The Geography of Nowhere: Living Beyond Boundaries

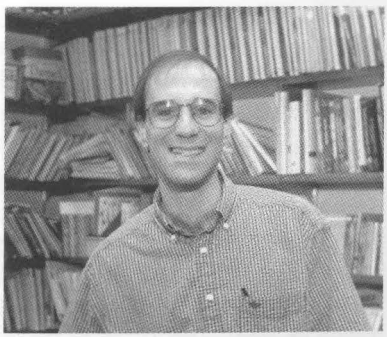
Presidential Address, ITMS Sixth General Meeting

By **Thomas Del Prete**

Merton's most compelling talks are arguably those in which he uncovers the spiritual in the literary. One of my favorite among these is the talk he gave on William Faulkner's story "The Bear" one Sunday afternoon at the Abbey in January 1967.[1] In that tale Faulkner immerses us in a hunt for an elusive – an uncannily elusive – bear. This hunt has become an annual event for Faulkner's characters; indeed, it is a quasi-religious event, a ritual of expectation and hope mixed with awe – for no one has actually seen the bear face to face.

For Merton the story is a parable of spiritual formation. More particularly, it traces a broad pattern of development towards full personal identity inscribed uniquely in each person's life. Though he does not cast it explicitly in these terms, the pattern of personal development he describes is also a movement through paradox, a movement which pushes us across boundaries of self, place, culture, and time which, on the one hand, helps us to make sense of the world but which, on the other, also defines and delimits who we are and what we do. As I will try to illustrate, the story in Merton's hands suggests that development in the spiritual life involves learning how to live beyond boundaries – what in the paradoxical language of Merton the "stranger" we might say is learning how to be no-one in a geography of no-where.

It is important to start with Merton's preface to his discussion of the actual story in order to understand the more universal story he sees in it. He begins with a brief commentary on the topic of spiritual development and full personal identity. He emphasizes that spirituality is not some "entity" with which we seek to fill ourselves, but rather is an increasingly more complete realization of who we most deeply are. As he puts it in the direct, unembellished and very personal way which characterizes so many of his talks, "There's only one thing for anybody to become in life – there's no point in becoming spiritual; [that's] a waste of time. . . . You've come here to become yourself, to discover your complete identity, to be you" (*B*). After disabusing his listeners of whatever abstract notions of the spiritual life they may have harbored, notions which in some form Merton himself confronted time and again in his own journal, he says that the process of attaining a full personal identity involves for a Christian a realization that one's full identity is in fact Christ, and that in each one of us "there is a unique realization of Christ" (*B*). To



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complete his effort to explain the deeply personal meaning of this message, he takes himself as an example, saying that there is a "'Louie-Christ' which has to be brought into existence and hasn't matured yet" (*B*).

In "The Bear" the journey towards a parallel kind of self-realization is framed entirely in the context of the hunt for the bear. Young Ike McCaslin, the protagonist in the story, has grown up hearing about the bear and approaches the annual hunting ritual with high expectation. Each hunting episode leads Ike successively to some new experience of the bear, and increasingly the hunting ritual takes on the character of a primal and existential encounter.

Merton traces the pivotal moments in Ike's journey. First, Ike becomes conscious of the sound of the hounds chasing the bear in the woods. Merton identifies this incipient awareness of something different and significant in the woods as a beginning stage of spiritual development. When Ike observes the fresh and very distinctive footprint of the bear, his awareness of the reality of the bear increases, a new level of awareness which Merton reminds his listeners is important to cultivate "in all areas of our lives" (*B*). In another instance, Ike is at a stationary post in the woods when he senses the hidden presence of the bear. This intuitive shift in perspective deepens in the mystery of Ike's realization that the bear, though hidden, sees him, that he is somehow *known* by the bear. What he believes to be his pursuit of the bear gives way to a growing awareness that the bear, far from acting as the pursued, is *allowing* him to come closer. Merton draws a parallel to the spiritual life, stressing that the realization that one is apprehended, that there is a relationship, is an important juncture in the life of prayer. Finally Ike comes to realize that a bear who is allowing his presence and his relationship to be known cannot in turn be known using the typical means of the hunter. One summer, many years removed from his first hunting foray, Ike leaves behind his gun and enters the woods. As he ventures inwards he puts aside as equal impediments to his search the other trappings of the hunter – his compass and his watch – thus, in Faulkner's words, "relinquishing completely to"[2] the wilderness and the imperatives of nature.

The rest of the story builds towards mystical encounter. The invisible bear leaves footprints that are so fresh Ike watches one fill with water. In Faulkner's telling, Ike follows "eager without doubt or dread."[3] Merton says, "This is when you're really grooving in the spiritual life" (*B*). Finally, Ike is brought back by the bear to where he left his compass and watch behind – back to what is ordinary and familiar for him – and there he sees the bear looking at him. As Faulkner puts it, "It did not emerge or appear; it was just there immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling."[4] And then it simply fades. What began as a social ritual of hunting ends for Ike in awareness of a transcendent relationship and in theophany; significantly, it ends also with Ike returned to his watch and compass.

We are all familiar with the New Testament instruction, echoed in Merton's introduction to *No Man Is An Island*, that we must be willing to lose our lives in order to find ourselves.[5] There is something of this profound paradox of our existence in Ike's journey, and it is multi-layered. First, Ike must let go of his ostensible purpose as a hunter, the hunt symbolized by the rifle, in order to get closer to his quarry. Faulkner says that "the ancient rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated";[6] Merton equates this supplanting of the rules with the New Testament. Secondly, Ike must risk getting lost in a very literal sense in the woods – in psychological terms, let go of the desire for self-direction and self-determination symbolized by the compass – in order to see the bear and thus find himself on a deeper level. In going from civilization to the wilderness, and then leaving

behind the security of the compass, he goes in a sense from "somewhere" to "nowhere," from humanly-designated visible space to trust in the hidden "space" or reality which is God. The compass is of no use in this geographical realm. To know, one doesn't chart the path but listens in awareness to be known, to be led. Finally, Ike has to give up another kind of orientation, the orientation to linear time represented by his watch. In becoming aware of the presence of the bear, and of the bear's knowing relationship to him, he must become attuned to the bear's time, to a reality which transcends linear time; the process in fact takes years in the story. Put in another way, the fullness of experience, not linear time, becomes the measure of reality. It is in this sense that the story is eschatological – a large part of its enormous power for Merton.[7]

To summarize, Ike's journey, taken as a pattern of spiritual formation, is a movement through paradox across the boundaries which separate instinct, self-preservation, self-direction, and one's social or cultural role from intuitive trust in a hidden presence; a movement from intuition to awareness; and from awareness to listening and responding trustingly to God. Merton puts it in deceptively simple terms for purposes of his talk when he says, "The whole business of growth is knowing when to let go . . . then all of a sudden, you'll find that it'll just work by itself – you'll see the bear, see" (*B*).

There is another story here and that is the story of Merton both as monk and as teacher and interpreter of Faulkner. Merton himself was very moved by the story, describing it in his journal as "Shattering, cleansing, a mind-changing and transforming myth. . . ." (*J6*, 165). What if we make Merton for a moment the protagonist in this story? What do we learn from him about what he describes as the "business of growth" and "letting go" (*B*)? In what sense are the boundaries of self, place, and time which Ike has to confront in paradox also redefined or transcended for Merton?

According to Merton, a key element in Ike's development is that it fulfills, albeit in a special way, "his state in life" (*B*) as a hunter. Merton concurs that the process of becoming yourself is somehow ingrained in who you are, is realizable in the framework of your everyday life. To recall Merton's more general point, the attainment of a mature personal identity is not a matter of going outside yourself, or becoming "spiritual" as if that, too, was something to acquire that is not you, but of becoming yourself. The implication is clear – if we fill ourselves with some notion of spirituality, then we have taken up the inner space in which Christ might find himself in us and thus allow us to discover who we really are. As Merton puts it, this is "the Christ who can only be who He wants to be in us and He can't be in me what He is in anybody else" (*B*).

Applied to his own life, this insight sheds light on Merton's efforts to reconcile his twin vocations as a writer and monk, his acceptance over time that they were not mutually exclusive, that in fact writing was an integral part of his own inner journey – a means to both unmask his own self-illusions and discern and express what was true and real. There is another parallel. Just as Ike must ultimately give up the identifying characteristic of the hunter, his rifle, in order to fulfill that role, Merton must learn in some sense to give up the idea of spirituality itself in order to fulfill his monastic vocation. As he says, "There's no point in becoming spiritual – [that's] a waste of time."

This is a different, more spontaneous teacher than the young Master of Scholastics in the early 1950s who fretted in his journal that "the blind was leading the blind"[8] and who came to understand how spiritually debilitating a preoccupation with spiritual perfectionism could be for his students.[9] It is also perhaps the sign of a teacher who himself has struggled to journey through the paradox of losing and finding which moves one across the boundary separating false self from true self, or an

ideal and abstract, indeed "spiritual," self from the ordinary, deeply personal, and real self made real in the recognition and fulfillment of a relationship, in and through Christ. This theme of becoming one's real and whole self in the context of one's state in life is symbolized by the fact, which Merton is keen to point out, that Ike is brought back by the bear to the very place where he left his compass and watch, and it is there that he sees the bear.

It can surely be no coincidence that as Merton disavowed an otherworldly or world-denying spirituality in favor of a spirituality rooted in the reality of a "Louie-Christ," his teaching voice assumes a more informal, direct, and spontaneous tone, while his writing about himself, on self and identity, and on place becomes more ironic, often playfully so, and his use of paradox expands. So, for instance, he adopts with cool irony the persona of the stranger in *Day of a Stranger,* saying, "In an age where there is much talk about 'being yourself' I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else."[10] A few passages later he lowers the boom completely, "The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual" (*DS,* 41).

To cite one more of many possible examples, there is Merton's account in "Learning to Live" of his response to someone's request to say how he had become a success – "I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. . . . If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success."[11] Clearly Merton is challenging boundaries in this writing, refusing to be bound by certain cultural assumptions and expectations which make a person into an image and reality into a product, and which pigeonhole him in some spiritually stifling place.

The irony which characterizes Merton's writing about himself often gives way to paradox in writing on self and place. At times this paradoxical language lacks the fresh and authentic quality of the more purely ironic writing. Its purpose is similar, however; Merton, like his Zen counterparts, like playful Chuang Tzu, like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* or John of the Cross, points to what it means to be who we are by saying he has to become no-one, and, leaving his compass and watch behind as it were, suggests that reality is not where we are but where God is, or no-where. He is referring to the whole of reality, the reality therefore which is "All," which is beyond boundaries, beyond concept, beyond words, and certainly beyond the myths we construct about ourselves singly and culturally. And in that no-where he finds himself in a hidden geography of relationship and compassion, in a new relationship to place and time, and in an authentic freedom.

Merton's preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain,* written in August of 1963, is illustrative. As he says in one passage, "The only true liberty is in the service of that which is beyond all limits, beyond all definitions, beyond all human appreciation: that which is All, and which therefore is no limited or individual thing . . . [I]f the Truth is to make me free, I must also let go my hold upon myself, and not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a 'thing.' I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me."[12]

Among several themes evident here, the idea of letting go of oneself as an object or impersonal self to realize one's Christ-self is the clearest forerunner of Merton's concluding comment in the conference on "The Bear" that "the whole business of growth is knowing when to let go" (*B*). The key additional dimension is in the intimation of relatedness to others through Christ. The paradox of losing oneself to become oneself leads, again paradoxically, to a new consciousness of and identifi-

cation with others in Christ. As Merton puts it later in the preface – "My monastery is not a home. . . . It is not an environment in which I become aware of myself as an individual, but rather a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion. To exist everywhere I have to be No-one" (*HR*, 65). There is a hidden geography beyond the boundaries of space and culture, a spiritual geography shaped by compassion, which, with profound implications for Merton's engagement with the social issues of his time, identifies him with the "struggles and suffering of the world" (*HR*, 65).

Interestingly, it is in another preface to a Japanese edition of his work (*Thoughts in Solitude*), written in 1966, that Merton recasts the terms of the paradoxes which one must move through to get beyond the illusion of separateness to the hidden reality of relatedness. One loses oneself, in the sense of an individual and separate self, to find one's undivided self in the wholeness of love. Merton boldly proclaims that to be in the All is also to be "one in the unity which is love." The hidden geography of compassion becomes as well the geography of love. As Merton writes, "He who is truly alone truly finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that, but all men" (*HR*, 118). And this love is found ultimately in our own inner depths, "in the ground of our own being." In this sense it is in the ground of our ordinary lives, and, as Merton puts it, "is the very ground of that simple, unpretentious, fully human activity by which we quietly earn our daily living and share our experiences with a few intimate friends" (*HR*, 117). It is because the ground of our daily lives is in love that the fact that the bear returns Ike McCaslin to his compass and watch, that is, to his ordinary state in life, is so significant.

Merton uses the rhetoric of paradox as a way to shift perspective from a self-constructed reality to a deeper one. He sees Ike McCaslin's quest as hinging precisely on this willingness to close the experiential gap between oneself and the "whole of reality." In "relinquishing completely to" the wilderness, Ike, in Merton's words, "is no longer a little enclosed being that stands outside of reality" (*B*). According to Merton what is significant is that "one lets go of oneself so that there is no longer a formal, obvious experienced barrier, so to speak, between me and the rest of it" (*B*).

For Merton himself, the elimination of this boundary meant a new way of seeing his own "place" in all of its wondrous particularity, and a new sense of immediacy and relationship to his environment, of himself as "part of" and not "apart from." What he writes in *Day of a Stranger* is again indicative: "I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. . . . I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration" (*DS*, 33).

He tries similarly to evoke a consciousness of himself as part of "the whole of reality" when he explains, "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe" (*DS*, 41). Reflecting on his effort in his journal, he commented, ". . . it is OK. It comes close to being real" (*J6*, 169).

However much Merton "relinquished to" the whole of reality, the challenge was continuing for him. Entranced by the prospect of relocating to the Pacific Shore after his visit to the Monastery of the Redwoods in May of 1968, he writes, "The country which is nowhere is the real home; only it seems that the Pacific Shore at Needle Rock is more nowhere than this . . ."[13] In a parenthetical pause, he catches the contradiction in that remark, but writes that he must leave it in.

In keeping with the theme of our General Meeting,[14] we may very well ask not only what is true north, and what it might mean to follow in that direction, but what happens when one does let go of one's hold upon oneself, when one moves beyond the illusory freedom of a self-contrived or even

spiritually idealized existence and experiences the true liberty of serving "that which is beyond all limits," when one lives, as it were, beyond boundaries in the geography of no-where. For "letting go" is also a "relinquishing to" and one must respond.

Merton's response is in a sense his own sequel to "The Bear." Clearly for him, what is important is to dissolve the boundary between self and reality, and to realize in a very concrete and personal way the "Louie-Christ" that needs to develop. To become oneself in the sense of realizing oneself in Christ is not an isolating experience, however, but a radically unifying one transcending the boundaries of space and culture, and transforming the normal sense of time and place. At the same time, because it is a personal realization, it grounds one in one's own "state in life," in the ordinary here and now, in what Merton says is "the greatness of existence, its seriousness, and the awfulness of wasting it" (*J6*, 165).

This was not an altogether settling or settled experience for Merton. It created tension as he assessed the authenticity of his monastic culture. It impelled him to confront the forces of destruction, depersonalization, and division in his society. But the Merton who launched his Cold War Letters in 1962 with trepidation could also say as he entered the hermitage in 1965, echoing the voice of Chuang Tzu and others that he listened to across the boundaries of time and culture, that he was embarking on a life free from care. Still, he never ceased to hunger to know what he believed more fully by experience.

The "whole business" of letting go, of working through the paradoxes involved, of going nowhere, puts us precariously with a new kind of freedom in a geography beyond boundaries. This is what Merton described poetically as "the free man's road" which "has neither beginning nor end."[15] To be there means to say with Merton that there is no real division, that in fact "we *are* the world"; and then to learn in our unique Christ-self way "how to validate our relationship, give it a fully honest and human significance, and make it truly productive and worthwhile" (*LL*, 120).

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1. Thomas Merton, "The Bear" (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, Tape AA2079); subsequent references to "*B*" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
2. William Faulkner, "The Bear," as quoted by Merton in his talk
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) xvi.
6. "The Bear," as quoted by Merton in his talk.
7. See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love,* Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 165; subsequent references to "*J6*" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 333.
9. See Thomas Merton, May 10, 1953 letter to Augustine Moore, OCSO, in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990) 58.
10. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1981) 31; subsequent references to "*DS*" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living,* ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) 11; subsequent references to "*LL*" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *"Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 64-65; subsequent references to "*HR*" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
13. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain,* Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 110.
14. The theme of the ITMS Sixth General Meeting was "Magnetic North / True North: Geography Beyond Boundaries."
15. Thomas Merton, "Elias – Variations on a Theme," l. 178, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 245.