

**Daniel Cossachi and Eric Martin, eds.**

*The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence between Daniel and Philip Berrigan.*

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016. Pp. 340. Pb, \$30.

Denise Levertov's (1923–97) poem, "O Taste and See," was often shared in the peace communities gathered by Daniel Berrigan, S.J. Levertov, a Berrigan friend, and fellow poet, invites human beings to live intensely in this poem. When they encounter "grief, mercy, language, tangerine, weather," for example, they are "to breathe them, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform into our flesh" ([New York: New Directions, 1964], 53). *The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence Between Daniel and Philip Berrigan*, a labor of love by co-editors Daniel Cossachi and Eric Martin, also extends an invitation to living life well. These letters beckon us to "savor" them as much as they challenge us to "transform" our lives. The last few stanzas of Levertov's poem imagine that its reader is "hungry" and is "plucking the fruit of plum and quince trees" (53). *The Berrigan Letters* also speak to those who are hungry, hungry for a life rooted in family, friendship, community, justice, peacemaking, literature, love, and God.

The book cover's captivating photograph of the brothers Berrigan heralds its contents. Bob Fitch, the photographer who focused his artful lens on Philip and Daniel during their time underground after the Catonsville Nine action, captures two radiant faces smiling at one another and a brother's hand resting comfortably on the shoulder of the other brother. The Berrigans, who, in this photo, as Daniel was later to write in *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (New York: Bantam, 1971), had just risked a good number of years in prison and the potential fouling of their good names. And yet, and yet (another of Daniel's touchstone phrases) here they are together, founts of joy and laughter, simply dressed in a late fall's barren landscape but offering warmth and shelter to one another. It is a glorious sight for eyes that are wearied by the bombast, glitz, and violence of the American scene these days.

Elizabeth McAlister pens a deeply moving preface to her beloved husband's (Philip) and brother-in-law's (Daniel) letters. McAlister, a courageous activist, an anchor in the Jonah House community, a well-regarded speaker, and writer well articulates why this text is to be a primer for peace activists and beyond. According to McAlister, "whatever the content, the letters bespeak, above all, a profound love of each other; a deep trust in each other's advice, insight, support; and, as their awareness grew that America was not what the history books recorded, their need to walk together on the journey to become men of the gospel and to do all in their power to make oppression, poverty, war, and weapons rare if not obsolete" (xiii). Is there a desire for what McAlister speaks of burning deeply within each of us? Can we continue to build beloved

communities where we learn how to be human, how to love one another, and how to dismantle social structures rooted in greed and violence and which seem intent on killing every last living thing?

One notes, and wonders, too, if the Berrigan correspondence, in part, grew out of a mother's love. McAlister shares that when each of the six Berrigan brothers left home, "his mother [Freda] made it clear that she expected him to write home, to keep in touch" (xiii). Do we see, in Freda's request, the first steps of life deeply rooted in service to all living beings: stand firm in love and community and don't let go? Further, there is an immediate command: Keep in touch with one another, especially with those who count for nothing in our society. Perhaps it is also Thomas Merton, the monk, and writer, who embodies another of the letter's many themes: ground your work in God and love. McAlister makes mention of an inter-denominational (at least within the Christian community) gathering of lay and religious elders and young people hosted by Merton at his Gethsemani Abbey which "set down solid roots and modeled interreligious collaboration for peace work that blossomed in subsequent decades" (xv).

In the well-written introduction to the text, Cossachi and Martin "hope that those who work for the justice, peace, non-violence, love, healing, and mercy of the gospels and prophets will find something in the pages to sustain them" (xxiii). In the manner of Levertov, the work they have produced invites both savoring and transformation. And, in the manner of the Berrigans, they show, through the letters, the cost of trying to be human in inhuman times. In letters written in January of 1972, for example, both Philip and Daniel speak to the heavy-lifting needed to turn the war-making ship around. Daniel cites a sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. which speaks to what King hoped would be said at his funeral. King wanted others to remember him as one who gave himself entirely, even to the point of risking death, so that people may be free, may be fed and housed, and may live in a society permeated by peace and well-being. In writing about the upcoming trial of the Harrisburg 8 (later declared mistrial), Philip speaks of "pushing back the darkness of the time" using non-violence, community-building, and the nurturing of hope and love even though one is doing so behind bars for long periods.

Cossachi and Martin provide ample context for the letters using brief introductions for each chronological set of letters as well as liner notes for individual letters. Their efforts are just enough to give the reader a sense of the "who, what, where, and when's" but not too much to distract one from what centers this text: that we are to see what a life rooted in love might look. Daniel describes such a life quite well in a 1985 birthday letter to Phil: "Thank you from my heart for another year, for all of us. For holding fast to the Promise + the

faith + Hope of the Saints. For surpassing the clichés –‘needs’ + ‘moods’ and ‘comfortableness’ and all such shit. Before being sweet and strong and outside of so many, by locating and overflowing and multiplying hope – everywhere! For being my brother, Daniel” (214).

When Phil received a copy of Dan’s book, *America Is Hard to Find* (New York: Doubleday, first edition, 1972), he wrote to his brother to tell he that he was “devouring” the book and that it resonated with him immediately. Phil further notes “I say to m’self, we have those wave lengths because of where we are. And others don’t have them because they aren’t where we are” (98). We see from where we stand, and with whom we stand; we can then resist what we can’t stand any longer, e.g., a world hell bent on waging war after war, day after day.

Forty years after writing this letter to his brother Daniel, Philip died (December 6, 2002) of a cancer that was left untreated while he served time—eleven years in all—in prison for his resistance to war making and nuclear weapons. Daniel died on April 30, 2016 and, like his brother Philip, was lauded nationally and internationally for his prophetic witness for peace and his pastoral dedication to so many human beings such as those dying of AIDS for whom he spent twenty years serving. Daniel was also recognized, when he died, as one of the most influential Jesuits of the past century. That he might be recognized as such by the Jesuits was, of course, not always the case. In 1965, for example, after saying words of consolation for Roger Laporte, a young man who immolated himself to bring attention to those Vietnamese who were being burned to death by American napalm filled bombs, Daniel was exiled to Latin America by his Jesuit superiors and New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman. It is now heartening to see that much of the work that both Berrigans dedicated their lives to finds itself centered in the papal writings, decrees, and actions of Pope Francis, a fellow Jesuit to Daniel. In April of 2016, for example, the Vatican sponsored a conference on non-violence. A focal point of the conference was a critical re-examination of the just war theory. Its participants made the claim that there are no “just wars” and encouraged Pope Francis to write an encyclical on peacemaking. The Vatican has recently announced that Pope Francis will dedicate his January of 2017 World Peace Day message to “Non-violence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”

One may well meander through *The Berrigan Letters*, tracing every affectionate end to a letter between brothers, moving up and down with them as they, like everyone else, worked through anger, disagreements, and disappointments with one another, and guffaw while reading their hilarious exchanges. Finally, though, there is a good chance that the letters will awaken their reader. This book is one that will be relished by peace activists, of course, but is also a book that is a must-read for all those deeply in love with life and wondering

how, in these profoundly destructive days, to find hope and to respond. Hope is right here and right now; it is in each one of us, and it is waiting for our full expression of it. Let's not waste a minute of time. We have the Berrigan "instruction manual" which we must now make our own. Thus may we urgently, and without hesitation, attend to the matters of peacemaking, nonviolent resistance to the death making efforts of the corporate state, rooting ourselves in prayer and in the lives of the marginalized, and of building beloved communities.

*Anna J. Brown*

Saint Peter's University

*abrown@saintpeters.edu*

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00402008-17