

## **Terrible Days: Merton/Yungblut Letters and MLK Jr.'s Death**

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*William Apel*

These have been terrible days for everyone [Dr. King's murder] and God alone knows what is to come.

Letter from Thomas Merton to June Yungblut<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton was devastated. In his letter of April 9, 1968 to his Quaker friend June J. Yungblut, he wrote of the "terrible days" which surrounded the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. Like so many others, Merton had placed tremendous hope in the witness and work of Dr. King. He also knew, however, that one individual could only accomplish so much. And now Dr. King had sacrificed his very life for God's cause of love and justice in a racist and war-torn world.<sup>2</sup>

Merton's most immediate concern was to get a note of condolence to Coretta Scott King. He did not have the King family's home address in Atlanta, but he was confident that June Yungblut could pass his message along to Dr. King's widow. Merton knew June and John Yungblut to be reliable and dedicated friends in the struggle for peace and social justice. As longtime members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the American Friends Service Committee, the Yungbluts had worked closely with Dr. King in his nonviolent protest against racism, poverty and war. Merton could rest assured that through June Yungblut his words of condolence would be delivered to Coretta King.

Thanks to June Yungblut's correspondence with Merton, we gain an eye-witness account of events surrounding the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.—especially those that occurred inside the King family home after the assassination. As an interfaith friend, June Yungblut shared information with Merton, which he otherwise would not have had. Because of the June Yungblut letters, Merton was brought close to the pain and suffering of the King family.

Many familiar with Merton's life are aware of the train of events related to his discovering of the news of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s murder. This terrible news came to Merton over the car radio as he was returning from Lexington after having visited Shakertown

with his friend and English guest Donald Allchin. Rather than return to Gethsemani, Merton headed to Bardstown instead. He wanted to spend the evening with Colonel Hawks – a close African American friend.<sup>3</sup>

Merton had predicted several years before Dr. King's death that the civil rights movement would soon fall upon harder times. In fact, Merton wrote in print about a coming crisis of leadership. Several of his essays in *Seeds of Destruction* (1964) anticipated this coming crisis. Merton envisioned a future in which many in the white community who had supported the civil rights movement would lose courage and drop away. This prophecy was to come true. After Dr. King's assassination, black leaders insisted on more control and leadership of the movement. This caused many white liberals, some in leadership positions to back off.

These terrible times that Merton forecast were indeed visible during the long, hot summer following Dr. King's death. The old coalition between white liberals and black leadership did, in fact, begin to dissolve. The rise of a new generation of black militants, the popularity of Malcolm X's brand of black nationalism, and Dr. King's own decision to broaden his social agenda to include poverty at home and the Vietnam War abroad, created great unease among white liberals and their leadership.

Merton's criticism of his white liberal friends for their withdrawal of support from the movement was frank and direct. In his essay from *Seeds of Destruction* entitled "Letters to a White Liberal," Merton accused many white liberals of growing soft in their commitments to the cause. He wrote:

It is one of the characteristics of liberals that they prefer their future to be vaguely predictable (just as the conservative prefers only a future that reproduces the past in all its details), when you see that the future is entirely out of your hands and that you are totally unprepared for it, you are going to fall back on the past, and you are going to end up in the arms of the conservatives.<sup>4</sup>

The future Merton predicted had arrived. Much faith and renewed courage for the tasks ahead would be needed. But for the immediate present, Merton wanted to get a message of condolence to Coretta Scott King. The rest would have to wait for now. First things first: Thomas Merton turned to June J. Yungblut for help. She was well suited to be his emissary to Mrs. King.

### June J. Yungblut

June Yungblut was born in the American South. She came from a very distinguished Quaker family whose roots could be traced back to William Penn. Yungblut graduated from Keuka College in upstate New York and then earned a Master's degree from Yale and a Doctorate in Philosophy from Emory University. June and her husband John (a Quaker theologian) were serving as directors of the Quaker House in Atlanta when correspondence between June Yungblut and Merton began in 1967.

During this time in Atlanta, the Yungbluts became friends with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his family. In fact, John and June Yungblut were prime movers in an attempt to arrange a meeting at Gethsemani between Dr. King and Thomas Merton. The idea was to provide a time of retreat and relaxation for Dr. King along with a low-key meeting with a few members of the Catholic peace movement.<sup>5</sup> During this same period of time, June Yungblut had developed a close friendship with Coretta Scott King.

In his biography of Thomas Merton, Michael Mott marks the year 1967 as a time when three important women entered Merton's life. According to Mott, each woman brought a "wholly different perspective" to Merton. June Yungblut was one of these aforementioned women; the other two were Rosemary Radford Ruether and the teenager Suzanne Butorovich.<sup>6</sup>

A natural bond of friendship arose immediately between Yungblut and Merton. From the start of their correspondence, they shared common literary interests. In addition, Yungblut's Quaker activism connected with Merton's ongoing concerns for peace and justice. And beyond all this, they were poets! In fact, June's best-known poem entitled "This is the Child," written after Merton's death, illustrates for us what kindred spirits they must have truly been.

Yungblut's poem portrays the brutality of war—especially the suffering and slaughter of innocent civilians—something that deeply troubled Merton as well. Yungblut's poem memorialized an image, which haunts those who lived through the Vietnam War: The unforgettable scene of a Vietnamese child whose napalmed body, and cries of pain, are affixed forever on the cover of *Life* magazine.

This is the child  
who danced naked down the road in Vietnam

her clothes torn from her body  
 by frenzied fingers  
 the dance of death, dürer woodcut  
 etched in napalm  
 come forward on the stage  
 leaping, running, mouth aflame  
 we are your audience  
 we watch you play  
 where will it all end? <sup>7</sup>

As a dedicated Quaker, June Yungblut did all she could to oppose war. And like her interfaith friend Thomas Merton, she knew that to oppose war was to confront the violence inside herself—beginning with the violence within her own heart.

What also drew Merton and Yungblut together was their love of the arts—most especially dance. Professionally trained by Martha Graham, Yungblut’s work with the Barbara Mettler studio of Creative Dance rounded out a fascinating fusion of Quaker commitment to peace and human rights with a love of literature, poetry, and dance. Without question, June Yungblut’s creative and compassionate life fueled both her faith and her commitment to peace and justice. Her friendship with Merton and the King family was surely an extension of that commitment.

### **The Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Both Thomas Merton and June Yungblut feared that Dr. King’s life might come to an early end. In Merton’s April 9 letter to Yungblut immediately after King’s murder, he noted, “What a terrible thing and yet I felt that he was expecting it.”<sup>8</sup> On her part, Yungblut also feared for Dr. King’s life. She wrote Merton about her reservations concerning Dr. King’s last visit to Memphis. Although the letter itself is lost to history, Merton copied part of its content in his journal entry of April 6, 1968. Yungblut wrote:

Martin is going to Memphis today...He won’t be back until  
 the weekend...I hope both he and Nhat Hanh will soon go to  
 Gethsemani...If Martin had taken a period there he might have  
 had the wisdom in repose to stay out of Memphis in the first  
 place, and it was a mistake to go there.

In her perceptive letter to Merton, Yungblut anticipated Dr. King's "Jerusalem." She wrote about her deep concern regarding King's involvement in the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis.

He [Dr. King] had done no preparation and came in cold to a hot situation where the young militants had him just where they wanted him...If there is violence today Memphis will be to King what Cuba was to Kennedy...If Memphis is to be Martin's Jerusalem instead of Washington, how ironical that it is primarily a nightclub for Mississippi, which is dry where the crucifixion may take place and that the Sanhedrin will be composed of Negro militants.<sup>9</sup>

The Sanhedrin, rather than being "Negro militants," was a white racist named James Earle Ray. Death for Dr. King was nevertheless the verdict—coolly and calculatingly executed without mercy.

### Condolences

As mentioned earlier, Merton's most pressing response to Dr. King's death was to send a message of condolence via June Yungblut to Coretta Scott King. This was first and foremost a matter of the heart. His note to Mrs. King was not intended for public record or future publication. Instead, as a monk and a priest, Merton wrote to Coretta Scott King from the depth of his own grieving spirit. He longed to communicate his love to the King family, and June Yungblut was indeed the channel for this love.

The central paragraph of Merton's message to Mrs. King is quintessential Merton. Here he speaks spirit to spirit, as one broken heart to another. He laments the loss of one of God's greatest servants – a man who lived his life as best he could in the imitation of Christ. Merton's words to Mrs. King revealed both a personal and universal dimension. He knew that Dr. King, in all his particularity, had now become a universal man—one who belonged to the ages. Merton writes to Coretta Scott:

Let me only say how deeply I share your personal grief as well as the shock, which pervades the whole nation. He [Dr. King] had done the greatest thing anyone can do. In imitation of his master he has laid down his life for friends and enemies. He knew the nation was under judgment and he tried everything to stay the hand of God and man. He will go down in history as one of our greatest citizens.<sup>10</sup>

On April 11, June Yungblut wrote back to Merton of her own personal heartbreak. She reported how she had helped at the King home; how she cared for the smaller King children; how she grieved as Coretta Scott flew to Memphis to bring home her husband's body. June Yungblut told Merton of her sadness as she observed the younger King children trying to grasp the reality of their family's tragedy. She also told Merton about her deep admiration for Coretta Scott's courage. June noted how Coretta Scott grieved in private, while displaying tremendous strength and dignity in public.<sup>11</sup>

### **An Act of Redemption?**

June Yungblut noted to Merton one small sign of hope during those bleak days in the King household. She reported to Merton a conversation she overheard involving the younger King children. It was an exchange between the King and Abernathy children. This exchange was poignant and deeply moving. Perhaps it was redemptive? Yungblut tells Merton:

The Abernathy children asked Andy Young if they could hate the man that fired the shot [that killed their father]. Martin and Dexter King answered before Andy could and said, "no", they couldn't hate the man because their Daddy told them they were not to hate anyone.<sup>12</sup>

The words of Dr. Howard Thurman, a longtime friend of the King family and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., may be instructive in this regard. Several years before Dr. King's death he wrote:

To be to another human being what is needed at the time that the need is most urgent and most acutely felt, this is to participate in the precise act of redemption.<sup>13</sup>

Could it be that "the precise act of redemption" in this situation were the simple words of Dr. King's children? No to hatred, yes to love.

### **Strength to Love**

Looking back on the letters exchanged by Thomas Merton and June J. Yungblut at the time of Dr. King's death, we are reminded of the price that is often paid by those who labor for the realization of God's kingdom. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King knew the price of divine glory. So did Thomas Merton and June Yungblut. The price has always been high – the Hebrew prophets

and Jesus knew it better than anyone. Costly grace must always replace cheap grace if God's work is to be done.<sup>14</sup>

I'm sure Merton and Yungblut both understood that Martin Luther King, Jr. had followed – as best as he could – the way of Jesus his Redeemer in living out the “moral imperative of love.” In her forward to the 1982 edition of *Strength to Love*, Coretta Scott King quotes directly from her husband's speech to the anti-war group Clergy and Laity Concerned. These words, perhaps better than any other of Dr. King's statements, express the universal nature of God's redemptive love. They also go to the very core of Thomas Merton's own understanding of love. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another; for love is of God and everything that loveth is born of God and knowth God.”<sup>15</sup>

Love has no equal. The courage to love has no equal. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King knew of this love and this courage. So did Thomas Merton and his interfaith friend June Yungblut. They too affirmed love as a “Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist-belief.” Indeed, God's love is without boundaries.

Ultimately, Thomas Merton and June J. Yungblut believed in Dr. King's witness to love because it was of God. Nothing, not even our mortal shortcomings, can keep this love from doing its work. Even in the “terrible days,” God's love prevails. This is the great truth that Thomas Merton and June Yungblut shared through their correspondence and friendship. This is the legacy of the strength to love found in the life and witness of Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King, Jr.

#### Endnotes

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1. William H. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 645.

2. Parts of this present article are adapted from chapter nine of my

book *Signs of Peace* published by Orbis Books in 2006. The content has been refocused and expanded with an emphasis upon Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death and the additional use of unpublished letters of June J. Yungblut at the time of Dr. King's death.

3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 519-520

4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1964), 36.

5. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 519.

6. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 487.

7. June J. Yungblut, *This Is the Child* (Tuscan, AZ: Mettler Studios, 1975), page not numbered

8. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, 644.

9. Patrick, Hart, ed. *The Other Side of the Mountain* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 79.

10. Shannon, ed. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, 451.

11. June J. Yungblut to Merton, April 11, 1968, archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky

12. Yungblut to Merton, April 11, 1968.

13. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1961), 18.

14. My reference to cheap and costly grace recalls Dietrich Bonhoeffer's opening chapter of, *Cost of Discipleship*, especially with which Merton was familiar.

15. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 5. Coretta Scott King reported in her 1982 forward to the book that people constantly told her this book "changed their lives."