

writing as offering today's seeker a model of authentic searching for wholeness in the context of everyday living. Merton was "willing and able to be honest about his problems: . . . always he was open in sharing them . . . [he] wants to share what he has learned and is learning, and the learning is in real time." He quotes Merton offering "My life is a great mess," observing, "That may be so, but in that mess each of us who understands our life also as a kind of pilgrimage may find direction" (110). *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices* is a remarkably fine introduction to both Merton and spiritual pilgrimage. It has immediately become my first recommendation to those who ask me, "Who was Thomas Merton?"

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FOREST, Jim, *Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh*, Introduction by Mobi Warren (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), pp. xvii, 138. ISBN 978-1-62698-424-8 (paper) \$20.00.

Buddhist monk, spiritual leader and writer Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926) only preceded Jim Forest (b. 1941) in death by about a month in early 2022. In a brief period, we lost two of Merton's friends and significant peacemakers of the Vietnam War era and beyond. I did not have the chance to meet Nhat Hanh, known to friends and devotees alike as "Thay" (Teacher). Jim Forest was an Orthodox Christian, writer and peacemaker who first encountered Thomas Merton in 1961 during his work with Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker, serving for a time as its newspaper's managing editor. He later worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and cofounded the Catholic Peace Fellowship, assisting Catholic conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. Forest himself served in the U.S. Navy before conversion to Catholicism and receiving an early discharge from military service on the grounds of conscientious objection. He would later in life serve as the international secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship after being received into the Orthodox Church. He has written memoirs and books, including biographies of Dorothy Day and Merton.¹

I met Jim on a few occasions and through some brief correspondence. It was a pleasure to spend more time with him, even if virtually, through a book. Because of the personal and conversational tone of *Eyes of Compassion*, other readers may share this impression of being in the presence of two devoted peacemakers and learning from each wisdom

1. Jim Forest, *All Is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991; rev. ed. 2008).

gleaned from two great spiritual traditthayions – the Buddhist master’s wisdom received and translated through a devoted Christian disciple.

In describing some aspects of *Eyes of Compassion*, one may be superficially reminded of another book placing Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhism into conversation with a Christian peacemaker in *The Raft Is Not the Shore*.² In the latter, the dialogue partner was Fr. Daniel Berrigan discussing the Vietnam War, peacemaking and interreligious topics in dialogue-essay form. Here, the similarities with *Eyes of Compassion* end. Rather than essays, Jim Forest presents personal stories from his life at times when he worked and lived in community with Thay. In fact, Forest devotes one of the narrative vignettes about Berrigan’s stay with Thay and the writing of *The Raft Is Not the Shore*, since it overlaps with a time Forest spent with Thay in the 1970s.

Eyes of Compassion opens with an introduction by Mobi Warren, author, naturalist, retired teacher and translator from Vietnamese to English of many of Thay’s books. In 1973, she was invited by Thay and Cao Ngoc Phuong (later ordained as the Buddhist nun Sister Chan Khong) to be a full-time volunteer of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation in a southern suburb of Paris. Thay’s *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*³ was an inspiration for her commitment to activism in opposition to the Vietnam War, and with Thomas Merton’s introduction, it dovetailed with her interest in Christian–Buddhist dialogue and its ramifications for seeking peace together. Soon after, she discovered Jim Forest’s booklet *Only the Rice Loves You*,⁴ which provided a roadmap for the volunteering she sought out. She contacted Laura Hassler from the Fellowship of Reconciliation in New York, who was described in this essay and had recently returned from volunteering in France.

Eyes of Compassion recounts brief stories with reflections by Jim Forest on Thay and his teaching drawn in a mostly chronological sequence through Forest’s lifetime of interactions with Thay. In fact, Mobi Warren herself reappears after the introduction during the time she spent in France while Forest was there. So too, before that, there are stories of Thomas Merton, with whom both Thay and Jim Forest met and corresponded, as well as of Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, Thay, like Pope Francis, paired Merton and King, saying, “Dr. King is not only a brave man but a gifted listener. . . . As with Thomas Merton, you can say just a little and he understands a

2. Daniel Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Raft Is Not the Shore* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

3. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, Foreword by Thomas Merton (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967; Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2022).

4. James Forest, *Only the Rice Loves You: A Month with the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation* (New York: Hoa Binh Press, 1972).

great deal” (17-18). In brief reflections, Forest’s gift is evident of capturing larger-than-life personalities and discreet but meaningful moments through photographs, journals, and sketches reproduced throughout the book, with some art by Thay himself.

Sometimes through seemingly simple stories of mundane tasks, Forest shares the depth of Thay’s teaching which have the effect of reorienting our approach to everything – walking, eating, chores. How can I climb flights steps in a way so as not to exhaust myself? Can I focus on each segment of a tangerine and where it was grown and who was responsible for bringing it to me? Can I wash dishes to wash dishes rather than crossing off a task with another problem or even leisure in mind, taking me out of the present? With the rise of an industry attempting to sell mindfulness, the radical, noncommercial, uncompromising mindfulness of Thay shines through Forest’s prose and further reveals the authenticity of his total lived experience in contrast to a vulgar commodity offered by the contemporary market.

Humor is a constant companion in the book, revealing Thay’s Zen master skill of turning a situation on its head – sometimes to the point of hilarity or disorientation – to sharpen our senses of observation that everyday life can dull. Forest does a fantastic job of balancing a humorous, light touch with the sadness that also haunts the book in recounting the toll that the Vietnam War took on Thay: its devastation of his homeland, oppression of its people, his exile, and the deaths of family and loved ones. It is here, when we arrive at the depths of Thay’s sorrow, that we understand how profound his practice of compassion is. Fittingly, Forest selects the book’s title from a quotation of Thay that underscores his own teachings on suffering in the midst of his personal loss from war: “The two opposing armies are two sides of the same coin, the coin of war. If we look at what happened with eyes of compassion, we can see in how many ways the two sides in war resemble each other” (65).

The deaths of Jim and Thay at nearly the same time and the publication of this book not long before create an immediacy to my gratitude for their extraordinary lives. *Eyes of Compassion* is such a fitting tribute to the ways in which their lives intersected through the decades and to the end. I highly recommend this brief book, and it is a book that I will reread. Other books will provide more detailed biographies of each of the book’s prominent figures, but there is much wisdom pertinent to Christian and Buddhist traditions and life in general that is revealed in points of intersection so carefully recorded and beautifully recounted by Jim Forest.

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