that they were representing opposites for me, particularly in issues of spirituality, and so it's been very hard for me to reconcile within myself what seemed to be a conflict. Of course there was conflict between them, but ultimately they sorted it out. I don't have to worry about that anymore, though I did want to write about them in a way that brought them together in ways they couldn't do when they were alive. That was really for my benefit, not theirs. As I said, they're done with that. They sorted it and moved on. I had to work out within myself what looked to me like two very different, conflicting strands of their lives, their actions, and their beliefs, and to discover that I actually can hold both of them at the same time, and I can feel totally at home with both of them. Yet

I still have my task, which is to find my own way within that.

**HEVELONE:** I'm curious about your grandmother's draw to Catholicism, because she wasn't raised Catholic. There were no Catholics in her family, as you say in the book. Do you have any sense of what in particular about Catholicism drew her versus other types of Christianity?

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**HENNESSY:** I can't add anything more to that than she has already written. Still, I'm not sure if she really wrote clearly about it. She did say that, to her, it was the Church of the Poor—that all of these churches and cathedrals were built on the pennies of the poor. That meant a lot to her. I think she also had a real affinity

to immigrants in New York City, which is where she was born. She didn't grow up in New York, but she returned to New York when she was a teenager. She had a real connection with all kinds of immigrants coming into the city and, while there were Jewish immigrants that she was very much attracted to, the Catholic immigrants were the ones going to the church.

That said, I don't really know what grabbed her and I don't think she really knew what grabbed her, either. I can only guess, ultimately. My grandmother had a lot of layers to her. She was a very physical person. She loved the physical world and the physicality of the sacraments. She loved art, music, and literature. And I think she found these elements in the Catholic Church. I think she also was a natural mystic, and that Catholicism gave her a path for that.

Other than that, I really have to say this is pure speculation on my part. This is a question that many people ask, and she herself didn't really satisfactorily answer it. It's a mystery, as many of the best things are.

**HEVELONE:** Can you talk about the role Peter Maurin played in Dorothy Day's life and in founding the Catholic Worker [Movement]?

**HENNESSY:** It was a very interesting relationship. I think that the Catholic Worker Movement would not have come into being without the two of them coming together. Before she met Peter Maurin, my grandmother really did not know what the social teachings of the church were. Peter introduced her to them. She had been wondering. She had been waiting. "How do I combine the radical activist life with the religious life?" Before Peter, she saw no way that they were things that could be combined. It was either one or the other, and she had chosen Catholicism, but she felt she was sitting there doing nothing.

So Peter comes to her and says, well, here are the teachings of the Church on social justice, and it was just explosive for her. Peter was also a writer. He wrote these essays and poems in a very interesting tradition—this kind of chanting of his thoughts of how to change the world or, as he would say, how to make the world a place where it's easier to be good. He came to her and asked if she would publish these ideas. As a journalist, she heard, “start a newspaper,” and that was what she did.

Since she was a journalist, she knew how to start a newspaper. She knew how to lay out a newspaper. She knew the whole step. That was the small beginning, which of course mushroomed into this amazing movement, or, as Peter used to call it, organism. It certainly wasn't an organization. There was no organizing at all happening with the Catholic Worker Movement.

In terms of their relationship, they were two very different people. He wasn't really interested in the personal. He never engaged in personal conversation, while she was very interested in the personal. He wasn't interested in literature. He had a one-track mind. He saw what was happening in the world. He said we have to study the past and the present in order to change the future, so that was what he was focused on.

She had much broader areas of interest. As I said before, she loved music, art and literature, and Peter didn't. There were many ways in which they didn't meet eye to eye. But in terms of the vision that they both had and the energy that they both had, the sparks were flying.

It was always very hard for my grandmother to feel that people would forget about Peter, because he wasn't as engaging as she was. He was very hard to understand because he had a very thick accent. People just kind of judged him on that or judged him on his presentation. Sometimes he didn't quite understand his audience, and he would start talking



about arcane French theology to people who wanted to know about how to deal with a strike. So, he certainly wasn't the face of the Catholic Worker Movement. My grandmother was the face and the voice of the Catholic Worker Movement, but she always felt that she would have done nothing without Peter—that she just would have never found a way to focus her skills in a way that would have been satisfying if she hadn't met him.

**HEVELONE:** I was surprised about your grandmother's positions on the education of your mother, Tamar. Dorothy Day discouraged her daughter from attending school. She herself had struggled against her father because she wanted to be a journalist and he felt that that wasn't appropriate for her, as a woman, to be a journalist. Do you think that this sort of condescension towards formal education, particularly for women, seeped into those early years of the *Catholic Worker*, or was this more of a personal struggle between your mother and your grandmother?

**HENNESSY:** First, it wasn't just education for women. It was education across the board. Secondly, I think it was very personal, because my grandmother certainly encouraged other people to go to school. It was a Day family trait to be dismissive of higher education. Both my grandmother's older brothers dropped

out of school when they were fifteen and started to work as journalists, and they both were very intelligent. One brother spoke five languages. There was a sentiment within the Day family that higher education was a waste of time, particularly if you were a journalist. You just needed to get to work as soon as possible, and fifteen was a great time to start working, for the boys, that is.

My grandmother would often say to my mother, “Oh, you don't need that. You already know it.” To her mind, she was being supportive, but to my mother's mind, she was being dismissive.

In terms of a personal struggle between them—beyond my mother's education—it's hard to know, but this is how my mother felt years later. My mother was very different as a child. She was extremely shy, and she had a hard time connecting with people. She learned differently. She wasn't reading and writing as quickly as her cousins, let's say. My grandmother's interpretation of that was that my mother really wasn't an intellectual, and never would be an intellectual. Now, of course, we know a lot more about learning differences, and the truth of the matter is that my mother was highly intelligent. She just worked differently. As we have come to understand more of this great spectrum that we work on,



she certainly saw many of her behaviors as possibly autistic. In the last decade of my mother's life, she was able to start interpreting her life through this information. But when she was growing up we didn't know these things. We didn't talk about these things. My grandmother felt that my mother was labeled as a special child—that it would be better for her to be directed towards crafts rather than towards academics.

My mother did love crafts, so it's not a clear-cut thing. We are all very complex people, so it shouldn't have been one or the other. She really desired to test herself academically. Her family members on her father's side were academics, so she watched her cousins growing up and being highly educated while there she was, having battled with her mother and then marrying young.

**HEVELONE:** Can you talk more about your mother's young marriage to your father David Hennessy, the struggles that they had because of his alcoholism and abuse, and how that impacted your mother's choice to move away from Catholicism?

**HENNESSY:** My mother had a few issues with Catholicism. She would always say to her mother "I was raised a Catholic. You weren't. You don't understand these things." And I think to a certain extent she was right.

One of the things that my mother believed—and I think this is probably the greatest difficulty that my mother had and why she left the church—is that we are all children of God. This is something that she learned at the Catholic Worker. She did not believe in divisions, and both she and my grandmother were aware from early on that the Catholic Worker attracted a lot of men who were gay. Of course, back in the day, you didn't talk about it. It was kept quiet.

I never had a conversation with my mother about my father's sexuality and she would never have spoken of it. I can't say for sure whether she knew that he

was gay, but she was not dumb. I believe that she knew, though I can't prove that. She loved him. Even though it was a very difficult marriage and even though she knew within the first three years—well, the first month—that she had made a dreadful mistake because he was deeply troubled, she saw who he was and who he was being taught that he was by the Church, which was destroying him. As I say in the book, he died believing that he was going to hell.



My mother got tired of having to reconcile what the Church's teachings were on homosexuality with her own belief. And it wasn't only my father. There are many men and women that have been destroyed because of their absolute devotion and the examination of who they are within these teachings of the Church. And this is just one aspect. She said it was a relief to give all this up. It was a letting go of a burden.

**HEVELONE:** It was a relief to give it up, and yet she was still always a woman of faith, right? Even though she no longer identified with the Catholic Church, would she have considered herself to be a Christian or would she just have considered herself to be a worshipper of God?

**HENNESSY:** I don't answer this question in the book because, for one, I don't think

it's my question to answer. I can only answer it for myself really. But my mother was always very clear that she did believe in God. How she saw God manifested, she didn't articulate. But that was her way. She didn't like to define things.

That was one way in which she was very different from my grandmother. My grandmother loved words. She loved describing and defining. She would say things like, "I'm a Christian anarchist." She loved those things, and my mother did not. I never heard her ever describe someone with a label except for Republicans. She did kind of have this thing about Republicans. But she didn't like to nail things down like my grandmother did.

Writers love to really nail things down, but my mother wasn't articulate that way. I would have to learn what she was thinking or what she believed in other ways, not verbally—what she did, how she was with people, and how she was with the world. I think she had an immense faith, and that faith was grounded in a belief that we all have such great potential. You're going to laugh, but she was a gardener and she always used to "say build up your soil," that we all need good soil, and we will flourish.

She talked a lot about the question of how people flourish, and she certainly felt that people did at the Catholic Worker. Her experience growing up was that if you provide the right environment, if you provide loving kindness—people can flourish. She would always say that all the world needs is loving kindness. That, to me, is an incredible expression of faith.

My mother did flourish. It was just unfortunate that there were certain events that happened when my mother was a teenager, at a point when she's trying to find out who she is, that my grandmother really missed the boat—as certainly many parents do.

It's like *Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events* that happened around that time that kind of derailed my mother

in searching for her vocation. But up until that time, she thrived at the Catholic Worker. The difficulty was in the separations that they endured when my grandmother would go off speaking. I think that was the most difficult aspect. That was another Day family trait—they were all wanderers. My mother was not a wanderer, and my grandmother didn't recognize that.

**HEVELONE:** The end of your book talks about how there's this ongoing balance in life. You saw it in your grandmother, you saw it in your mother, and I'm sure you see it in yourself—a balance between meeting people's needs and yet not being eaten up by their needs. Could you speak to that ongoing struggle and what you have learned from the examples of both your grandmother and your mother?

**HENNESSY:** In many ways, you can address people's needs in pretty simple ways. But it is hard to be the focus of people's needs. Both my grandmother and my mother experienced situations in which people's needs were bottomless. They could never be fulfilled. I have experienced that, too, though probably not as intensely as they have, because I've been much more protective of myself than they were. That's probably an effect of growing up with the Catholic Worker.

But what do you do? How do you keep at it without doing what I have done, which is withdraw? Both my mother and grandmother could not withdraw for several reasons. Where do you find the strength to meet that? I don't know. I think that's something that you have to figure out—what is your foundation of strength?

Certainly for my grandmother, it was prayer. It was daily communion. For my mother, I think the things that sustained her were gardening and weaving.

Today, Kathe McKenna, who's part of Haley House here in Boston, said that she felt like my mother's weaving was her version of saying the rosary. I think that is spot on. That's a wonderful way of looking at it. Discovering where you find sustenance is absolutely essential. You're always going to make mistakes with people—always. They did. I do. But you have to keep trying to do your best. All you can do is do your best.

**HEVELONE:** Thank you so much for your time.

**HENNESSY:** It was great to be here.

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