

Lessons of the Cell

A student inmate,
Cork Prison, Ireland,

introduced by James G. R. Cronin

Introduction

Thomas Merton, in his 1967 essay, 'The Cell', appreciated that to 'learn from the cell' of the solitary meant, 'first of all learning *that one is not a monk*'.¹ This essay reflects on prison witness as told through personal testimony. It opens with Jim Forest's testimony from 2018 on his prison witness in 1969-70. This is followed by a reflection written by a student inmate in Cork Prison in February 2020 as part of a creative writing exercise. This student's response to Merton's 'The Cell' was written just weeks before the first wave of coronavirus disease forced the Irish government to impose a national 'lockdown' on its citizens. The term 'lockdown' now entered the public consciousness to describe social restrictions imposed by the state to preserve public health. Previously, this term had only been used to describe a method of controlling prisoners by locking them in their cells. The essay concludes by returning to Jim Forest in 2021 and his reflection on the lessons of the cell. The aim of this essay is to highlight the paradoxical nature of these prison testimonies as holding doubt and regret in creative tension with inspiration and hope. It is this creative tension that can teach us, as readers, a lesson of how to become more attuned to hope in dark times.

On 8 December 2018, Jim Forest spoke in Edinburgh at a day conference hosted by the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland with the title, 'The Spiritual Roots of Protest: a day of reflection on Thomas Merton with Jim Forest'. Jim testified to his prison witness as being an awakening of his younger self that he was still processing in later life. Jim recalled his incarceration— he called it his 'sabbatical' — in Wisconsin in 1969-70 as the juridical consequence of his anti-Vietnam activism as a member of the Milwaukee Fourteen in 1968.² A

characteristic of faith-based activism is its emphasis on testimonies of personal witness against structural injustices. The Milwaukee Fourteen (1968-1971) was an anti-war protest group mostly made up of clergy and Catholic lay people that used the 'hit and stay' tactic of protest, in which groups of mostly Catholic activists would break into military draft board offices, remove draft files, incinerate or destroy the files, and wait to be arrested.³ A paradox in prison witness testimonies is the renunciation of an aspect of the self to chart a journey in seeking a deeper sense of what it means to be a person to oneself and for others. Forest, in his memoir, perceived his prison cell as a space of spiritual transformation: 'I had once aspired to the contemplative life and, in a funny sort of way, found it for a year in the company of convicts'.⁴ Had his prison witness been worth it? Forest was not so sure, but nor had he entirely changed his mind on the value of the radical religious left as witnesses against the 'principalities and powers' of the world.⁵

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The cell is indeed a place of reflection and inner awakening. It can be a place of utter development and a place that can unchain the mental steel that locks tightly around our internal chests of gold. As the brother once said to the Elder: 'What shall I do, Father, for I work none of the works of a monk but here I am in torpor eating and drinking and sleeping and in bad thoughts and in plenty of trouble, going from one struggle to another and from thoughts to thoughts'.⁶ This much, I relate to; this much, I can assure you is true. Personally, I have experienced this situation of cerebral dysfunction. My thoughts navigated me towards negativity which ran wild with all sorts of hypotheses and conclusions. But until I really accepted, and that is the key word here, actually *accepted* my fate and learned how to play the cell like a majestic instrument; then I was doomed and my mind would always run wild.

Interestingly, the Elder replied to the brother, he said: 'Just you stay in your cell and cope with it as best you can without being disturbed by it'.⁷ Never truer and wiser words spoken. So how does a man like me encased within a cell achieve this?

Well ... to 'cope' within the cell, I had to look inwards, explore my soul through countless hours, weeks, months, years of reflection. You see, it is this very reflection that made me grow, learn, develop and shine light within the darkness; it allowed me to at least generate synthetic happiness.⁸

Over the years if a zig-zag journey, the cell then became my sanctuary, my gym, my study, my glorious residence of self-development. I became at one with the cell, I became to know the cell like the back of my hand. The cell became my home and place of 'solitary'.⁹ The cell has become my omnipotent teacher and spiritual director. It has helped me adapt a highly structured and healthy lifestyle. Giving me purpose and order; giving me meaning and a deeper understanding of myself.

I believe that a man's problems derive from not being able to sit alone and gather his peripatetic thoughts. To be unable to reflect and analyse his very own reality. To be unable to tap into his own 'contemplation'. To be able to just sit in 'silence'.¹⁰ That is why for me, this kind of practice had become a cell ritual; you see, silence waters the soul and grows petals around the heart.

Boredom however, well that quite simply only derives from a lack of a man's inner abilities; complete and utter 'ignorance' to his creative and imaginative processes.¹¹ Within the cell, I do not become bored; I do not become detached from myself and hand the steering wheel over to my ego. I have my mind, the most beautiful and elegant companion I could ever have. I have learned from the cell; they can imprison the body but not the mind; you can be anywhere in the world you want to be, just close your eyes.

Conclusion

Shortly before Christmas 2021, Jim Forest emailed friends. He reflected on the strange year of pandemic and social restrictions, his hope for a recovery from illness, and how being a patient in hospital had taught him the virtue of patience:

What a year it has been. I've spent a substantial chunk of it, more than three months, either in the Alkmaar hospital or at a rehab center in Schaghen, a 20-minute drive to the north [Netherlands]. On November 2nd, I celebrated my 80th birthday while at the latter location. I've been back home since November 19th, [...] I wonder if there is a connection between the words 'patient' and 'patience'? I've just looked in the *Oxford Dictionary* and see that a patient means 'a person who suffers patiently', but notes this usage is now rare or obsolete. In fact, I am more patient than I used to be.¹²

Jim's acceptance of illness connects with a Cork student's personal testimony.

A lesson of the cell is to be patient in the present by becoming attuned to the possibilities that the future holds. This is the condition of Christian hope.

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Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'The Cell,' *Sobornost* 5, no. 5 (Summer 1967). The essay was subsequently included in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), pp. 252-259. Quote on page 253.
2. Jim Forest, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines, A Memoir* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020), pp. 203-211; Jim Forest, 'Rooted in Thin Air', *The Merton Journal* 28, no. 2 (Advent 2021), p. 56.
3. Michael Shoup, 'Witnessing Peace: The Milwaukee Fourteen, 1968-1971', MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (May 2020), <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/80890>.
4. *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines*, p. 209.
5. *Ephesians* 3:10, KJV.
6. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 252.
7. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 252.
8. Dan Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). Synthetic Happiness is what we make when we don't get what we want.
9. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 252.
10. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 256, 253.
11. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 255.
12. Jim Forest, 'Personal Communications', 11 December 2021

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