

The Fellowship of Reconciliation

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Dear Friends:

I write this only hours before leaving for Europe with Thich Nhat Hanh, to help him with meetings and contacts over there. We shall be meeting especially with representatives of the new FOR-sponsored International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam, about which we wrote you recently and of which Thich Nhat Hanh is a sponsor.

The past four weeks, in which our Buddhist guest has traveled about much of this country to meetings arranged by the Fellowship, has been a very moving experience for the staff members who were privileged to accompany him. You will savor the rare spirit of the man in the material in this folder, which we thought you might like to have as a keepsake.

Your thoughts and prayers, like ours, will be with him as he returns to unknown risks in Vietnam.

In fellowship,
Alfred Hassler
Alfred Hassler

P.S. Forgive the use of this note for a reminder. Our budget is a heavy one, precisely because we are engaged in such activities as this. If you have not yet responded to the recent budget mailing, will you do so today, please? And as generously as you can? Thanks.

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THICH NHAT HANH

Thich Nhat Hanh has two primary responsibilities in South Vietnam: one as director of the Youth for Social Service Program for the United Buddhist Church, the other as director of the Institute for Social Studies at Buddhist University. He thus has intimate contact with the peasants throughout South Vietnam and at the same time is close to the Buddhist leadership in peace and social change. Scholar, philosopher, poet, Thich Nhat Hanh's poems are widely quoted in many parts of the world and sung to music in Vietnam.

I want my friends to know that I have joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Becoming a member of the Fellowship, to me, is as natural as breathing — because my whole being aspires for peace, understanding, love and brotherhood. The Fellowship of Reconciliation to me is an effort to put love in action... The basis of all Buddhist doctrines is Reverence For Life. All Buddhists should pledge themselves to the refusal of war. Peace should be in our mind and in our heart. Peace should be on the earth. Being in the Fellowship I find myself among those who believe in ahimsa and who work untiringly for peace and reconciliation —

bhikṣu Thich Nhat Hanh

OUR GREEN GARDEN

Fires spring up like dragon's teeth at the ten points of the universe.
A furious acrid wind sweeps them toward us from all sides.
Alone and beautiful, the mountains and rivers abide.

All around, the horizon burns with the color of death.
As for me, yes, I am still alive,
But my body and the soul in it writhe as if they too had been set afire.
My parched eyes can shed no more tears.

Where are you going this evening, dear brother, in what direction?
The rattle of gunfire is close at hand.
In her breast, the heart of our mother shrivels and fades like a dying flower.
She bows her head, the smooth black hair now threaded with white.
How many nights, night after night, has she crouched wide awake,
Alone with her lamp, praying for the storm to end?

Dearest brother, I know it is you who will shoot me tonight,
Piercing our mother's heart with a wound that can never heal.
O terrible winds that blow from the ends of the earth
To hurl down our houses and blast our fertile fields!

I say farewell to the blazing, blackening place where I was born.
Hard is my breast. Aim your gun at it, brother, shoot!
I offer my body, the body our mother bore and nurtured.
Destroy it if you will,
Destroy it in the name of your dream,
That dream in whose name you kill.

Can you hear me invoke the darkness:
"When will these sufferings end,
O darkness, in whose name you destroy?"

Come back, dear brother, and kneel at our mother's feet.
Don't make a sacrifice of our dear green garden
To the ragged flames that are carried into the dooryard
By wild winds from far away.

Here is my breast. Aim your gun at it, brother, shoot!
Destroy me if you will
And build from my carrion whatever it is you are dreaming of.
Who will be left to celebrate a victory made of blood and fire?

NHAT HANH IS MY BROTHER

by Thomas Merton

This is not a political statement. It has no ulterior motive, it seeks to provoke no immediate reaction "for" or "against" this or that side in the Vietnam war. It is on the contrary a human and personal statement and an anguished plea for Thich Nhat Hanh who is my brother. He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same reasons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love. We deplore the needless destruction, the fantastic and callous ravaging of human life, the rape of the culture and spirit of an exhausted people. It is surely evident that this carnage serves no purpose that can be discerned and indeed contradicts the very purpose of the mighty nation that has constituted itself the "defender" of the people it is destroying.

Certainly this statement cannot help being a plea for peace. But it is also a plea for my Brother Nhat Hanh. He represents the least "political" of all the movements in Vietnam. He is not directly associated with the Buddhists who are trying to use political manipulation in order to save their country. He is by no means a Communist. The Vietcong is deeply hostile to him. He refuses to be identified with the established government which hates and distrusts him. He represents the young, the defenseless, the new ranks of youth who find themselves with every hand turned against them except those of the peasants and the poor, with whom they are working. Nhat Hanh speaks truly for the people of Vietnam, if there can be said to be a "people" still left in Vietnam.

Nhat Hanh has left his country and has come to us in order to present a picture which is not given us in our newspapers and magazines. He has been well received — and that speaks well for those who have received him. His visit to the United States has shown that we are a people who still desire the truth when we can find it, and still decide in favor of *man* against the political machine when we get a fair chance to do so. But when Nhat Hanh goes home, what will happen to him? He is not in favor with the government which has suppressed his writings. The Vietcong will view with disfavor his American contacts. To have pleaded for an end to the fighting will make him a traitor in the eyes of those who stand to gain personally as long as the war goes on, as long as their countrymen are being killed, as long as they can do business with our military. Nhat Hanh may be returning to imprisonment, torture, even death. We cannot let him go back to Saigon to be destroyed while we sit here, cherishing the warm humanitarian glow of good intentions and worthy sentiments about the ongoing war. We who have met and heard Nhat Hanh, or who have read about him, must also raise our voices to demand that his life and freedom be respected when he returns to his country. Furthermore, we demand this not in terms of any conceivable political advantage, but purely in the name of those values of freedom and humanity in favor of which our armed forces declare they are fighting the Vietnam war. Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favor of his brothers and moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion. He has come among us as many others have, from time to time, bearing witness to the spirit of Zen. More than any other he has shown us that Zen is not an esoteric and world denying cult of inner illumination, but that it has its rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world. Wherever he goes he will walk in the strength of his spirit and in the solitude of the Zen monk who sees beyond life and death. It is for our own honor as much as for his safety that we must raise our voices to demand that his life and personal integrity be fully respected when he returns to his smashed and gutted country, there to continue his work with the students and peasants, hoping for the day when reconstruction can begin.

I have said Nhat Hanh is my brother, and it is true. We are both monks, and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years. We are both poets, both existentialists. I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans, and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cuts across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program. This unity of the young is the only hope of the world. In its name I appeal for Nhat Hanh. Do what you can for him. If I mean something to you, then let me put it this way: do for Nhat Hanh whatever you would do for me if I were in his position. In many ways I wish I were.