

At Play in the Lions' Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan

Jim Forest

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With *At Play in the Lions' Den*, Jim Forest offers his latest biography of iconic Catholic peace movement figures. As with his studies of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, Forest personally knew his third subject, Daniel Berrigan. In this case, his five-decade friendship with Berrigan warrants adding 'memoir' to the subtitle, and Forest's personal recollections add unique intimacy and insight throughout this fascinating story.

Choosing material from a life as fully lived as Daniel Berrigan's is not simple. Yet Forest captures far more than the well-known public encounters that endear Berrigan to peace and social justice advocates. For instance, he recounts lesser-known acts of friendship and quiet service, such as anonymous support roles with the homeless, indigent cancer victims, and dying AIDS patients during the epidemic's height.

Forest also chronicles Berrigan's 15-year immersion in prescribed Jesuit formation and his gradual emergence as a public anti-war figure. This is key, since counter-cultural leaders, especially those with institutional church ties, do not just mystically appear without context,

and stories of their radicalization can prove as instructive as stories of later heroism.

Both Day and Merton played important roles in Berrigan's radical emergence, as did his brother Phil. But tales of Berrigan's visits to France and his teaching assignments with urban youth and Le Moyne College students especially illuminate his growing willingness to question received wisdom and challenge structures of wealth and power. Time in Europe offered fresh perspectives on the Vietnamese conflict and exposure to cutting edge theological inquiry and practice. Establishing a house of hospitality and challenging well-connected local slum landlords (who were also College benefactors) exposed the consequences confronting entrenched wealth. Though he initially distanced himself from the Catholic Worker's unpopular pacifism, Berrigan eventually embraced those radical peace commitments. I wished for even more from these years between his first visit to France (1954) and emergence as an anti-war voice (1965), but space limitations no doubt prevented that.

Though Forest writes as a personal friend, he does not avoid Berrigan's weaknesses. We glimpse some defensive brittleness in Berrigan, rendering others reluctant to contradict or challenge. Alongside the deep love and respect Dan shared with his brother Phil, fraternal tension and misunderstanding sometimes show. In chapters on 'Meeting Dan' and 'Meeting Phil', and elsewhere, Forest pointedly contrasts these two very different personalities. He found Dan 'imprinted, inside and out, with France' and akin to a fine 'noneconomy bottle of Chateaufort de Pape', with a dwelling that sported 'kaleidoscopic' posters, artwork, signs. Phil seemed, on the other hand, 'stamped "made in America"' and akin to 'a gallon bottle of economy Gallo wine', whose 'room resembled a library basement' (p. 78).

We also see Dan willing to learn from criticism, though. For example, his piercing, one-sided critique of Israel—having never visited the country—before an Arab audience during the 1973 Yom Kippur War faced sharp backlash. Without retracting the essence of his concerns, he conceded his error in not consulting Israelis or developing a more balanced critique, and he professed his ongoing love for Israel, though an 'outraged love' (p. 184). The following year he visited Israel and returned with a more nuanced understanding.

However, the strongest image of Daniel Berrigan this portrait offers is one of steadfast compassion, insight, and conviction. The tales of bold action are here—the Catonsville draft board raid, the resultant trial and his underground evasion, the King of Prussia Plowshares action and his

countless arrests (at least 250 by one estimate). But we also grasp the depth and character behind them, witnessing his modesty, his generosity, and his capacities to listen, connect with others, and quietly act in their support.

Berrigan's priority for human connection over rigid structures also emerges. He humanized his liturgy well before Vatican II—presenting it in English, including non-Catholics on special instances, using common vessels when needed, offering private Masses among close friends. Following a superior's prohibition against conducting Mass in his apartment, Berrigan responded on one occasion by sharing unconsecrated bread and wine with his guests and simply pronouncing, 'Let the Lord make of this what he will.' (p. 75)

Perhaps the most consistent reflection of Berrigan's core identity comes in his unwavering conviction that 'Thou shall not kill' reflects a moral absolute applied universally. Equally clear, the teachings and example of Jesus provide his foundation for those convictions. Throughout *At Play in the Lions' Den*, just as in life, Berrigan prods and challenges Forest's readers to risk, sacrifice, and act to tear down barriers that inhibit God's Kingdom among us.

Berrigan's friendship with Merton surfaces at times, as does Merton's concern whether Berrigan's protests alienated more than helpfully communicated. But Forest invokes Merton with restraint to illuminate rather than overshadow Berrigan's own story. The book includes a helpful chronology that names publication of many Berrigan books along with key life events, and it logs over 300 endnotes. The index, limited mostly to proper names, omits subjects and topics.

Forest's fluid and engaging prose carries the reader effortlessly along. He weaves numerous extended quotes of Berrigan and many others together with his own reflections and descriptions. The margins of virtually every page are packed with photos and epigraphs from Berrigan's writings, which greatly enhance the text. This book is well worth reading—a great gift to any who seek guidance and inspiration for faith-based resistance.

Gordon Oyer is the author of *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*.