

Crisis of Faith: Thomas Merton and the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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“These have been terrible days for everyone, and God alone knows what is to come.”

Letter to June Yungblut, April 9, 1968¹

“Beloved, let us love one another for love is of God and everyone that loves is of God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God.”

1 John 4:7

Introduction

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 was devastating to thousands of his supporters, and Thomas Merton was no exception. In the short run, King’s death sent Merton into a downward spiral that inwardly resulted in a crisis of faith. He mentioned this to no one. We would, in fact, not know of Merton’s spiritual crisis had it not been for one solitary entry into his personal journal.

The focus of this essay concerns this often-overlooked crisis. Although short-lived, its resolution reaffirms a theology of love that had been at the center of Merton’s life, and of Dr. King’s life too. I will first examine Merton’s crisis of faith beginning with the aforementioned journal entry, then explore its resolution through an inquiry into the exchange of letters between Merton and June Yungblut in the week following Dr. King’s death; finally, I will expand on Merton’s and King’s understanding of love, an understanding that still challenges us today.

Journal

In his April 6 journal entry, only two days after King’s murder, Merton found himself in a deeply discouraged state of mind. He confessed to himself that Dr. King’s death “finally confirmed all the apprehensions – the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year.”² Merton raises a number of

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 645; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*,

questions stemming from his reaction to King's murder. There are two questions, however, that cut to the heart of his faith and life-commitments. In all candor and with a penetrating honesty, he asks, "Is the Christian message of love a pitiful delusion? Or must one just 'love' in an impossible situation?" (*OSM* 78). All the violence and hatred in the world had reached a tipping point for Merton and spilled over with King's brutal death. Was there any word the Christian message could speak that would adequately address the present situation, or would all words express only "a pitiful delusion"? Or maybe, worse yet, was any expression of love merely a fallback position? Maybe the word "love" would be no more than a pious platitude? Such was Merton's inner state of mind and spirit at that time.

Letters

Thomas Merton and his Quaker friend and kindred spirit June Yungblut carried on a lively and sustained correspondence in the years 1967 and 1968 covering a range of topics – from their lives as writers to their witness for peace and justice.³ However, for the purposes of this article, I focus on an exchange of letters that took place during the week following Dr. King's assassination on April 4, 1968. In this particular correspondence, Merton can be seen giving and receiving love and learning from the love of others. This interaction of love became the way in which he would work through his crisis of faith. Love in action demonstrated for Merton that love is quite real and that the Christian message of love is not "a pitiful delusion." Merton's experience underscores the truth that expressing love in troubled times is not the only recourse left for someone in despair; rather, it is *the primary thing* to do. Merton was reminded at that time that love is a forceful and often redemptive action. How did Merton in April of 1968 find this renewed understanding of the saving power of love? A careful examination of both the texts and relevant context of the Merton-Yungblut letters of that week will reveal some answers.

It is crucial to know a little more about June Yungblut. In 1968, she and her husband John were co-directors of the Quaker House in Atlanta, Georgia. They were both active in Dr. King's movement for racial equal-

vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 78 [4/6/1968]; subsequent references will be cited as "*OSM*" parenthetically in the text. (This was said even before his Aunt Kit's drowning in a ferryboat off the coast of New Zealand four days later [see *OSM* 84-85] and before the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy in June [see *OSM* 126-27]).

3. See William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 143-60.

ity and justice. June was good friends with Coretta Scott King and close to the entire King family. John Yungblut was closer to Martin Luther King than to anyone else in the King family. Based on their collective understanding of the family, John and June, along with others active in the movement, thought that Dr. King needed some time apart from all the demands of his activism and the hectic schedule he kept. The Yungbluts conferred with Merton, and together they all agreed that King should experience a personal retreat at Gethsemani – Merton’s monastery in the rolling hills of Kentucky.

On March 12, June Yungblut wrote to Merton with good news. It looked like the retreat was going to happen. She told her Trappist friend, “Coretta has your dates [suggested retreat dates] and will nail Martin down.”⁴ But sadly the retreat never happened. Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King never met. Instead, on April 5, the day after King’s assassination, Merton wrote Yungblut a very somber letter.

Merton to Yungblut, April 5

Merton’s April 5 letter was brief and to the point. He tells her, “This all means something more serious than we can imagine” (*HGL* 644). He is not hesitant to admit that he was afraid of where the assassination might lead the nation. He writes of his love and admiration for Dr. King: “he, at any rate, had done all that any man can do. It will be to his glory” (*HGL* 645). Then, in the most direct way possible, he asks, “Could you please pass on the enclosed note to Mrs. King?” (*HGL* 645). Understanding just how comforting a note from Merton would be, Yungblut would surely be willing to share.

In his note to Coretta Scott King, Merton made clear that he was not writing as the famous author Thomas Merton. Rather, he was writing as a monk dedicated to a life of prayer and as a priest who wanted to offer pastoral support and comfort. Merton writes from deep within his own grieving spirit. In his note, he speaks from spirit to spirit, loving heart to loving heart. The communication is not lengthy, but it is pure Merton. Even though the note is of a highly personal nature, a greater love that transcends the particular situation shines through. This love is the same love that Jesus taught and lived. Merton’s words deserve repeating here: “Let me only say how deeply I share your personal grief as well as the shock which pervades the whole nation. He has done the greatest thing anyone can do. In imitation of his Master he has laid down his life for his friends and enemies” (*HGL* 451).

4. Unpublished letter from June Yungblut to Merton, March 12, 1968 (archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY).

As a simple monk of prayer, Merton writes, “My prayers are with you and with him” (*HGL* 451), and as a priest, he follows up with a promise of a most loving act: “This morning my Eucharistic offering will be for him and for you” (*HGL* 451). The Christ of the Eucharist that Martin Luther King loved would most likely have been of great comfort to the grieving Coretta.

Already, in the April 5 letter to June Yungblut and in the letter of condolence sent to Coretta Scott King, the message of Christian love, which Merton calls into question the next day in his journal, is very evident. Does this mean he did not actually suffer a crisis of faith? No, the expression of crisis rings true. But so does his irrepressible desire to want to love.

Yungblut to Merton, April 6

June Yungblut’s letter of April 6 is also filled with accounts of loving deeds in the midst of heavy sorrow. (Merton’s letter of the previous day and Yungblut’s April 6 letter had passed each other in the mail.) Yungblut tells Merton, “Not one person in the house [the King home] believes that Martin is dead” (TMC archives). Yungblut was at the King home helping to care for the King children while Coretta King flew to Memphis to accompany her husband’s body home to Atlanta. These two actions, each in their own way, were surely expressions of deep love.

Yungblut mentions to Merton that they all watched the television reports “over and over” as the “seemingly far away events” are repeatedly aired. Rev. Ralph Abernathy, fellow member of the nonviolent civil rights movement and friend of Dr. King, also “goes over the events” repeatedly. She tells Merton that Abernathy knows it all happened but can’t believe it quite yet. Fellow civil rights activist and future mayor of Atlanta, Andrew Young, she writes, is already planning the “next steps” for the movement. Each seemed to respond to the events in his or her own way. But the common thread among their separate responses during those terrible days was love.

The most remarkable acts of love came from Coretta Scott King. If anyone was a sign of love for others during that time, it was Coretta Scott King. June Yungblut tells Merton that on returning from Memphis, Mrs. King entered the house and spoke briefly to each person present. This did not escape Merton’s attention. With these simple acts of selfless recognition of others, Christian love was put into practice. It was no “pitiful delusion.” Yungblut then shares with Merton that Mrs. King lovingly embraced her for “a long time.” Neither said a word to the other. A loving silence seemed to say it all. This is the kind of communication Merton

elsewhere describes as communion – the highest form of communication.⁵

Merton to Yungblut, April 9

Merton begins his April 9 letter to June Yungblut by stating, “Today is the day of the funeral” (*HGL* 645). He acknowledges his receipt of her “most moving letter” of April 6. He then writes about his meeting in Louisville with Alexander Peloquin, a noted musician and composer, who had set Merton’s “freedom songs” to music.⁶ These songs were intended for use at a Liturgical Conference in Washington, DC. It was a gathering Dr. King had on his schedule for the summer of 1968. Merton now wondered if his “freedom songs” might be used in King’s honor at the conference. This gift to Mrs. King was another act of love, and one that she, so well schooled in music, would presumably appreciate (see *HGL* 645).

The April 9 letter is also the letter that speaks of the “terrible days” they all were facing. Immediately after this statement, Merton tells Yungblut that the way forward will not be easy. He writes, “We will need a lot of faith and a new vision and courage to move in these new and more bitter realities” (*HGL* 645). Merton knew the challenges could not be faced with an individual’s strength alone. But with God’s help, together they could muster the courage to love. Merton’s crisis of faith in “the Christian message of love” was being overcome in the only real way possible – by performing acts of love and receiving love.

Yungblut to Merton, April 11

The second letter from June Yungblut to Merton during these “terrible days” is a lengthy one (*TMC* archives). She informs Merton that his letter of April 5 had arrived and she was taking his “fine letter” over to Mrs. King that day. Included with Merton’s note of condolence were the four “freedom songs” previously mentioned. Yungblut agrees with Merton that the songs should be used during a public tribute to King, and she also agrees with Merton’s suggestion that Harry Belafonte would be the best choice to sing them. Yungblut also shares that she had a long conversation with Senator Robert Kennedy, who had come to the King home the day before the funeral. Merton must have been pleased to learn that Bobby Kennedy also had sent his greetings to him – yet

5. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.

6. See William H. Shannon, “Freedom Songs,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 167; subsequent references will be cited as “*Encyclopedia*” parenthetically in the text.

another expression of love.

At the heart of the April 11 letter is Yungblut's moving account of Dr. King's funeral service held at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. This church is where he and his father served as senior pastors. Yungblut tells Merton that she wishes he could have been there to *see* all that she witnessed. The service was nationally televised, but the cameras could not have captured the depth of the love that those present in the moment must have experienced.

Yungblut confesses to Merton that she had thought she had done all her grieving. But with the start of the first hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy," the tears began to flow once again. The memories of the eight years she spent with Dr. King came rushing back to her. She notes that there were two events in the worship service that she knew Merton would especially appreciate. In the first, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. got up from his seat in the congregation, mounted the pulpit and said he would like Mahalia Jackson to sing. She stood right at her place in the pew and "sang a gospel song." Descriptive words alone could not have rendered the loving depth of this music. Next, A. D., Martin Luther King, Jr.'s brother, announced to the surprised congregation that "the greatest trumpet player in the world" was present and "wanted to play for Martin." June describes how Dizzy Gillespie asked the organist to accompany him as he played "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." She reports that people wept.

After the funeral service, Gillespie came to the King home. Yungblut writes of how she told Gillespie, "I've never heard a trumpet played that way before" and that his playing was "a prayer for all of us," to which Gillespie simply replied that "he would never play a trumpet like that again." The sound of the trumpet was pure love expressed for Martin Luther King, Jr. For June Yungblut, it was a healing moment.

The African-American theologian and preacher Howard Thurman – a mentor to Dr. King – has written: "To be to another human being what is needed at the time that the need is most urgent and acutely felt is . . . redemption."⁷ This is what Jackson's singing and Gillespie's playing did that day for many in the congregation. It met others at their deepest point of need and freed them from their despair. From Dr. King's perspective, this kind of action is a genuine act of love – one that was "of God."

One pertinent story remains to be shared from June's April 11 letter, and it has no equal. According to Yungblut, the Abernathy children, after the memorial service, asked Andrew Young "if it was all right to hate the man who fired the shot." Yungblut writes that before Young could

7. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 115 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961) 64-66.

answer, King's children, Martin and Dexter King, replied that no, they couldn't hate the assassin because their "Daddy said not to hate anyone" (HGL 646).

Theology of Love

Martin Luther King would have been proud of his children's response. It stands as a witness to the Christ-like love he had taught them. It represented the strength to love that Dr. King had spoken and written about so often. It is the *agape* form of love that Jesus taught, and like his Redeemer, it is the love for which Dr. King lived and died. Thomas Merton also wrote of this kind of love, calling it "a nonviolent resistance to evil even as one refused to demonize and hate the evildoer."⁸ Merton, like King, believes: "Genuine love includes even the love of enemies" (*Encyclopedia* 271). This radical inclusion of the enemy, that both King and Merton affirm, is an integral part of their being Christian. Indeed, as disciples they become signs of love, the living love that can only be "of God" and *for* humanity.

In "An Experiment in Love" written in 1958, Dr. King describes how his understanding of the Christian message of love is linked with Mahatma Gandhi's method of nonviolence. King remembers that it was the nonviolent "Christian love" from the Sermon on the Mount that motivated his people, but soon Gandhi's insights into nonviolent protest were added. It was a perfect combination.⁹ He states what love in action means for him: "I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom" (King, *Testament* 16). As with Merton, love was not merely offering the cup of cool water; it was also transformative, having the potential not only to change the hearts and minds of people, but also to change society and make it more just.

In his book *Gandhi on Non-violence*, Merton discusses the Gandhian principle of *satyagraha*, which he says "is totally dedicated to the transformation of his own life, of his adversary, and of society by means of love."¹⁰ And to be clear, such love for Merton and King is forever rooted in the love (*agape*) lived and taught by Jesus. Love like this is, as King

8. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Love" (*Encyclopedia* 271).

9. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) 16. Subsequent references will be cited as "King, *Testament*" parenthetically in the text.

10. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 35.

says, “the force which all the great religions have seen as the principle of love” (King *Testament* 16).

Coretta King, in a 1982 introduction to her husband’s most popular book, *Strength to Love*, quotes from a speech he gave to the anti-war group Clergy and Laymen Concerned. The words are broadly expansive but deeply rooted in his faith tradition. She reports that he tells the group:

When I speak of love . . . I am speaking of the force which all the great religions have seen as the unifying principle of love. 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 St. John: Let us love one another for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.¹¹

King’s reference to love “as the unifying principle” that “unlocks the door” is not far from Merton’s notion that ultimate reality or God is the “hidden ground of Love.” Merton says this God-Reality can be called by many names. Some call it Being or Atman or Pneuma or Silence; it matters not (see *HGL* 115). King and Merton both agree: life is all about love, and the source of that love is the living God. As 1 John 4:7 states, “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

Conclusion

Whatever question Merton may have had about the veracity of the Christian message of love, whatever crisis of faith may have weighed upon him during those terrible days in April 1968, passed. He was once again free to love and be loved as God intended. In his exchange of letters with June Yungblut, Merton was helped in the reawakening of his faith and to the wonderful reality of love and living.¹² The message of Martin Luther King reminded him of the love that cannot be denied. Fifty years after death of both King and Merton, the message has not changed – this love still cannot be denied. It is the love that continues to guide people of good will whatever their spiritual pathway might be.

11. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963) 84. This collection of sermons by Dr. King is often considered his most influential book. Coretta Scott King reports in her 1982 foreword to the book that people constantly told her this book “changed their lives.”

12. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979); this posthumous collection of essays, especially Part One, is very relevant to Merton’s understanding of love.