

## About Contemplative Life Today

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*Thomas Merton*

[Merton.] First of all, the question of the death of Martin Luther King [Jr] is a little closer to home than you realize. You probably don't know the details. Some friends of his and of mine – mutual friends – in Atlanta were discussing with Martin Luther King about his coming here for a retreat in preparation for the march in Washington. And one of the times when he could have come was last week and they were sort of thinking about [this] and I got this letter from this Quaker woman in Atlanta<sup>1</sup> written on Wednesday which was the day that Martin Luther King went to Memphis. So I will just read what she says:

Wednesday: Martin is going to Memphis today and I learned he won't be back until the weekend so John will see him next week. I was going to talk to him tomorrow and get another plan going. If the Memphis march becomes violent again there will be a terrible shattering for him. I hope both he and [Thich] Nhat Hanh will soon go to Gethsemani. (Nhat Hanh is this Buddhist from Viet Nam.) If Martin had taken a period there at Gethsemani he might have had the wisdom and repose to stay out of Memphis in the first place. And it was a mistake to go there. He had done no preparation and came in cold to a hot situation where the young militants had him just where they wanted him.

So, in other words, it was kind of a crucial and providential thing – he might have come here and if he had come here he would not have gone to Memphis, and if he had not gone to Memphis he would not have been killed. Of course, one of the things you need to understand is that this whole race situation is much more complicated right now than it looks to us because there's a big division within the Negro people themselves.

Most of the Negro people don't want this violence and they're trying

1. See letters to June J. Yungblut in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985).

to keep this thing non-violent and they're trying to keep it quiet. And you've got a lot of young kids who are very mad and very fanatical, and they're not really members—some are members of [a] certain movement—others aren't. And they are trying to push the violence. He was actually caught between those two groups in Memphis. And that was what made it so tough for him. What he was trying to do was to keep the whole thing non-violent and keep it from erupting. And they were trying to push it into violence. They were trying to stimulate violence. So he was caught there. And it's a very complicated situation.

Now, another thing is too that you're liable to hear at the moment—you sort of get the impression that since this has happened the Negroes are blowing up all over the place. Well, yes and no. And they're not all mad either. Don't get that idea. But there is violence, of course, here and there. But just to give you a funny and strange example of how this works: today, quite by surprise, two young Negro men and a White man came in [to the Abbey Guesthouse] from the Ghetto district of Cleveland. I got a message to come and see them. They said: 'Well, we're living the monastic life in Cleveland and we wanted to talk to you about it' and so forth and so forth. And now the first thing about this is that they came from this tough section of Cleveland and I said, 'Is there anything happening there?' They said no everything is all right.

All they wanted to talk about was this monastic life they started. They rented a house for 50 dollars a month. The place is falling down but anyway they can live in it. And there they have a nucleus of people living the monastic life—mostly centered on meditation. Well where they meditate is in the attic. They just get up in the attic and meditate. There is not much more than a bare roof. And, incidentally, I handle all kinds of monastic problems around here. Characteristic 'monastic problems' with these kids—you know what it is—what do you do when the neighbors come in and beat you up and tear the place up? You know, so this is the monastic life!

But what they've got going spiritually is meditation. It cuts across all kinds of denominations. It doesn't matter whether you're Catholic or Muslim or whoever you are. As long as you want to meditate and do the monastic thing. And then they also have music and art. And they paint and get the kids in [and] give them paint and pictures, and then these other guys come in and tear it all up. But it struck me as very strange. Here, Martin Luther [King] did not come. Instead of him these kids came. In other words, it gives you an eerie feeling that this whole thing is in God's hands and you don't know what's going to happen next. And they're pretty hip to a lot of spiritual things. They know about Zen and yoga and things like that. They know some Catholic spirituality. And

they're pretty smart kids, very sharp kids. They're very solid kids. Especially these two Negro men: they are real solid men; just as good as you can find anywhere.

So what I would suggest is pray for them. I told them if they need to get away and get some fresh air for a few weeks that this [opportunity] is here. I hope you will back me up on that. I'm not saying they should come into the community, of course, but they could be family brothers for a couple of weeks or something. That's the kind of thing we can do for those people you see. Give them a place to come to get a breather and to give some advice and help and money and books and food. That's some of the things we could providentially do with our prosperity. To help all these poor guys [who] are courageously doing these [things] completely – well just going right ahead and doing it.

And in this way they'll have something to say [to] us and we'll have something to say to them. But to me it's very hopeful. I mean this is going to spring up all over. The thing you could see with them is the enormous need these men had for a deep spiritual life. Living as they do in the Ghetto and being from the Ghetto and having no place to go but the Ghetto; no place to go except up. So in other words the monastic vocation cannot be stamped out, period. You don't have to worry. It's going to go on. Those who want it and are willing to lay the money on the line will get it. So I think we should have that basic confidence and realization. But it's always a help to see other people who are doing the thing for real without any of the advantages and so forth, and to see that no matter what happens you can have it.