Jim Forest: an alphabet of his own design

Jim Forest’s activity as a writer began in New Jersey at age five, in 1946, when he produced a handwritten family newspaper using an alphabet of his own design. It was an excellent publication whose only shortcoming was that no one could read it. A few years after achieving literacy, he was often found hanging around the office of the town’s weekly newspaper, watching linotypers setting type from molten zinc. Before long he was hawking The Red Bank Register on Broad Street, delivering papers door to door, and starting his own mimeographed publication using an alphabet that others could read.

His engagement in Christianity began about the same time that he was selling newspapers. At age 12 he was baptized in an Episcopal parish in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, though it wasn’t until he was in the U.S. Navy, stationed in Washington and working at the U.S. Weather Bureau, that he began to see his vocation in religious terms. In 1960, he joined the Catholic Church. His religious life took another turn in 1968 when he and his wife, Nancy, were received into the Orthodox Church. He is now secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and edits its publication, In Communion.

In 1961, after obtaining an early discharge from the Navy on grounds of conscientious objection, he joined the Catholic Worker community, led by Dorothy Day, in New York City; during that period of his life he became managing editor of The Catholic Worker. Later he was a reporter a New York City daily newspaper, The Staten Island Advance, and worked part-time for Religious News Service, a Catholic news bureau. From the mid-sixties on, he edited Fellowship, the magazine of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. After moving to Europe, he was editor of Reconciliation International.

Another dimension of Jim’s life has been peace work. In the late sixties, Jim was responsible for Vietnam program activities of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. One aspect of his FOR work was to travel with and assist Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet. In 1969-70, Jim was imprisoned for thirteen months as a consequence of his involvement in the “Milwaukee Fourteen,” a group of Catholic priests and lay people who burned draft records. After leaving prison, he was a member of the Emmaus Community in East Harlem, New York.

In 1973, he became publications director for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1977, he moved to Holland to head the staff of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. He was IFOR’s General Secretary for twelve years.

In connection with work on two books about Russian religious life, Jim traveled widely throughout the former USSR. His experiences in Russia were a factor in his becoming an Orthodox Christian.

Jim is the author of many books, most recently Praying with Icons, The Ladder of the Beatitudes and Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness. Jim is currently at work on a book about the resurrection of the Orthodox Church in Albania. Earlier work includes Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton; Love is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day; Religion in the New Russia; Pilgrimage to the Russian Church; Making Friends of Enemies; The Whale’s Tale; The Tale of the Turtles; and Four Days in February. With Tom Cornell and Robert Ellsberg, he edited A Penny a Copy: Readings from The Catholic Worker. An autobiographical essay is included in Toward the Authentic Church. Translations of his books have been published in Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Korean and Russian.

An occasional teacher, in the early seventies Jim lectured at the New York Theological Seminary and the College of New Rochelle. In 1985, he taught at the Ecumenical Institute, Tantur, near Jerusalem, and in 1999 was part of the summer faculty of the Department of Religion at the University of Dayton.

Jim has led retreats in the USA and England and has lectured at hundreds of parishes, theological schools, colleges and universities.

An influential factor in Jim’s life was his friendship with Thomas Merton who dedicated Faith and Violence to Jim. Merton’s letters to Jim have been published as part of The Hidden Ground of Love (Farrar Straus & Giroux, NY).

In 1989, he received the Peacemaker Award from Notre Dame University’s Institute for International Peace Studies. He is on the advisory board for the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award.

He is the father of six children and grandfather of three. Since 1977 his home has been in Alkmaar, Holland, a city northwest of Amsterdam.

Uncle Louie’s Birthday Bash

Bring your friends and dance the night away to fabulous music by Peace in the City Band featuring Neil Wesensel and his rocking musicians on Fri. Dec. 12 from 8:00 pm – midnight at Heritage Hall, 3102 Main Street in Vancouver. While Merton—known affectionately in his religious community as “Uncle Louie”—died in 1968 accidentally near Bangkok on December 10, we are taking the liberty of celebrating his life and heavenly birthday on Friday night instead of mid-week. The TMSC Board thinks Fr. Louis would heartily approve. Other birthday performers include a monologist, a mediaeval rap artist, a singer, a drummer and dancer, and a juggler! Mehndi artist Cypress will also be available to make you more beautiful. Come and be amazed! Tickets are $20.00 at the door.
Thomas Merton's New York
Thomas Merton both loved and hated New York. The hate was temporary, the love won out. It was in New York that he reached adulthood, studied and taught at Columbia, partied with his friends (some of them, like Robert Lax, lifelong), suffered the deaths of his grandparents, had his faith-breakthrough and was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. He left New York to teach at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, NY, and it was from Olean that he left for Gethsemani in 1941. He didn’t return to New York until 1964, when he went there for a private visit with Zen scholar and writer D. T. Suzuki. Once again, he discovered, he could love New York, having learned in the interim to love himself.

This nine-day program in Manhattan focusing on Merton’s early years in New York City and their influence on his life, will include visits to Corpus Christi Church, Columbia University, Greenwich Village, Douglaston, Long Island, The Cloisters and Harlem. Participants will stay at The House of the Redeemer, 7 East 95th Street, in the heart of Manhattan’s “Museum Mile.” The House was built between 1914 and 1916 as the town residence of Edith Sheppard Fabbri, great granddaughter of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, and given by her for the use of retreats and a “place apart” in 1949.

Cost is $1,975.00; participants are limited to eighteen. Thomas Merton’s New York is co-sponsored by the TMSC and the Humanities Department at Simon Fraser University.

Thomas Merton in France
A perennial favourite, this ten-day program in Prades, France, invites Merton’s presence among us in the place where he was born and spent part of his growing-up years. We will review his life, with special attention to the ways in which he cherished and expressed his French origin. We will spend time on his great themes—contemplation, non-violence and interfaith encounter—and we will visit St. Antonin and Montauban. The program is intended both for longtime lovers of Merton and his writings as well as new friends of Merton. It will include lectures, discussions, ample free time, and a chance to meet local members of L’Association Française Thomas Merton.

Cost is $1,975.00; participants are limited to twenty-six. Thomas Merton in France is co-sponsored by the TMSC and the Humanities Department at Simon Fraser University.

Thomas Merton in Alaska
This nine-day program aboard the Norwegian Sun departs Vancouver on Sun., Aug. 22 at 5:30 p.m., and returns at 7:00 a.m. on Sun., Aug. 29. Ports of call include Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway and Wrangell, Alaska. The Norwegian Sun also cruises the Sawyer Glacier in Alaska.

Resource materials for Merton seminars on board include Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters and selected nature writings by Thomas Merton.

For information about cruise arrangements and cost, please contact Lindy Rothenburger at The Travel Group, 605 – 1200 West Pender Street, Vancouver, BC V6E 2S9; phone: 604-681-6345; fax: 604-681-5301; toll free phone: 1-800-665-6345. Thomas Merton in Alaska is co-sponsored by the TMSC and The Travel Group.

Annual General Meeting Rescheduled to March 13
On the advice of our accountant, the TMSC Annual General Meeting was changed from November to March in order that our financial statements, which reflect our fiscal year (January 1 – December 31) can be prepared and presented at the meeting. The Board has rescheduled our 2003 AGM, with the approval of the Provincial Government, to March 13, 2004. It will take place in the Fireside Room at Canadian Memorial Church & Centre for Peace, 1825 West 16th Avenue in Vancouver at 12:30 pm.

Merton Reading Room to Open in July 2005
Following nearly two years of negotiations between the TMSC and Vancouver School of Theology in Vancouver, there is now a “firm expectation” that a permanently designated Merton Reading Room within the new VST library in the Iona Building will open in the summer of 2005.

The reading room will be in the lower level of the newly renovated Iona building in the southwest corner. There will be natural light from corner windows, and a non-working fireplace on one wall. The size of the room will be approximately 150-200 sq. ft. and nearby will be enclosed study carrels for Merton scholars. Ross Labrie, TMSC Board member, is working with the librarian at Vancouver School of Theology on a Merton bibliography for future acquisitions. The Merton Reading Room will open many possibilities for Merton scholarship in Canada, and Merton studies in cooperation with VST.

TSMC Upcoming Programs & Events

Sat. Jan. 24 Merton in the Morning: Ron Dart, University College of the Fraser Valley
Fri. Feb. 6 Merton, Nouwen & Icons: Jim Forest
Sat. Feb. 7 Merton & Peace: The Spiritual Roots of Protest: Jim Forest
Thurs. Feb. 26 Vancouver Public Library: Merton’s Life & Thought with Kathleen Deignan, CND
Fri. Feb. 27 Concert: My Name is That Sky—A Celebration of Thomas Merton’s Creation Spirituality in Word and Song with Kathleen Deignan, CND
Sat. Feb. 28 Winter Retreat—Thomas Merton’s Celtic Soul with Kathleen Deignan, CND

Sat. March 10 Zen Mind, Christian Heart: Thomas Merton’s Inner Experience with Judith Hardcastle
Sat. March 17 Zen Mind, Christian Heart: Retreat with Jay McDaniel, Hendrix College, Arkansas
Fri. March 23 Vancouver Public Library: Merton’s Life & Thought Series with Jay McDaniel
Sat. April 3 Merton in the Morning: Michael Higgins, St. Jerome’s University, University of Waterloo
Thurs. May 27 Vancouver Public Library: Merton’s Life & Thought with Bonnie Thurston
Sat. May 29 Spring Retreat—Seeing With Our Souls with Bonnie Thurston
Sat. June 7 TMSC Annual Decadent Dessert Party