

Merton's 'The Cell': The place where we meet everything

Jim Forest

On 15 May 2021 the Society hosted its first webinar, an extended reflection on the instruction from Merton's essay 'The Cell': 'Where we actually are is where we belong.' There were talks by James Cronin & Jim Forest, ending with a general discussion. The following is an edited transcript of Jim Forest's talk, with contributions from James Cronin.

Jim Forest: It really is exciting to be in a kind of gathering – even though it's a non-physical gathering – It fits well with Merton's essay, 'The Cell'. We're each in our own little cells talking about 'The Cell'. I hadn't read Merton's essay on the cell in a long, long time so I'm grateful for just having been prodded into doing so. I wrote a single page a few days ago on this experience and I thought I would begin by reading it to you.

Thomas Merton's essay was dated The Feast of Saint Benedict, 1967, that is the 21st of March, not quite two years before his death, so it's in the category of his later writings. Merton's jumping-off point is a paragraph of wisdom from the Desert Fathers, the castaways who were fleeing into the wilderness just as the world was busy becoming Christian or at least Christianised. The first stage of martyrs had passed, the real martyrs. Now came a different sort of martyrdom, the white martyrs who gave witness not by subjecting themselves to capital punishment, but by living in a place which any sane person would avoid, the desert - areas where lions and jackals were more at home than human beings - and by renouncing the great towns and cities like Alexandria and Athens with their cathedrals and libraries. These early monks rarely had as much as one book and nothing more to

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live in than a simple hut. Many supported their supremely modest needs by weaving and selling baskets. The structure was simple. An Abba, that is to say an elder, was at the centre, someone who had many years of experience living in solitude and to whom there was a source of counsel, a person to whom you could confess, even daily. The sayings of the Desert Fathers are collections of sentences and stories about the guidance and examples that the Abba passed along to those who came to pay attention to their sayings. 'Give us a word, Father,' was a frequently pronounced sentence in these communities of ascetics. By the way it's interesting to note that in Merton's account in *The Seven Storey Mountain* of what must have been mystical experience at the church of St Cosmas and Damian in Rome when he was eighteen years old, he mentions the Desert Fathers. It's the first mention of the Desert Fathers that I know of in Merton's writing. On December 15th & 16th 1964 Merton was permitted to spend his first full day and night at the cinder-block hermitage the community had built for him in the woods not far from the monastery. 'Everything the [Desert] Fathers say about the solitary life is exactly true,' Merton wrote in his journal that night. 'The temptations and the joys, above all the tears and the ineffable peace and the happiness. The happiness that is so pure because it is simply not of one's own making, but sheer mercy and gift.' He's bathed in a kind of almost inexpressible joy as he spends the first night at the hermitage.

I remember visiting the hermitage before it was officially the hermitage. It was his place to meet with guests and to write. How happy Merton was as we walked up the path from the monastery, to find ourselves in view of this little structure, and the pleasure that Merton communicated in simply being there, putting wood in the fireplace, sitting on the porch. I think – even then he had a root of a tree that had somehow been torn away by the wind, and he had used it as a decoration. That root also represented himself as a kind of person rooted in thin air. Over a period of twenty-four years of monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton had gradually become a citizen of the desert, or at least had taken a huge step into a deeper solitude than was usual for monks

of the cenobitic tradition of the Benedictines. But of course he had far to go. It was one thing to live alone and another to embrace solitude. Solitude was a process more than an arrival point. One is always on the way. And of course he had far to go. It was harder than he had anticipated. He quickly came to appreciate an Abba's advice to a younger monk that Merton quotes in his essay, 'The Cell': 'Just stay. Just stay in your cell and cope with all this as best you can without being disturbed by it.' The purpose of a hermit's radical solitude – Merton's life makes it clear but so does the life of many other hermits down the ages – is not antisocial, rather it is a direct confrontation – and here comes one of my favourite phrases in Merton's writings – with the baffling mystery of God. There is no edge to the mystery. There is no final border. It's something like a night sky which has been a major source of wonder, encouragement and bewilderment since Adam and Eve. Those who gaze at the stars with the most powerful telescopes reach a point where there are no more galaxies. We've run out of stars! And then what? What comes next? Where are we when there is no where, and there is even no here? How do we see the mystery of life and living and consciousness, how do we see ourselves in the light of such unfathomable darkness?

When we consider Merton's writing, his attention to the baffling mystery of God, one of the most notable aspects is his steady movement toward, on the one hand a deeper solitude, and on the other his deepening awareness of God's presence in human beings. The deeper his attention to the divine mystery, the deeper his attention to the human mysteries. These two are so intimately interconnected. What many saw as contradictory impulses, was, for Merton, a unifying impulse. Being still, keeping his focus, drew him into a contemplative communion that made him so attentive to such matters as war, environment and racism. The eyes that contemplated the night sky over his hermitage also noticed the blinking red lights of hydrogen bomb-bearing B52s rumbling through the constellations every night.' He describes this, you may recall, in his essay, 'The Rain and the Rhinoceros', in *Raids on the Unspeakable*.

The cell is the place where we meet everything. Far from escaping from the human race, we become more intimately interconnected. It's one of God's jokes.

James Cronin: One thing, Jim, that came through your own book, *On writing straight with crooked lines*, is a lesson that I think we should and could, learn ourselves – the need to forgive ourselves and the need to wrestle with our own contradictions. That really comes through, I think, in reading your book and also in what Merton was doing. Merton was aware that he took wrong turnings but he was also ready to forgive himself. And my reflection on the values of Merton for contemporary society is that message, that we need to forgive ourselves, we need to recognize our common humanity, and the notion that sympathy, forgiveness and mercy are words that are not weak words but are strong words, extremely difficult to put into practice, but something that our modern contemporary secular society, that often looks to cancelling people for whatever particular reason, doesn't practice. And that mercy and forgiveness first begins with forgiving ourselves, before we can forgive others. So I would just like to know Jim, your reflections on that and what you learned from your time of imprisonment, your imprisonment because of a consequence of Vietnam and your draft avoidance for conscientious objection, and also in 1962 when you protested against the imminent resumption of atmospheric testing by the United States in response to the Soviet testing in 1961. So I just want to know, Jim, what did you learn from the cell, and how has it enriched your journey?

Jim Forest: In the book that you refer to, *Writing straight with crooked lines*, I entitled the chapter on my year of imprisonment in Wisconsin in 1969-70 was something like a 'sabbatical'. For me it was a sabbatical. It was a time to return to the New Testament. I read – the rhythm of my day was to read a chapter a day of the New Testament. When you got to the end you start over again. Like the painters of the Brooklyn Bridge or the George Washington bridge in New York, as soon as they finish painting the bridge, they go back to the other end and start again. And I was reading the New Testament that way. I returned to the rosary. I didn't have one at first, but I have the rosary I was born with, ten fingers. I read a lot of Russian literature. Dorothy Day had always wanted me to read Dostoevsky and a number of other Russian authors. And fortunately I was in a state prison in Wisconsin where one had an unusual degree of access

to any book you wanted to obtain. We had access to the state university library. I got books from as far away as London. I was very lucky. It was very contemplative, root-deepening, time for me. Of course it could have been much worse as it is for most prisoners, much, much worse. Not just the isolation but you're cut off from any contact, any meaningful contact with people dear to you. That's the hard part. But mostly for me it was a time for a contemplative re-opening. As for the subject of mercy and forgiveness and so forth, well, I'm not very good at forgiving myself. But I'm very good at accepting forgiveness. My experience of God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. That's my experience. It's not a theory. It's like noticing that when you step out into the rain, that it's raining, that you're wet, that the drops of water are falling from the sky above you and you're drenched in them. I can forgive you, I can forgive anybody. But I leave it to others to forgive me and to communicate God's mercy.

James Cronin: Can I return to the time you were in Hart Island prison in 1962 having been arrested for picketing outside the Atomic Energy Commission.

Jim Forest: Actually, not picketing, just sitting on the pavement, in front of the main entrance. One of the newspapers actually put a picture of me on the front page, not because I was a particularly attractive subject. I had just returned from the Abbey of Gethsemani and while I was there the Abbott had insisted that I have a haircut – I was rather shaggy when I arrived. And so I had not just a haircut but it was like a marine haircut, arriving at boot camp. You know, the hairs are shaved off.

Merton wrote to me at that time. The letter came to *The Catholic Worker* and someone from *The Catholic Worker* brought it to the pavement where I was sitting half-frozen along with fifty other people.

James Cronin: The interesting thing I noticed in that letter is that it has many of the prototype imageries that Merton later uses in the very famous letter to a young activist that I am sure you all know that was popularised particularly through Robert Ellsberg's publication in *Orbis* [publications].

Jim Forest: It was in *The Catholic Worker*, and Robert at that time was editing it.

James Cronin: In the letter, I think, Merton is also giving you pastoral

support. He is that informal pastor. I think this is so important, because without you Merton couldn't have made those connections within the peace movement. Without you and Dorothy he couldn't have made connections to the Fellowship of Reconciliation. You were the man who connected him to Charles Thompson of Pax Christi in Britain, which was central in giving him those transatlantic connections. So you helped him, and he helped you as well in establishing the ground. I want to pay tribute to you, Jim, because in many ways, I feel you are so central to understanding Merton as a pacifist writer, and in the sense that without your good graces it would have been a lot harder for Merton to have made an impact. There are two things I briefly want to say. Why I think this is a significant point is because a new book I'm reading at the moment called *Spiritual Socialists* by Vanessa Cook, a historian who is looking to the lost traditions of the radical left in the United States and is looking to the faith-based element of the Left. And in that you play a significant part. I looked for you, Jim, in the index to that book and you are mentioned. Merton isn't mentioned. I think the work is important in showing that the Left is not just a secular manifestation but it also has these rivers of religious faith and belief that thread through the narrative which have been lost and now are being recovered by historians. So in this sense the conversation we are having today also has a relevance in an emerging and re-emerging consideration of your role and the role that Merton played in the sixties – and the relevance of this for our own day. So, Jim, could you say a bit more about the notion of Merton as an informal pastor to the peace movement?

Jim Forest: Part of my role was simply to communicate Merton's ideas, thoughts and insights during that period of his life to others because he couldn't write to a great many people. He wrote a lot of letters but on the other hand there were millions and millions of people he didn't write to. I did the best I could, often by just reading aloud to colleagues, friends and co-workers the latest letter from Merton, which was often a letter of advice and guidance of one sort or another, or of sharing articles and essays he had written, either under his own name or under some pseudonym after his silencing in 1962. My own role was a pretty minor one in my opinion. It's the role of a journalist to write down what people say and try to spread it around – that's all.

James Cronin: What Merton, I think, was trying to do in terms of the faith-based consciousness within the Left at that time was to make people

aware that there were alternative traditions within Roman Catholicism in relation to peace and war, and that pacifism was and should be regarded as a recognised tradition. Earlier you highlighted for me that you would like to amplify the significance of Franz Jägerstätter.

Jim Forest: We had that famous retreat in November 1964 where people gathered with Merton at the monastery, people associated with the Catholic Peace Fellowship, which was just in formation at the time, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation which Merton, Dorothy Day and I were members of. We met part of the time at the hermitage when the weather allowed otherwise in a guest-house room. Gordon Oyer has written an excellent book about that retreat. We kept returning to Franz Jägerstätter as a model of a Christian response to the kind of terrifying decisions we have to make in the context of war and tyranny. Jägerstätter said 'No', and had his head chopped off. He refused to be part of the German army and refused to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Very simple. Here is a relatively uneducated person, although quite articulate, who leaves his three daughters and his wife, all beloved to him. I wouldn't say he was a true Austrian nationalist but he certainly loved his country. To go to Germany and die in prison in Berlin - what a model for our time. This was the person that Dan Berrigan, Merton and others at the retreat kept returning to as somebody who we ought to do our best to make better known, because at the time Franz Jägerstätter wasn't even being considered for canonisation. He certainly hadn't been beatified. Part of the work of the Catholic Peace Fellowship was to tell the story of Franz Jägerstätter over and over again. I think part of the inspiration to do that came from this retreat.

James Cronin: I also would add that there is a very British connection to that as well because of the work of Archbishop Thomas Roberts who told the story of Jägerstätter at the Vatican Council, an important witness for shifting the Roman Catholic's position to conscientious objection, which was articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* in 1965. But also I think we need to remember Gordon Zahn, a socialist and an activist.

Jim Forest: Of the people from that period, Gordon Zahn would be at the top of the list, up there with Dorothy Day. As a scholar he discovered the life of Franz Jägerstätter while researching the response of the German and Austrian church to Hitler. He discovered this previously unknown person, Franz Jägerstätter, and was so astonished by what little he could

find out that he decided to devote years of his life to researching his life, seeing what was available, and eventually publishing a book called *In Solitary Witness*. Very important.

James Cronin: I think the witness of Jägerstätter also highlights some of the difficult decisions that people will have to make in life, and gives a model as to how you can approach those difficulties, and also the contingency of how one acts within a society or a state in which sometimes one's own conscience position may be different from that of the value system surrounding you. So these are important witnesses. So I want to ask, Jim, to what extent do you think Merton was conscious of himself as bearing witness to his way of being in the world? Perhaps narrow that down to look specifically at the issues that you were involved in in relation to peacemaking?

Jim Forest: Well, Merton's first piece on the subject of war was, of course, the *Seven Storey Mountain* where he writes about his decision to become a conscientious objector. The last time I visited Columbia University, I was happy to find at the actual correspondence, three or four pages, he had had with the draft board. His decision not to kill is described very accurately in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He was willing to be a medic or something of that nature, but not to kill anybody. And there's his novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*. Then it becomes a somewhat neglected topic - not that he ever loses interest in it. But it reappears in 1961 when he is revising *Seeds of Contemplation*. When he got to the chapter, a very short chapter in the original book, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 'The Root of War is Fear', the title doesn't change but the content of the chapter is greatly expanded. If Paul Pearson is taking part in this conversation, he can correct or amplify this. Well, working on that book and reaching that chapter he realises that there is a lot he should have said that he didn't say, and he should say now. It was one of the reasons for revising the book to enlarge on this topic. Then it seemed to him the ideal place to publish this as a stand-alone article would be in *The Catholic Worker*. Then it occurs to him to add three long paragraphs, on the duty of Christians to overcome war, not to take war as something that is to be ever part of the human scene. He sends that to us, and Dorothy Day passes it on to me and tells me to write in subheads, and decide whether these three paragraphs should go at the beginning or the end of the text as we published it. That's when I became woven into Merton's life, and vice-versa. Then my correspondence with Merton really begins there.

James Cronin: It reminds me, as you were speaking, of a key analysis given by the historian Patricia McNeil in 1992 in a book called *Harder than War* in which you also feature. She had a conversation with you, in which she highlights that the real power of Merton as the theologian was not as a systematic theologian but rather as a theologian of experience.

Jim Forest: Like the Desert Fathers. None of these desert fathers are looked back on as theologians in the sense that we use the word in modern terminology. But few theologians come near to the importance of the desert fathers.

Notes

Merton's essay, 'The Cell' was originally published in *Sobornost* in 1967. It is included in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

Jim Forest has been a tireless worker for peace since the early 1960s when he was co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, and is one of the few people still living who knew Merton as a friend and co-worker. In 1988, he was received into the Orthodox Church. Since 1989, he has been international secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship. He has written 13 books including biographies of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, & Daniel Berrigan, an introduction to the life and thought of his friend Thich Nhat Hanh, and in 2020 a personal memoir, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines*. He currently lives with his wife Nancy at Alkmaar, The Netherlands.

from Statement of Position by Franz Jägerstätter

written in Tagel Prison, Berlin — July 1943

These few words are being set down here as they come from my mind and my heart. If I must write them with my hands in chains, I find it much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his own free will. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering, a strength far stronger than all the might of the world. The power of God cannot be overcome.

from In Solitary Witness by Gordon Zahn