

Of Tangerines and Tea

Review of
Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh
by Jim Forest

Introduction by Mobi Warren
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Reviewed by **Joseph Quinn Raab**

Jim Forest, an author familiar to Merton readers, found his soul mates and mentors while working with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the Catholic Peace Fellowship throughout the Vietnam War and the Cold War era. A few of those mentors, like Dan Berrigan, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, have been the subjects of Jim's previous books. Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) is the subject of his last. Jim was just twenty-four years old and Thay thirty-nine when the two first met in 1966 (4). Jim was working with FOR – the organization that had hosted Nhat Hanh when he came to the U.S. to advocate for an end to the war. Alfred Hassler, Jim's boss, was normally the one to accompany Thay on his travels in the States – but when he was unavailable, Jim stepped in and a friendship was born. Jim and Thay spent days together in New York and in San Francisco, and their shared work for peace would bring them together many times over the ensuing decades, Jim spending time at Thay's Sweet Potatoes and Plum Village communities in France, and Thay staying at Jim and Nancy's home in Holland.

Jim and Thay died within a couple weeks of each other in January of this year – and this little book is a fitting *adieu* to a long friendship. In it, these two peacemakers show us that hope and humor, love and laughter, need not be threatened by darkness and war. Evil, Thay tells Jim, turns out to be nothing at all; and recalling Merton's epiphany at Polonnaruwa, he asserts "everything is good" (130).

The title, *Eyes of Compassion*, recalls a line from the Lotus Sutra – "learn to look at other beings with the eyes of compassion" – words that "silenced" Thay the first time he had recited them. "I knew that these words were enough to guide my whole life" he would write in *Being Peace* (95). They did guide his life and he became a teacher (Thay means "teacher") who helped countless others, including Jim, to see with compassionate eyes. This lovely homage continues that teaching through a series of one hundred and thirty-five short "chapters," which are mostly vignettes of their friendship that function as koans and lessons in Zen.

From the get-go we are reminded that Thay was not a stereotypical Zen Master – stern and intimidating – but just the opposite. He was warm, gentle, and he could be very funny. For example,

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Jim recalls when he and Thay were walking together in San Francisco's Tenderloin district and they passed a porn shop with a bold sign in the window that said "you must be 21 and able to prove it in order to enter this store." Thay smiled, looked at Jim and asked, "Are you 21, Jim?" Jim had to think for a moment, considering the question a koan, then answered "no." "'Good,' said Thay, 'neither am I' . . ." (33).

On another occasion, when the Ellsberg family joined Jim and Thay for dinner, Daniel Ellsberg asked Thay if he would explain Zen. Thay paused, smiled, and looked at Jim, and then said, "Jim will answer." Jim's face turned red with embarrassment and he said nothing. Thay laughed and said, "Jim's silence is the best answer" (81).

There are many Zen lessons in this book, but one teaching moment comes to mind as indicative of its considerable power. In "Eating Tangerines" Jim recalls excitedly talking to Thay about an idea as he shoved tangerine slices mechanically into his mouth. Thay stopped him and asked, "What are you doing?" "I'm eating a tangerine," Jim said. Thay asked, "But have you really noticed it?" Then he told Jim to eat it slowly, to savor each segment; "if you pay attention, the tangerine connects with everything, with the sun, with the rain and water, with the hands of many people, with the place where its tree was rooted. . . . Pay attention. Wake up. Live in the Present moment" (39-40).

Through Jim's illuminating recollections, we learn that whether Thay was gently waking him with a cup of ginger tea, or teaching him how to wash dishes as if washing the infant Jesus, Thay managed to open up a world of wonder – leaving Jim in awe of the mundane becoming miraculous: tangerines and tea, like bread and wine, becoming spiritual food and drink.