

Rooted in Thin Air

Jim Forest

The following is an edited transcript of the discussion with Jim Forest that concluded the Society's webinar based on Merton's essay, 'The Cell', with contributions from Paul Pearson, Fiona Gardner and Gary Hall.

Jim Forest: Let me ask a question. Paul Pearson is among us. Paul, would you respond to what I said in my somewhat speculative reference to *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and that particular chapter, 'The Root of War is Fear'?

Paul Pearson: I think Bill Shannon quite clearly says that those three paragraphs were Merton's entry into the anti-war movement. He's very clear on that. But I did have a question. I'm not sure if it was Phil or Dan Berrigan, or both of them, talking about their own experience of prison, and saying the reasons they did it was the supreme reason, that they would never have chosen prison for any other reason. I think one of them in particular had a very, very tough experience there.

Jim Forest: Dan nearly died.

Paul Pearson: So it contrasts with your experience of talking about it as a sabbatical. There is another side to that.

Jim Forest: I was in a better prison. You could have a sabbatical in my prison even though it looked like it had been designed for a Hollywood movie with James Cagney. The priest of our church for some years who has unfortunately recently died, Father Sergei Ovsiannikov, has written a book published by Bloomsbury a couple of years ago called *The Journey to Freedom*. It's a wonderful book. I highly recommend it. I have thought of it time and time again during this conversation. He was in solitary

confinement in a Soviet prison and that was where he began his journey to freedom. He was in the worst possible conditions. He didn't even have a window he could look through. There was only indirect light into his small cell. And there his discovery of God's presence revolutionises his life. And that can happen, has happened, countless times in Christian history to people in similar situations. I was not in solitary confinement, not even for one hour. I always had a window I could see through. I had access to books – so important. My situation is nothing like the purgatory, like the hell many people have endured in prison, or jails, whatever the situation is. There is a door within you that can open. We all see that over and over again in the writings of prisoners about the roots of their spiritual lives. And Merton, in a sense, chose prison.

Fiona Gardner: Jim, I so liked your phrase, 'rooted in thin air', about Merton. I've made a note of it because it fitted in really well with this idea of Merton often seen as very contradictory, but you said he had this unifying impulse. And there's something here about the holding of the opposites which I think is something that happens when you're in solitude or contemplative prayer, and presumably in a prison cell. And there's something about how you hold the two things together. Did that phrase 'rooted in thin air' come out of just . . .

Jim Forest: Thin air – out of thin air. First heard by Jim Forest this morning when he was listening to Jim Forest.

Fiona Gardner: That's brilliant. I love it. But I was thinking of actually being rooted in the Spirit, and how the spirit can toss with us in the wind and go with us in the wind but somewhere there is an underlying unifying impulse which I suppose Merton would think of as the ground of all being. Anyway, I just loved that phrase, so I don't know if you want to expand it any more?

Jim Forest: Thank you for highlighting it. I've been enjoying Paul Pearson's book collecting many of Merton's photos, and some of them have to do with that root that he placed on the porch of the hermitage. I guess that's what's been haunting my thoughts — to put that on the porch of the hermitage, a symbol of what was going on in the hermitage, what he was trying to achieve, to be rooted in nothing. Thich Nhat Hahn once told me that the Chinese ideograph for a monk is somebody standing on nothing. That makes me think of in turn what Merton had to

say in that lecture he gave just before his death in 1968. You leave everything behind, your special clothes, your monastery treasures. You leave it all behind.

Fiona Gardner: And that includes all the structures as well.

Jim Forest: If you have to. It's not about burning everything in the fireplace, but the circumstances of your life could be such that the house burns down, the monastery burns down, the communists come and close the monastery, you become seriously ill and you can't do things you want to do. Right now I'm dealing on the one hand with Parkinson's and on the other hand with an infection of my spinal cord — lot of things I can't do. I haven't been on a bike ride in months and months. I don't know if I ever will take a bike ride again. Things change, and you have to rethink the geography of your life.

Gary Hall: I'm just fascinated. Thank you both. I've so many notes and thoughts. Jim, you reminded me, that back in 1992 I was staying at Jonah House and went to visit Phil Berrigan in jail. He was in a bad way. But it was his parting words that I have been trying to work out ever since. He said, 'I hope one day you'll come and join us here in the belly of the whale,' which was how he understood his prison witness. I've been a prison chaplain for many years, but I feel like I've never fulfilled that calling.

Jim Forest: George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, was consulted by William Penn who established the colony of Pennsylvania in what became the United States. Penn was required, because of his social standing in England at the time, to wear a ceremonial sword. It troubled him greatly to have to do this, even though he wasn't ever going to use it to kill anyone. Still, the symbol of power, having the state's permission to kill, troubled him. And he asked George Fox whether he should continue to wear it. And Fox's answer is very interesting. He said, 'Wear it as long as you can.' In other words, you do things until there is a sense of the divine wind blowing you in a different direction. And then maybe you become like Franz Jägerstätter and then you say 'No' even at the cost of your life. Don't trouble yourself about by what God hasn't yet called you to do. If someday you want to become an occupant in a prison, I'm sure God will help arrange that — not just as a visitor but as a prisoner. You don't have to bully yourself into it. But Phil and I often argued about this.

By the way I think Phil Berrigan spent too much time in prison. But worse, that's fine for himself, but he bullied people into doing what he was doing, who were in many cases not well prepared for life under such restricted conditions. What do you think?

Gary Hall: Many things. It feels that it's about discerning the moment when you just dig your heels in and take the cost. And sometimes the discernment is complex in a world like ours. Is this the moment? Or do I need to keep the powder dry for some other moment?

Jim Forest: I completely agree. I'm still not at peace with my decision that led me to spend a year in prison. Was it the right thing? For one year I didn't see my son.

from The Prison Statement by Franz Jägerstätter

Just as the man who thinks only of this world does everything possible to make life here easier and better, so must we, too, who believe in the eternal Kingdom, risk everything in order to receive a great reward there. Just as those who believe in National Socialism [*Nazism*] tell themselves that their struggle is for survival, so must we, too, convince ourselves that our struggle is for the eternal Kingdom. But with this difference: We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead, spiritual weapons — and the foremost among these is prayer. For prayer, as St. Clare says, is the shield which the flaming arrows of the Evil One cannot pierce. Through prayer we constantly implore new grace from God, since without God's help and grace it would be impossible for us to preserve the Faith and be true to His commandments.

The true Christian is to be recognized more in his works and deeds than in his speech. The surest mark of all is found in deeds showing love of neighbour. To do unto one's neighbour what one would desire for himself is more than merely not doing to others what one would not want done to himself. Let us love our enemies, bless those who curse us, pray for those who persecute us. For love will conquer and will endure for all eternity. And happy are they who live and die in God's love.

from In Solitary Witness by Gordon Zahn