THE DEMOCRACY OF THE CARPENTER:
THE LABORER’S NEED OF AN “INDUSTRIAL
PHILOSOPHY”” BY BOUCK WHITE

The labor movement needs to get a philosophy of the universe. A man’s philosophy is the most important thing about him. It determines everything he does. For it is the mold from which his thoughts take their shape; and thoughts are deeds in the gristle. A wrong philosophy will, in the slow, sure grindings of destiny, work itself into a wrong career. And likewise a no-philosophy of life, soon or late, will work itself into a no-career. Show me a man who has no philosophy of life, and I will show you a man who is on a wide sea with neither compass nor chart nor pole star; in derelict condition, the sport of every gust, without steerage way or sailing orders.

The privileged class has had in every age a philosophy of the universe. And thereby has raised up a massive rampart of systems and creeds and laws and institutions which fortify it with an incalculable security. Labor has lacked a philosophy of the universe. Accordingly, it has not captivated the thinkers of the world, but only the dreamers. It has been rather an emotion of the heart than a clarity of the head; a hope, mighty to stir the imaginations of men; but lacking in coherence of thought, or the logical compulsions that mold the will into constancy and marshal transient generations into fixed purposeful array through a long succession of ages. Labor has permitted property rights to boast itself to be The Establishment, with its own rights merely a protest, a criticism, a negation; a body of unorganized despair, making sallies upon a foe secure behind many outworks. Against a regular army, guerrilla tactics have never yet been abidingly prosperous.

Jesus had a philosophy of the universe. And, with slight alterations which are demanded by the scientific advance since his day, it is the philosophy which labor in all time must cherish, as the mainspring of its hope and the replenisher of its idealism. Stripped of its unessentials, his philosophy was this: The universe has a meaning; and it is an industrial meaning.
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If the universe had no meaning, it would be all up with Democracy. For Democracy rests on the grandeur of man. And in a meaningless world, man were meaningless also,—a puny helmsman on a black and driving tide. The social hope above all others needs to be full of immortality. Only they who believe that Time's turbid rush is accomplishing something, shall present to the cruelty of circumstance and the malignancy of foes a sturdy, enduring brow. Any creed declaring humankind to be a cloud of ephemera pursued by the creeping shadows of the night, would strike into Democracy a mortal chill. That which augments human dignity is favorable to Freedom's cause. Small men make contented slaves: increase their stature, you decrease their servitude. (I speak of interior dimensions). Persuade man that he is a transient thing, a vanishing atom, unwrecked, tossed aside by the vast thundering machine, and you have engineered a lapse to complete serfdom.

Jesus held man to be immortal. But it was immortality here below. "The Kingdom", which recurs so readily and fondly to his lips, was his term for a reorganized human society fashioned into fellowship and beauty and truth. Religion constantly seeks to slip the leash and escape into an other-worldly bliss, forsaking earth and her importunate necessities. But not so the philosophy of the Carpenter. Long training as a builder of solid structures had disabled him for interest in an abode in the blue ethereal void. He planned a paradise in the Here and Now; an industrial commonwealth; a city of many mansions; a republic of the free-born, where justice and fellowship should be eternal.

Jesus held that the universe is favorable to the establishment of such a kingdom. The native kindliness of the earth, if only men would put greed away and work with each other, was rudimentary in his creed. The universe can be trusted. Broad-bosomed Earth has stores of nutriment for all of her children. Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Live not anxiously. Be big and liberal and human. Coöperation is a practical scheme. Kindliness begets kindliness. There is room for all. Let humankind put away its feverish competing one with another, and transform into a universal trust company. Give and it shall be given unto you, full measure, pressed down, running over. This was the teaching of the Galilean.

The man who "lays up treasure for himself" violates this creed of fellowship and trust. Therefore, riches kindled in the breast of the Carpenter an anger both durable and vehement. Greed is not only a crime, in that it is anti-social. It is something more; it is a sin, an impiety, betraying distrust in the competency of Mother Earth.
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The Galilean set himself against an enormous bulk of possessions privately owned, because of the excessive caretakings which such a social system imposes—this cumbrous civilization wherein one must bear oneself so warily, and is so full of care. He sought an ordering wherein private wealth should be reduced to a minimum, and common wealth expanded to the maximum. And this he did out of his liking for joy and spontaneity and gladness. Every wall is a prison wall. Build a boundary line against your neighbor, and you have also shut in yourself.

It is because the religion that bears his name has forgotten this glad commandment of the Galilean, that our world is becoming despondent. Gaiety is almost perished! Existence is waning into gray and pallid lines. Pale delights, cheerless toil, life a pilgrimage of dolors!

"Be happy", was a distinct commandment of the Carpenter. And if for no other reason: Happiness conduces to morality. For the slippery paths of youth, in the heat of the day, and in life's sunset and evening glow, there is no angel guardian more watchful and efficient than a happy temper. On every side we hear it said: Be moral and you will be happy. But the Galilean put the stress equally in the other direction: Be happy, and you will be moral. Therefore, his animosity against the dominion of great wealth. He believed that property should not be permitted to stand between a man and his happiness.

The Carpenter phrased his belief in the natural kindliness and fertility of the Earth, in terms of the mechanical theology of his day, wherein the productive forces of nature were personified as a masculine personage, "Father". But the gender is a detail. The underlying, spiritual attitude of trust, is the important thing. Transposing his words into the feminine, in order to bring them into a thought-form more congenial to our most modern conception of nature, he enjoins the mood of cheerful and confiding repose:

Be not greedy. Earth, our liberal Mother, has abundance for all. Her bounteouness is without stint. Behold the fowls of the air. They sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns. Yet Erda, the Great Mother, feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, Mother Earth arrays them as even Solomon in all his glory never was. Therefore, take not this anxious thought saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? But seek ye first of all the cooperative commonwealth, the kingdom of the Most High, and all these things shall be added unto you.
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The plea for a co-operatively ordered society, was a logical part of his “Be not anxious” commandment. For only in a world’s work reorganized into a united thing, can come that ample and opulent productivity which would justify a liberal mood of soul. Where the kindly fruits of the Earth are regarded as a thing to be scuffled for, the soil yields not its increase as when fellowship holds the plow and swings the scythe. The wastes of competition, and the ravages of warfare, reduce the fertility of Nature.

This personifying of Nature must not be pressed to the point of exalting her into deity. Deity, as we now know, is moral. And nature is unmoral. She kills the evil and the good with outrageous impartiality; she sends her lightnings, her water floods and her earthquakes upon the just and the unjust. We must turn our steps in another direction or we will never encounter God.

YET there is a God. Jesus believed in him, and cherished toward him a tender intimacy. This God he found, not in the realm of nature, but in the realm of the ethical—the heaven which overroofs our human day, and speaks with the magisterial tones of old eternity. When this Great Unseen was asked by Moses by what name he should be known, the answer came: “The Lord God of your fathers; this is my name forever.” And it is a definition of deity which can never be improved upon—“our fathers,” that Ensemble whose grand and thundering chorus sheds glory and wisdom from antique time upon our perishable day.

The Great Unseen has animated the courage of all the heroic souls that ever lived. Elisha’s servitor, when confusion thickened and foes multiplied, cried out, “Alas my master! how shall we do?” And Elisha said: “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed and said, Lord, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.”

Because the Carpenter was of unsealed eyes beholding this Presence in the world, he sanguinely trusted the future. He knew that the Unseen is on the side of the people against their despoilers. The growth of God is democracy ever widening its tide and sweep. Because God is, freedom shall be. Jesus knew that the social hope was not a phantasy. In times when his soul was worn down, he would open the causeway between himself and the Highest; and lo, it was as though a legion of angels had been sent to succour him; but he quailed not. Measuring with purest fortitude the pathway ahead, he fared intrepidly on, with an energy of purpose which no danger could divert.
And he pressed this truth upon his partisans. This was his purpose in devising those two “Parables of Perseverance.” A man went to his neighbor to borrow bread to feed a guest unexpectedly arrived in the night. The neighbor called out: “Trouble me not; the door is now shut; I cannot rise and give thee.” But importunity got the bread at last. If that man was moved by the persistence of the would-be borrower, shall not God bring the Commonwealth, if we but persevere to demand it? Also, there was a certain widow, who by the sheer doggedness with which she followed him, induced a negligent judge to avenge her of her adversary. “And shall not God avenge his own elect which cry day and night unto him? I tell you that he will avenge them.”

The sureness of the Deliverance, and the certainty of a reward for the pains they were undergoing in Freedom’s cause, was the theme also of those Wedding Feast parables. To picture “the joy that was set before them,” Jesus resorted for verbal color to well known festive scenes. When the Industrial Commonwealth of God has come, said he, the world will be like a regal banquet for sumptuousness. Then will be heard the “well done, good and faithful servant.” Now, hardship was their lot; stoned, drawn asunder, slain with the sword; hunted into holes and refuges. But then: “Enter ye into the joys of your Lord.”

There’s a good time coming. Jesus taught it, the heart covets it; the intellect ratifies it. Man has no imagination to conceive the “goodness that is laid up for us,” when once the extortioner shall have vanished from the earth, supplanted by the grandeur of fellowship’s dominion. Nor shall death defeat us of that sight we languish to behold. Over death and the grave, the social faith is more than conqueror.

We live not in a hostile universe glowering upon us with ferocious intent. The problem of evil? Why, the evil in the world is but the spots where the garnishing mind of man has not yet busied itself. The philosophy to regulate his life is that of the Carpenter of Galilee.