

A Peaceful Spirit for a Peaceful World

Review of

Becoming Peace:

Contemplative Transformation in the Writings of Thomas Merton and Jim Forest

By Eric H. Janzen

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Reviewed by **Jessica Sun**

Eric H. Janzen's *Becoming Peace* is a quiet but urgent intervention in the literature on peacebuilding. By weaving together the contemplative theology of Thomas Merton and the activist witness of Jim Forest, Janzen proposes that sustainable peace is not merely a political outcome or a negotiated ceasefire, but an ontological state cultivated within the human heart. The book posits that before we can heal the fractures of society, we must first address the interior alienation that drives conflict. This is a work that demands both spiritual depth and practical courage, suggesting that true peacemaking requires us to become peace ourselves. Janzen recommends the accessible contemplative practices of silence and stillness, for in the silence we have the opportunity to begin to hear ourselves. As peace-builders, we must remember that how we do things is just as important as what we do.

As Augustine of Hippo famously prayed, "Lord, that I may know myself, in order to know Thee." Little Friends for Peace in Maryland, founded by peace-builders MJ and Jerry Park, teaches "peace in me, peace in the world" to hundreds of kids every year. Pope Francis aptly summarized, "To truly say 'no' to war and violence, it is not enough just to silence weapons and stop the aggressors. It is necessary to uproot the roots of wars and violence, which are resentment, envy and greed. . . . One must have the courage to 'disarm' hearts, to 'demilitarize' them."

Janzen primarily explores this process of the rhythm of contemplative transformation in the themes of restoration, reconciliation, separation/alienation and shalomic peace, considering how contemplative theology and practice understand the interconnection between all of humanity. He teaches that contemplative theology and the necessary practice of peace work lead to an ever-increasing sense of this interconnection. At the same time, one must be careful to avoid the pride and thus the haste that leads to burnout. He quotes from Jim Forest: "God and my guardian angel must have been laughing. Thanks to an act of civil disobedience, I had stumbled off the conveyer belt that carries peace activists along at the same speed and ambition as corporate executives and

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movie stars. I had once aspired to the contemplative life and, in a funny sort of way, found it for a year in the company of convicts” (57).

In the journey of becoming peace with God’s grace that Janzen encourages, a further exploration of available trauma-informed psychological practices would be beneficial. Landmark texts such as *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* by Judith Herman (2022) would be an apt place to start. Other psychological self-awareness frameworks such as the Enneagram may also assist in explaining how people may face with courage their inner pain, especially in Janzen’s centering of understanding one’s own false versus true self. Enneagram is often understood as the nine survival selves or coping selves, and offers tools in growing towards integration and inner liberation. In this practice of becoming aware of our projections onto others, or what we have rejected from ourselves in shadow work, having a path to work towards inner wholeness is crucial. If one undertakes inner “parts work” that Janzen sometimes refers to, a component of Internal Family System (IFS) therapeutic methods, it may be helpful to refer to critics of IFS. They have questioned whether treating the mind as literally multiple risks reinforcing dissociation rather than resolving it. IFS can be destabilizing for people with complex trauma or dissociative disorders if not paced and managed carefully. The IFS approach shows real promise for certain conditions but needs larger, controlled trials before it earns the evidence status of established therapies.

In this work of interior liberation, one is necessarily impelled into acting for those same conditions and possibility for all. Love does not tolerate indifference. Taking the example of Thomas Merton and Jim Forest, Janzen writes, “Merton’s contemplative life followed a choice to become a monk. It took an unexpected turn as the inner transformation resulting from his contemplative life forced him to see beyond himself and become deeply concerned about conflicts and injustices in the world. Forest’s time in prison was an outside force that unexpectedly led to the beginning of his contemplative practice and allowed him not only to be a peacemaker for his entire life, but also to articulate what becoming peace ontologically looks like” (61).

Janzen, in discussing further the close mentorship between Merton and Forest, concludes with the salient reminder that “Peacemakers have to accept that the changes they are working for are changes they may not see. Some transformations occur in part because of their efforts, results which they may never know about.” As Amy Grant croons in “Trees We’ll Never See”: “‘Til then it’s prayin’ for rain and pullin’ up the weeds / Plantin’ trees we’ll never see.”