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Review of Writing Straight With Crooked Lines: A Memoir

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***Writing Straight With Crooked Lines: A Memoir.* Jim Forest. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020, paper 326 pp., ISBN: 9781626983571**

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Jim Forest's life was dedicated to the work of peace and nonviolence. Peacemaking requires vision, a sort of vision that is uncommon in the twenty-first century. Early in his pursuit of peace he found himself challenged by the words of blind Bartimaeus, "Lord, that I might see." (Mark 10:51) He offers, "I have been haunted by those words ever since. They opened the door to realizing that peacemaking begins with seeing, seeing what is really going on around us, seeing ourselves in relation to the world we are part of, seeing our lives in light of the kingdom of God, seeing those who suffer and seeing the image of God not only in friends but in enemies, seeing how interconnected we are. *What we see and what we fail to see defines who we are and how we live our lives.*" (148 emphasis mine)

Forest begins *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines* by reflecting on seeing. He compares writing an account of one's life to archeology. "I'm digging into the rubble of my own memory," he writes, "which, like earth, hides more than it reveals." (1) The resistance to excavation, he finds, are barriers he has erected, keeping at bay pain, failure, self-deception, and wounds that have yet to heal. He wonders if it is even possible to tell the truth about one's life. But in the rubble of his memory, he also sees the persons and events that were the most significant in shaping him. Around each of these memories he has, in his simple, direct style, crafted a short story. Almost every story is illustrated by Forest's own photography, his sketches, and reproductions of newspaper headlines. These illustrations are not supplementary; they are invitations to literally see who and what influenced him.

Unlike many Americans born in the 1940s, Forest was raised in an atmosphere that encouraged questioning the status quo and resistance to the myth of the American dream. Forest's parents were members of the Communist Party. His mother, after she and his father split up, deliberately settled Forest and his brother in a predominately black neighborhood, and worked as a social worker to support them. His father was an organizer for the Communist party, moving frequently across the USA. It was also an atmosphere that held opposites in tension. His mother's Communism was tempered by an inheritance of stocks and bonds that helped keep their single-parent family financially solvent. In spite of the Communist Party's embrace of atheism, Forest describes his mother as a Methodist atheist, and his father as a Catholic atheist.

Subsequent chapters offer insight into Forest's developing interests - art, history, photography, literature, music, and the beauty of the natural world. These interests fed his spirit from childhood, shaped his adolescence and adulthood, and sustained him through a long prison confinement, depression, and a lengthy illness.

He construes his refusal to submit to the demands of a first-grade teacher as his first experiment in resistance to authority. He discerns at age ten the first stirrings of his opposition to war when he encountered at church veiled Japanese women whose bodies had been scarred by the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He writes, "Their scars, though unseen, were etched into my memory, a door to the

world's pain, and made me more aware of the seriousness of existence. I was also old enough to realize that taking Japanese victims of America's atom bombs into one's home was not something that all Americans would appreciate. Such hospitality required courage." (37)

The most substantial of Forest's excavations are devoted to friendships that shaped his commitment to peacemaking in the 1960s. The most significant were Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, and Thich Nhat Hanh, and Forest writes of each not as a saint or someone to be placed on a pedestal, but as a flawed, flesh and blood human being. We encounter at close range Day's care and temper, Merton's humor and fatherly advice, Berrigan's passion and theatricality, and Hanh's deep sorrow and compassion. Day and Merton saw in Forest more than he saw in himself, and were catalysts for his deepening involvement in the peace movement during the Viet Nam war. Berrigan's commitment and intensity were factors that moved Forest from protest to civil disobedience and imprisonment. Hanh's playful interactions and questioning motivated Forest to deepen the inner spiritual work that would keep him from lapsing into treating the opponents of peace as enemies.

Forest's remembrances are not only of the major figures of the twentieth century peace movement and radical spirituality. His sifting of memories turns up encounters with strangers, names long forgotten, who made an impact on his life. The hospitality of a bus driver when a teenaged Forest was travelling alone, and advice and money from a retired professor who encountered him camping in a park after he fled the conflict of his father's second marriage, are events that help form the backdrop for the vision of intentional hospitality that emerged from his time with the Catholic Worker community in New York.

Forest takes us inside the Catholic resistance to the Viet Nam war. He carefully reconstructs the actions of the Milwaukee Fourteen that led to the September 24, 1968 theft and burning of draft records, and describes the trial that followed.

In mid-summer, 1968, a list of volunteers was created. They gathered for three days in August at a local monastery. Motives and personal background were discussed. They attended Mass each morning and gathered for Bible study each afternoon. A declaration was drafted and the group was divided into those who would take part and those who would take on supportive roles. In jail awaiting trial, the group organized seminars on economics, Ignatian spirituality, scripture, and history. Local priests visited and celebrated Mass with them.

Forest's view as a participant allows us to see the event not as an act of political protest, but as an act of radical Christian witness, an assertion that the laws of God were to be preferred over unjust human laws; the law of love chosen over a war seen as illegal and immoral.

He takes us from the USA to Europe. He spends time with Thich Nhat Hanh in Paris, and takes up residence in the Netherlands to oversee the work of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He travels to Russia, asking how he can construe as enemies people he has never met; while there explores the experience of Orthodox Christians. His geographic journey coincides with his inner journey, increasing his appreciation of other cultures, deepening compassion, and eventually leading him to embrace the Orthodox faith.

Woven into his memories are conflicts with his parents, the fracturing of his relationship with Dorothy Day, and three failed marriages. Forest reflects on these memories with a sense of honest lament.

At age fourteen, he pressured his divorced parents, demanding to leave his mother's home in New Jersey to live with his father in California. He writes, "At the time, self-centered teenager that I was, it didn't occur to me how hard a decision it must have been on both sides – agonizing for mother to let me leave home..., and hard for Dad to convince his wife Dorothy to let a stepson become part of the family." (56)

His first two marriages were the result of loneliness and youthful passion, both terminating by the time he was thirty. He admits his commitment to peace work blinded him to the impact his travel and prolonged absences had on his family. He struggles with this, understanding the spiritual depth of the actions of the Milwaukee Fourteen that led to his incarceration, yet mourning the fact his mother had to take on raising his son. He offers, "I still have mixed feelings...it troubles me that I put work for social change ahead of my responsibilities for him, much as my father had done to me..." (190)

Forest was married a fourth time in 1982, to Nancy Forest-Flier. Reading of his travels to the Holy Land with Nancy and the children (279 &ff), their trip to Russia (292 &ff), and the development of their joint practice of prayer at home before icons, one senses a deepening maturity that allowed family life become grounded and life-giving. This impression is supported by the photographs of the two of them together (269, 322) and of their extended family (v).

The lines of Forest's travels, relationships, and his commitment to peacemaking were indeed crooked. Growing up through World War II and the Cold War left him with the impression that nuclear war would not allow him to reach the age of thirty. He had no initial vision of a vocation to nonviolence and peacemaking, multiple marriages, imprisonment, visiting the Soviet Union, or a spiritual journey that would take him from a Communist household to Christian faith in its Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox incarnations. What does he make of it all?

Forest writes that he cannot, "...glibly call myself a Christian. Rather I'm someone *attempting* to become a Christian. It's a lifelong project...Finding mentors and learning from them was important, but finally I had to discover my own true face. It's a work in progress." (315,317) Looking back at his work for peace, he suggests, "If I have made a particular contribution, it has mainly to do with looking for ways to overcome enmity. To love an enemy, first you need to meet the enemy and try to find in him or her a bit of the divine likeness." (316)

Forest presents his life with humility, compassion, and sensitivity. It was a flawed life, but one animated by a vision of peace, open to change, and lived with a sense of gratitude. It was a communal vision, shaped by relationships with others, and committed to the world.

Reading *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines* has enticed me to engage in my own archeological sifting. It has me looking at my myriad wrong turns and interrogating more closely the friendships and relationships that formed me as a person. It was as though Forest was inviting me, through offering his stories, to ponder what I see and what I fail to see. In that sense, Forest's memoir took me beyond the realm of history and biography, into the realm of authentic spirituality.