

# Understanding Failure

*Jim Forest*

DO NOT DEPEND ON the hope of results," Merton wrote me early in 1966. I no longer remember what I had said that prompted his comment, only that it had something to do with activity aimed at ending the war in Vietnam. In fact the war was just warming up in 1966. It had another nine bloody years to run. Year after year opponents of the war such as myself would have the experience of absolute failure. Many thousands of people were yet to be killed. Most of the people whose names are now carved on The Wall commemorating American soldiers who died in Vietnam were still alive and well. Many were still children in 1966.

Merton's letter - since published time and again and translated into various languages - has become one of his best known letters. It has even been made into cards and even bookmarks. When it was first published in *The Catholic Worker* in the mid-70s, it was given the headline, "Advice to a Young Activist." But one needn't be an activist or young for it to make helpful reading.

The letter's main theme is similar to the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Not depending on the hope of results is a way of describing poverty of spirit - learning to live a life that is not enslaved by achievement or reputation or rewards, but rather a life whose mainspring is self-giving love. Such poverty of spirit requires us to swim

against very strong tides which sometimes, even often, get the better of us.

Merton doesn't mean that results don't matter or that we shouldn't be interested in them - only that it must not be the attainment of hoped-for results that rules our lives. To live the first Beatitude is something like being one of the people in medieval times laying the foundations of a cathedral. The builder knows he will not live to see it finished. Perhaps his children or grandchildren might one day stand on the towers, but he will not. Yet without his labour, towers he can only imagine will never rise.

A key word in Merton's letter is "truth." It's no easy thing to know the truth, still harder to speak it and hardest of all to live by the truth. In a prayer often used in the Orthodox Church, we speak of the Holy Spirit as "the spirit of truth." To know the truth and live in the truth is to participate in the life of the Holy Trinity: the primary community, the community without which there is no communion.

Merton - among the most prolific and gifted of writers, a man of words if ever there was one - warns us not to lose our way in words, rhetoric and slogans. Social movements, whatever their particular agenda, tend to be environments in which words are constantly on the boil, and where ideologies and slogans become a

substitute for thought and the silent activity of conscience. Movements of dissent, within themselves, rarely appreciate dissent.

Merton sees peacemaking as nothing less than an apostolic vocation. Far from being merely political, it has to do with drawing us closer to God, and thus in the process closer to each other. One can see in the lives of such people as Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King that all the good that they accomplished had an evangelical core and motivation. "If I have accomplished anything in my life," Dorothy once remarked, "it was because I wasn't afraid to speak about God."

A key sentence in Merton's letter is: "In the end it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."

Living as I do in a country that only a few decades ago was occupied by the German army, I often think of those people who, despite extraordinary danger and the influence of propaganda, struggled to save the lives of Jews and others who were being hunted by the Nazis. The parents of the eldest priest in our Amsterdam parish were such people. Finally they were arrested and jailed. They survived the war, but all their guests died in concentration camps.

What this family did might be judged an absolute failure, yet the memory of such actions - not all of which failed - still generates life-saving actions. Thanks to such people, light shines in the darkness of times in which evil seemed invincible.

On an especially sad day in his life, when death seemed to be laughing at each and every member of the human race, my Vietnamese Buddhist friend, Thich Nhat Hahn, told me, "Nothing is wasted." What precious words! He was weeping as he whispered them, gazing out a dark window at falling snow.

Nothing we do that is founded in love and truth can possibly be wasted - only we ourselves may not live to see what God does with actions which, at the time, seemed like pebbles thrown down a dry well.

Once, standing on the south porch the cathedral at Chartres, an area devoted to the Last Judgement, the guide, Malcolm Miller, asked the question: "Why do you think we are not judged one by one as we die rather than all together at the end of history?" The answer was: Because it's not until the end of time that the consequences of what we did and what we failed to do can be fully weighed up.

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