

# PANTS, BREATH & THE GENERAL DANCE:

## Thomas Merton's Ordinary Grace

By **Rusty C. Moe**

The structure of grace erupts into Thomas Merton's contemplation, not when he is being keenly theologic or an astute psychologizer or an artist, but when he is unselfconsciously recording — with his typewriter or on film with his Canon FX — the plain moments of his everyday life: the color of boiled rice in a small pan, a bird's flight framed by a window in the hermitage, splintered shadows moving across the expanse of an empty chapel floor. Do we need more than these quiet, fragile images, Merton seems to be gently asking, to know that grace is the scaffolding of the kingdom of God that is within each of us as well as hidden among us? More than this?

Beauty of sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel. The light and dark. The darkness of the fresh, crinkled flower: light, warm and red, all around the darkness. The flower is the same color as blood, but it is in no sense whatever as "red as blood." Not at all. It is as red as a carnation. Only that.

The flower is itself. The light is itself. The silence is itself. I am myself. All, perhaps, illusion. But no matter, for illusion is the shadow of reality and reality is the grace and gift that underlies all these lights, these color, this silence. Underlies? Is that true? They are simply real. They themselves are His gift. (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 13)

Or this?

What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. . . . Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it. (*Day of a Stranger*, p. 4)

Grace is not an event. It is the unbroken wholeness we suddenly see beneath the rhymeless suffering and errant fragmentation of our daily lives. Grace is what we mean when we try to explain those random moments when we are abruptly freed of our mind's dehydrating pretenses and clings and are returned to our natural state of unity with All That Is. We belong, in these moments. We are home "where everything flows into everything and carries with it and within it all lives of its life and others' life and all is a murmuring and whispering of things changing into each other, breeding and searching and reaching and withdrawing and dying," to

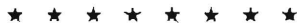
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borrow from William Goyen's *House of Breath*. And even if we forget these moments (and we will — again and again and again), we somehow know that we are exactly where we ought to be, that we can be no place else — or else we would be.

Two moments of sudden seeing are recorded in these, by now, famous passages of Merton's:

In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. . . . it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 156-157)



I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing. . . . I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree. And the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow, where you can go back and see different aspects of the figures.

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. (*The Asian Journal*, pp. 233-236)

My cat, Francis, is teaching me about the ordinariness of grace: his purr rises up out of his fur, his honey-colored eyes simply see, his walking and lying and leaping and roving are movements that become a part of any room he happens to be in. He isn't stimulated, he is wonder incarnate. Time and the physical world are received by his exquisite senses and joined within him in their essential, moment-to-moment relationships. Thomas Merton is describing this same process, isn't he, when he says: "If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying. . . . There is here an authentic atmosphere of prayer. Enjoy this. Drink it all in. Everything — the redwood forests, the sea, the sky, the waves, the sea lions. It is in all this that you will find your answers. Here is where everything connects" (*Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart, p. 82). Isn't he hinting that grace is the primal, erotic intelligence at the core of creation; the fundamental energy that fuses, twines, and reconciles all of existence in a ceaseless, silent dance of transformation?

A neutral stillpoint is the primary dynamism of grace. This point — which is neither an action, a portion of time, or corporeal — is the "place" wherein the essence of all things spontaneously interpenetrates one another in ever-changing rhythms and incarnations. In a sense, this stillpoint is the Breath within each breath, the Water within water, the Eye within our eyes. A year ago this past autumn, I wrote: "These are the clear-edged days. Days when each leaf

is seen wholly, of itself, against a relief of every other leaf seen in its totality; days when the air is free from all obstructions and the sun drops through it and enlightens rather than lightens. I blink, blinded by this brightness, this clarity, this simple effervescence of nature meeting its seasonal death willingly, gladly, completely.”

In our day, grace has two different aliases — chaos or miracle. In either case, grace is what we name that which we find ineffable, lawless, confusing, or disorganized. But there are moments, homely moments — usually subtle, always heart-thudding — when we see and know (beneath sight and intellect) a rhythmic, harmonious pattern that generates an absolute, non-prioritized connectedness of every thing. And our response is wonder, and that wonder, Merton reminds us, is our highest praise.

Last week, water was dripping from the trees as I was walking back from the mailbox with the newspaper. The water sounded exactly like rain, rain in the morning light. I stopped to listen. The dripping and the birds’ breakfast songs seemed to come from a place of silence that was as quiet as the sunlight falling through the mist in the valley in front of me. Quieter. And, for a moment, I wasn’t listening at all: I was part of a sound that was listening to itself through me in utter stillness.

Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*, was awakened to the sensual, playful ground of grace in a different way late one afternoon in 1969 while he was lying near the Pacific:

... watching the waves rolling and feeling the rhythms of my breathing ... I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a giant cosmic dance. Being a physicist, I knew that the sand, rocks, water and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. I knew also that the Earth’s atmosphere was continually bombarded by showers of “cosmic rays,” particles of high energy undergoing multiple collisions as they penetrated the air. All this was familiar to me from my research in high-energy physics, but until that moment I had only experienced it through graphs, diagrams and mathematical theories. As I sat on that beach my former experiences came to life. I “saw” the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I “heard” its sound, and at that moment I knew that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus. (*The Tao of Physics*, p. 11)

Compare this sudden seeing and hearing of Capra’s with the closing paragraph of *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

... the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of the dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash — at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the “newness,” the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyse them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

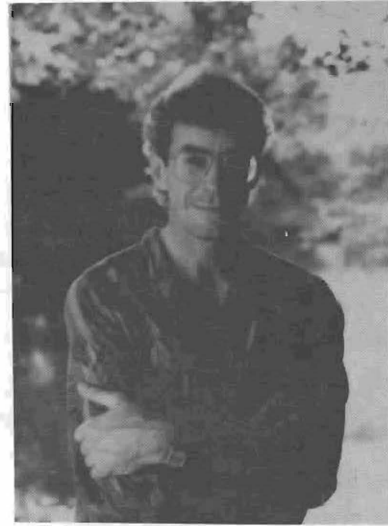
Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance. (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 296-297)

Remarkable. And Lovely. And a wonderful example of how the domestic reflections of Merton that lace his visual and written work hint at a Word that simmers immediately beneath the tender flesh of this world. When we create our everyday lives with care and consciousness, with trust and intentionality, we are preparing ourselves for those times when grace, the timeless Word, intercepts and upends our carefully constructed and timebound realities with reminders of our hidden home and our true names.

For Thomas Merton, an instrument of ordinary grace, I offer this journal cutting recorded during the final hours of a retreat at Gethsemani three years ago. It is nothing special — and for that reason, I think he would like it as a closing movement to these reflections.

*“sun is out and shining, the air is still cool, and the birds are celebrating their own voices . . . today won’t be as sultry as yesterday . . . the bats flew through the sanctuary during the 6:15 Mass (theirs must be a special novitiate) . . . a difficult sleep last night, one in which I woke with a sudden wondering of ‘Who is it that’s thinking — and knows he’s thinking?’ . . . showering, I had an even greater sense of that awareness: what is it that brings me to this place? who is it that gives over to such an urge? . . .*

*“walked to the top of the hill across the drive from the monastery where the statue of Joseph stands high on its pedestal in the midst of weeds and flowering yucca plants . . . should have done it sooner . . . the view! . . . plowed fields like Zen gardens and looping hills hazed with the aura of the day’s heat and aflame with the spice of earth’s cycles . . . three crows circled in the east, one cawing to the other two, and across Highway 247, I saw the cowherds hoofing it down the hill toward the edge of the blacktop . . . the bull was with them, black and loose-genitaled . . . this place exudes a geometry of timelessness . . . I walk among the well-tended dead as nonchalantly as I wander among the living, who carry nothing or a book or maybe coffee in a white cup from the dining room . . . the bricks of the buildings, shabbied by the years, beckon with a welcome that’s as fresh as their mortar once was, fresher . . . for a moment, sitting on the bench beneath Joseph, I am unrelated to anyone . . . and then comes the familiar rondeau of thoughts: how is it that I come to be sitting on a hillside next to a monastery in Kentucky as the sun sets and a cow lows on the 28th day of June almost 90 years after my grandmother was born? . . . what is it that I follow through these hills, that calls to me without gesture or word? . . . beneath what I am seeing, far beneath the words I have written and read and the few I have spoken, and beneath the listening and the silence is a spiritual tinder that is responsible for my ignition . . . I have place in this realm of creation, as surely as do the bugs that have stung me and the humidity that has hung on me . . . alone — I have place . . . and proceeding from this place, I continue to be created . . . the ineffable God has been resident in every breath, step and mouthful of food I’ve taken . . . there is no existence apart from that . . . none.”*



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