

Witness to Mercy: Thomas Merton's Vocation as Letter Writer

By **William D. Apel**

We must be to ourselves and to others signs and sacraments of mercy.
Thomas Merton¹

Thomas Merton in his vocation as a letter writer often acted as a witness to God's mercy. He did this through his pastoral counseling of epistolary friends. In *Seasons of Celebration*, Merton writes: "We must be to ourselves and to others signs and sacraments of mercy" – and this is precisely what he does in numerous of his letters. Indeed, there are scores of Merton's "letters of mercy" found throughout his massive corpus of correspondence.² I have chosen two for closer examination and exegesis. The first of these is from Merton to Jim Forest, at the time a young peace activist. The second is from Merton to John Howard Griffin, a fellow writer and civil rights advocate. Other examples of "letters of mercy" that I have explored but cannot discuss in this brief article are those by Merton to interfaith friend and cultural critic Doña Luisa Coomerawamy,³ survivor of Hiroshima and peace advocate Hiromu Morishita,⁴ and Quaker friend and spiritual teacher June J. Yungblut (see Apel, *Signs* 143-60).

My interest in Merton's letters of mercy arises for three basic reasons. First, they provide examples of how Merton responded to friends in times of personal crisis. Second, they reveal how Merton not only provided comfort and compassion for his friends, but also presented surprising new challenges to friends in their times of deepest need. Third, some of Merton's letters of mercy continue to speak to us across time. I know this to be true because, as will be seen, Merton's letter of mercy to John Howard Griffin has had that effect upon me at a time of deep personal crisis. Sometimes we have to come out from behind our scholarship. This is one of those times.

1. Opening the Letters

Before opening the letters, several points need to be made about Merton's understanding of mercy. First, we must never forget that Merton's primary knowledge of mercy comes from his own experience; in fact, he viewed his entire life in terms of God's mercy. This represents nothing less than the "mercy within mercy within mercy" that Merton so eloquently described at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*.⁵ William H. Shannon, in his brief article on mercy in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, states: "Mercy [for Merton] is not something we deduce from our knowledge of the divine essence; rather, it is revealed in God's relationships with people. This is the point of the Hebrew word that we translate as 'mercy,'"

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chesed.⁷⁶ This Hebrew word is perhaps best translated as “steadfast love.” Mercy is often thought of as forgiveness, or leniency, for an offense that normally requires a more severe punishment. But for prophets like Hosea, mercy has a more positive valence. It suggests God’s patience and enduring love – as with Hosea’s love for his unfaithful wife Gomer (Hosea 3:1-5). As Shannon notes, Merton also associated *chesed* with Jesus and the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The loving and merciful action of the Samaritan is the way of action Merton desired to call forth in himself and in others. We find this Gospel way of life, characterized in New Testament Greek as *agape*, to be very close in meaning to *chesed*. It was the prophets and Jesus then, more than any philosophical notions, that gave Merton his living sense of what God’s mercy most fully entailed.

2. The Forest Letter

Our first letter of mercy was sent by Merton to Jim Forest on February 21, 1966. It has become known among Merton readers as the “Letter to a Young Activist.”⁷⁷ In fact, Forest’s new book, *The Root of War Is Fear*, has an entire chapter dedicated to this letter.⁸ The Forest letter is noteworthy for a number of reasons. It addresses issues of war and peace, and it links Forest with the Catholic Worker and the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF). But our focus here is upon Merton’s counsel to Forest as Merton seeks to act a sign or sacrament of mercy. When Forest received the February 21 letter from Merton, he was in the midst of his peace activism and his work with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. It would be years before he gained public recognition as the author of *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*⁹ and numerous other books, and as a well-known teacher of wisdom and nonviolence. This was all in the future.

Forest’s initial involvement in the Catholic Worker movement soon led to his appointment as editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. Also during this time, he had become a founding member of the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF). This organization was highly controversial among American Catholics, and was frequently viewed as unpatriotic because of its opposition to the war in Vietnam. Merton, early on, had given his support to the CPF. Forest and Merton met for the first time in January of 1962. Their friendship grew quickly, and as with many of Merton’s friendships, it was cultivated primarily through the exchange of letters. Their very active correspondence lasted from 1961 until Merton’s death in December of 1968 (see *HGL* 254-308). Merton’s “Letter to a Young Activist” was prompted by a letter sent by Forest to Merton on February 15, 1966. He was in serious need of encouragement. In recalling this letter, Forest has written, “I was hard hit by all sorts of troubles, from Roger LaPorte’s death by fire to the disintegration of my first marriage.” He lamented: “I was also discouraged about the work I was doing” (Forest, *Root* 190). Forest was clearly in need of a good word from Merton. His friend responded in empathy and with care.

Merton was very much aware of the difficulties connected with peacemaking. Indeed, it was personal issues related to Forest’s work as a peacemaker that Merton focused upon. He himself had been criticized and silenced by his own religious order: he was forbidden to publish any more works on war and peace (see Forest, *Root* 49-59). As he had told another of his correspondents, opposition to war and peacemaking was certainly “a kind of arduous and unthanked pioneering.”¹⁰ Merton wanted to be sure his young friend knew that he had been heard, really heard, in his frustrations and discouragement as a witness for peace. As St. Benedict had advised, Merton sought to listen carefully with the ear of his heart.¹¹ Listening, in this sense, was always the first step to any true communication for Merton. The next step was God’s. This meant that Merton opened himself to

the possibility of being used as an agent of God's *chesed*, as being a sign of divine "steadfast love." This precise act of mercy, I believe, was passed from its divine source through Merton to Forest. Using an economy of words, Merton embraced Forest in loving mercy. He wrote in a simple and unpretentious way, "Thanks for the letter and for the awful, and illuminating, enclosure. I can well understand your sense of desperation. And the 'bleak mood.' And also I am glad that you wrote about it" (*HGL* 294; Forest, *Root* 192). Forest knew Merton well enough to know these were not frivolous or idle words. A sense of relief must have come to Forest just to know he had really been listened to and heard by a dear friend. Merton continued in all candor: "As you say, there are no clear answers, and you can guess that I don't have magic solutions for bleak moods: if I did I would use them on my own which are habitually pretty bleak too" (*HGL* 294; Forest, *Root* 192).

There is no false piety in Merton's words. It is a very human response to another in need. In very direct language, Merton let his friend know that he was standing beside him in solidarity and love. He was not alone in his despair. However, Merton did not end with these words of solidarity and compassion. His words also became the Word – an incarnate Word and a sacred challenge. Like Jesus in the Gospels, he was to turn reality upside down. He challenged Forest to see things with new eyes – to see the same things differently: "you are doubtless tired," Merton told Forest. Even if his troubling circumstances did not change, his way of "viewing" them could. The possibility of new life was already before him, if only he could stop and truly "see." Merton's words took Forest by surprise, maybe even a holy surprise! He wrote: "do not depend on the hopes of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect" (*HGL* 294; Forest, *Root* 192). Merton was pressing Forest to a new reality – a Gospel awakening. He told Forest: "As you get used to this idea [of failure and dashed hopes] you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself" (*HGL* 294; Forest, *Root* 192).

Merton reminds Forest that his was an apostolic work, a high calling; and this kind of calling, like that of the prophets and of Jesus, does not depend upon this world's metrics for success. What matters is not human results but rather faithfulness – a fidelity to God's way of life. Forest, upon reflection, later wrote that he had never thought of his work in these terms (see Forest, *Root* 197). His was an "apostolic work." This became a liberating moment in the life of the "young activist." He had been set free. He no longer had to carry the heavy burden of "success" and "results." In retrospect, Forest has written of this saving act, of this moment of *chesed*: "From time to time, when the sky was turning starless black, I reread it" (Forest, *Root* 196). Merton's letter of mercy, through God's grace, had been sent and received!

3. The Griffin Letter

Some of Merton's letters of mercy have literally to do with life and death issues. Merton's letter to John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black like Me*,¹² is one of them. On December 12, 1966, Merton wrote to his good friend and fellow writer regarding the latter's failing health.¹³ His letter came as a welcomed missive. Griffin's body was diseased and failing him, and his spirit was in need of a saving word. It was in these dire circumstances that Merton sought to be a sign or sacrament of mercy. As with the Forest letter, before discussing Merton's letter of mercy to Griffin we need some historical background. Like Merton, Griffin became a bestselling author who gained celebrity status almost

overnight. Also, like Merton, he was a devout convert to the Catholic faith; and both writers, early on, were active supporters of the civil rights movement in America. Griffin's *Black like Me* was a highly controversial memoir which changed his life forever. He, a privileged white Southerner, in November of 1959 darkened his skin through the use of harsh chemicals and a tanning lamp, and changed his appearance into that of a middle-aged black man. He writes that he was astonished when he looked into the mirror and could not recognize the man staring back at him. This man was someone he had never met and certainly did not know. Griffin would spend six grueling weeks as a jobless black drifter, moving through Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. He came to experience in small measure the abuses and indignities that tens of thousands of African Americans suffered daily in racist America. Griffin's biographer Robert Bonazzi has written: "By the simple act of darkening his pigment, he encountered a complex reality formerly unknown to him or any other white man."¹⁴

As a result of his social experiment and the book describing it, Griffin became a much sought-after speaker and an uncompromising advocate for racial justice. More than most whites, he had grasped the pervasiveness and depth of racism in America. The massive suffering and dehumanization of African Americans became the central theme of Griffin's writings and public presentations. This is the same theme Merton would address in *Seeds of Destruction*.¹⁵ Much to his credit, Griffin was careful to claim to speak only for himself. He never permitted his audiences to think he was speaking for blacks. He urged white Americans to listen more and speak less in their meetings with African Americans. His close friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr. confirmed him in this belief. Soon Merton would arrive at the same conclusion (see Apel, "Griffin" 19).

Merton and Griffin first met in 1962. Merton had just finished reading *Black like Me* when he found out that its author was on a personal retreat at Gethsemani, seeking peace and rest from his frenetic book tours and his work as a community mediator. Discovering this, Merton requested an opportunity to meet with Griffin while he was at the abbey. Griffin enthusiastically accepted. This first, brief meeting marked the beginning of a lasting friendship. Their close bond was to develop primarily through correspondence – a correspondence which continued well into the beginnings of Merton's Asian journey (*RJ* 131-41; see Apel, "Griffin" 18). As Griffin traveled about the country speaking in churches, colleges and other public forums, he would keep Merton informed about racial events as they were unfolding. Griffin often shared "inside" information and insights with Merton. Many have wondered how Merton, a cloistered monk, could be so current in his awareness of all that was happening in racial matters in America. Griffin was a large part of the answer to this historic question.

However, as we have indicated, the major topic of Merton's February 12, 1966 letter was not about race. Rather, it was about Griffin's failing health. By 1966 Griffin had difficulties walking and was often in need of a wheel chair. It would be number of years before Griffin's death but he was even then suffering from multiple diseases. When Griffin died in 1980, only in his mid-50s, his wife was to say of his demise, he simply died of everything (see Apel, "Griffin" 21). Now, we turn directly to Merton's letter of mercy to Griffin: it was February of 1966 and Griffin was about to face yet another of his numerous surgeries. He had tried to keep his public commitments, but this had become a losing battle. He could not keep most his speaking engagements and his days as an activist for racial justice were about over. This letter of mercy, like the one to Jim Forest, began by expressing empathy for his friend's many sufferings and identifying with his plight. He offers words of priestly comfort by telling Griffin: "I am going to offer Mass for all your intentions on

the 15th.” Merton’s letter continues in a very straightforward manner: “I hope you will have better health or less bad health or whatever one can reasonably hope to have in such a case.” He notes in all candor, “I hope the doctors are merciful and that you don’t have to get cut up: in fact, take a good rest if you can.”

Merton next writes words that Griffin could not have anticipated. Just as Forest was challenged to view his situation differently – to think of his peacemaking as an apostolic work – Griffin is challenged to a new way of seeing things. Much to his surprise, as with Jesus in the Gospels, Merton turns things upside down, writing: “You are probably doing more for the world bearing up with your Job-like afflictions than you did when you could get around and give talks.” These words affected Griffin deeply. And here is where I cannot help but enter the story. When I read these words of Merton to Griffin, they hit me like a ton of bricks. (Some readers may have had a similar experience with words from Merton – they leap off the page and into your heart.) I was having my own “Job-like afflictions” as I reread Merton’s words to Griffin as I was preparing this paper. During the half-year while I prepared this work my multiple sclerosis began to flare up. I began suffering from trigeminal neuralgia, and that was followed by the need for spinal surgery. Immediately on the heels of all this, I had a heart attack for my seventieth birthday. When Merton told Griffin, “You are probably doing more for the world bearing up with your Job-like afflictions than you did when you could get around and give talks,” I thought his words were spoken to me. They gave me a new perspective on my situation. His words were for Griffin – and for me – healing. They carried with them the possibility of new life. They became Christ for me; they were the Word incarnate. In Griffin’s case (as in mine) a new reality began to take shape – an awakening, a transformation, an awareness of God’s *chesed*, God’s steadfast love, mercy within mercy within mercy. Griffin began to explore much more deeply his contemplative side. In all truth, he was returned to a dimension of his life that he had to put aside because of activist demands. He tells us that he began to read more. He gave more time to his love of music and his photographic art (see Apel, “Griffin” 21). He was gaining a new sense of freedom – or was it an old one, lost? His contemplative existence became so pronounced that he good-naturedly referred to this phase of his life as being a “hermit like me” (see Apel, “Griffin” 21).

Griffin was at peace. He wrote, “acts of faith and hope no longer lie in writing books, but in keeping contact with a few beloved friends, studying and praying as much as I can, and by growing plants with the incentive of living to see them bloom” (see Apel, “Griffin” 21). The great irony (or mercy) of Griffin’s life was that as he “was dying of everything” he had come to “see” how to live for everything. In the end, Merton’s witness to mercy, to God’s *chesed*, to God’s steadfast love, was taken to heart by Griffin. He had a rebirth of spirit even as his body was dying.

4. A Closing Remark

A brief reference to words from the great African-American theologian and mystic Howard Thurman are in order here. His definition of redemption seems to be close to what Merton’s witness to mercy was all about. According to Thurman, “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.”¹⁶ This “precise act of redemption” is what Jim Forest felt when he was freed from the chains of “success” and what John Howard Griffin felt when he discovered new life in the very face of death. The deep mercy of God, *chesed*, never ceases. Whether it be related to a “young activist”

or a dying man, or to people like you and me, the mercy of God prevails. In sum, Merton's letters of mercy attempted to awaken its recipients to the steadfast love of the Holy One. As a sacrament or sign of mercy, Merton sought to share only one thing, perhaps, the only thing that truly matters, God's "mercy within mercy within mercy."

1. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 179.
2. According to Paul M. Pearson, director and archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, there are over 10,000 letters from about 1,200 different correspondents in the Merton Center archives, not including various other letters scattered around in several university collections, as well as numbers of letters in people's personal possession.
3. See William D. Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 161-82; subsequent references will be cited as "Apel, *Signs*" parenthetically in the text.
4. See William D. Apel, "Hiroshima Notes: The Friendship of Thomas Merton and Hiromu Morashita," *The Merton Journal* 22.1 (Easter 2015) 8-17.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362.
6. William H. Shannon, "Mercy," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 292.
7. The text of the letter is found in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294-97 (subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text); according to Forest an abbreviated version has often been reprinted and translated.
8. Jim Forest, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016) 190-200; subsequent references will be cited as "Forest, *Root*" parenthetically in the text.
9. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).
10. See the January 13, 1961 letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy (HGL 126).
11. Prologue, *Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English)*, ed. Timothy Fry, OSB [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982] 15).
12. John Howard Griffin, *Black like Me* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).
13. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 134; subsequent references will be cited as "RJ" parenthetically in the text.
14. Robert Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) xi; see also William D. Apel, "Out of Solitude: Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Racial Justice," *The Merton Seasonal* 36.3 (Fall 2011) 21; subsequent references will be cited as "Apel, 'Griffin'" parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 1-90; see also Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 119-88.
16. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1961) 18.