

Words to Live By

Review of

Thomas Merton: In My Own Words

Selected and edited by Jonathan Montaldo

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Reviewed by **Daniel E. Potocki**

I was first introduced to Thomas Merton as an undergraduate enrolled in a class on spirituality taught by Sr. Kathleen Deignan, a member of the Congregation of Notre Dame and professor at Iona College who has served the Merton community in many capacities, including author and musician. Deignan presented Merton as an important figure in American society and argued that his life experience, including his spiritual aspirations and intellectual contributions, characterize him as a mystic comparable to St. Augustine.

Since completing Deignan's class I have continued to ponder one question: why does the world know the twentieth-century renaissance man mainly by his secular name, Thomas Merton, rather than his monastic name, Fr. Louis, given him upon becoming a monk, and later priest, at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky? The simple answer may be that scholars and followers alike remain interested in Merton's commentaries on social issues that shape our common experience.

In the book entitled *In My Own Words*, Merton scholar and editor Jonathan Montaldo provides excerpts of Merton's writings on his monastic life. While Montaldo recognizes Merton's role and impact in American society as an articulate author, passionate activist and natural poet, he places important emphasis on Merton's search to become a monk while living at Gethsemani in the modern world.

These selected writings, which rely heavily on *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Monastic Journey*, present four dimensions – the literal, the symbolic, the moral and the mystical – through which Merton responds to the “gift of his existence” and “discover[s] his identity as one created to love God's image in him[self].” Indeed, Montaldo begins the preface with words of Merton that serve as an undercurrent for the remainder of the book: “I have never had the slightest desire to be anything but a monk, since I came here” (vii).

Montaldo makes his purpose clear: “This book aims to re-engage attention to that portion of Merton's writing in which he expressed his life's core task: to realize union with God by prayer and monastic contemplative living” (x). With the upcoming ITMS Eleventh General

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Meeting planned for June 2009, it is within reason that this book can serve as a resource for scholars to pinpoint the importance of Merton's monastic desire in order to unravel the meaning of interfaith dialogue in the modern world. Moreover, with continued interest in Merton's journal entries, *In My Own Words* can heighten the community's examination and understanding of the interconnection of Merton's "own words" and the words of others in relationship with him.

Montaldo's presentation of Merton's monastic journey parallels a lesson I learned while a high school junior at Iona Preparatory School. As part of my studies I was enrolled in a religion course that focused on culture and contemplation taught by an intelligent and engaging man, Mr. O'Connor, whose academic lessons taught me as much about life as did his character. One day of each week my classmates and I were divided into four separate teams as part of a project named "The Circle of Class." After formulating a collective argument together, one member was chosen to represent the team in the inner circle.

After a year of deliberations we students understood that we did not have all of the answers either individually or collectively, yet we did come to know that each topic was intricate in its detail and meaning. Before we closed our textbooks one last time, Mr. O'Connor concluded his teaching by sharing with us the purpose of our year-long "Circle" sessions. "Human experience," he said, "can be understood in two circles: the Circle of Life and the Circle of Influence. As you continue to discover the complexities of life you will identify the path you are meant to follow. Your journey on this path is your circle of influence, and I trust that you will travel with your talents and skills for the betterment of yourself, others and God."

Pairing the academic lessons I learned at Iona Prep with the spiritual insights I received from Montaldo's selections enabled me to discern in greater detail my circle of influence just as Merton grappled with his while at Gethsemani. My reflection centered on the latter half of the passage from the preface, namely, "since I came here." This subordinate clause gradually crystallized for me a refreshing lesson: just as Merton's monastic journey began when he arrived at Gethsemani, so too does my journey begin when I *arrive*. In other words, the journey begins when I arrive at school and/or the first day of a new job; the journey begins when a new relationship is forged with a spouse and/or newborn child.

Montaldo offers, then, an avenue for both personal and professional exploration through the presentation of Merton's monastic journey. It is our individual and/or collective exploration of this journey which Montaldo leaves so graciously for our doing, and it is my hope as well as Mr. O'Connor's, that we rise to meet the challenge in order to expand the circle of influence. As Merton states in one of the excerpts, from *Contemplation in a World of Action*, "Our first task is to be fully human" (84). *In My Own Words* is successful at least to the point that it encourages readers to take the time first to discover the journey in oneself in reflection of Merton's journey. Merton's life as a monk should be now and/or become just as much of a focal point of interest for scholars and followers as his promiscuous activities

as a student at Cambridge and Columbia and/or social essays on civil rights and nuclear warfare; for an argument can be made that his monastic commitment to serving God's will holds, in effect, the true meaning of his service to others through his written word.

Perhaps, then, my wonderment which first arose in Deignan's class about why we do not know Thomas Merton first as Fr. Louis will soon be engaged, as Montaldo makes clear that it is our task as individuals and a community to discover in full, or at least to some worthy extent, not only who Thomas Merton was as a monk but also who we are also in relation to him and others. Please, let the journey begin.