

A Good and Faithful Servant Danny Sullivan

At Jim Forest's very moving Orthodox funeral his second eldest son spoke about him on behalf of the family. It was moving that he talked of Jim the father and grandfather, the human being. Of the man who loved others but struggled with loving himself until his grandchildren came along and transformed him with their unreserved love. Others of us who were friends of Jim knew him in different ways but how fitting it was to hear of the Jim who was known in the intimacy of family life.

Jim was a good and loyal friend of the Merton Society since its founding in Winchester and how poignant and appropriate that the Advent 2021 edition of the Journal had an excerpt from a discussion with him from a webinar talk in May of that year. Jim was his usual stimulating and unexpected self in his responses. He was not one for repeating ideas but came to them fresh every time.

Jim leaves a fine legacy in his writings and in particular his outstanding biographies of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan, alongside his moving memoir of Thich Nhat Hanh. Yet his books on forgiveness, the beatitudes and praying with icons reflect a deeply spiritual person whose insights into living the Gospel are timeless. Jim's exceptional and constant commitment to peace activism were rooted in his spirituality that informed all he did and wrote. It was never about Jim but always about the message of the Gospel.

For someone who knew and was friends with the significant Catholic figures of twentieth century America, who whilst in prison received at the same time as the President of the United States, a photo of the earth taken from space and sent to him by one of the astronauts, there was about him an unfailing humility. Nancy his wife told me about the concept of humilification she introduced to the Forest family and that this was the experience of being loved for who you are rather than what you do or have achieved. Jim told me about this two Christmases ago when he recounted that just before that Christmas one of his grandsons having seen one of his books in the local library rushed into his house and said Grandpa, I never knew you wrote books!

Jim's own biography was aptly entitled *Walking Straight with Crooked Lines*, and who else but Jim could tell you about being in the middle of the Serbo-Croat war working with and supporting peace activists. His passion for peace never faltered and right up towards the end of his life he was sending missives to friends encouraging them in the work of peace. In all this he was deeply supported by Nancy who gave him an extended lease of life by donating one of her kidneys to him fourteen years ago. An unfailing act of generous love.

Given the world we live in and have lived in, being a peace maker like Jim must have been constantly challenging but he took great consolation

from that famous letter to him from Merton encouraging him never to give up and to recognise that the value, the rightness, the truth of what you're about is what ultimately matters. Jim constantly strived for that.

Let's remember too that Jim loved music, had a marvellous sense of humour and a great chuckle. He could laugh at life. He once stayed with Cathy my wife and me when over here giving a talk. One evening he asked if I had at hand a copy of his biography of Merton, *Living with Wisdom*. I told him no because I had bought many copies of it but always ended up giving it to one of my students. After Jim left I found a brand new copy of *Living with Wisdom* which Jim had left and inscribed 'To Danny, On condition that you don't lend this copy to anyone.'

A good friend, poet and fellow Scot, John Duffy, on hearing of Jim's death and knowing of my friendship with him sent me the following:

Road to Emmaus;
Eyes of Compassion; Love; Peace;
Flowers of Jim Forest.

Danny Sullivan is a member of The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland and edited the Merton Journal in its early years.

Meeting Jim — Mary Pearson

One of the unexpected consequences of attending a Merton retreat at Oakham is that you get to meet your heroes. Thus it was that I found myself in conversation with Jim Forest a few years ago. Jim enquired what I did and I replied that I worked in a women's prison which was shortly changing its population from female to male. Jim's response was quick and immediate, 'What's going to happen to them (the women)?' I replied truthfully that I didn't know. Jim had highlighted the plight of young vulnerable women who had already led lives of desperate insecurity now being faced with another disruption. I was struck by his immediate grasp of the situation and context. A few days ago we lost another connection with Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh. Jim was an early visitor to Hanh's monastery in France, Plum Village, and together they joined forces on peace marches. Oh, and Jim, the prison has since been pulled down and is now luxury housing.

Mary Pearson came to Merton after studying Zen whilst living and working in the Far East. By coincidence she was in Bangkok the year Merton died although he was unknown to her then. A high spot for her was visiting the Hermitage in 2015. To her Merton remains both contemporary and visionary.