Activist at the Hermitage

Review of
The Sound of Listening:
A Retreat Journal from Thomas Merton's Hermitage
By John Dear, SJ
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Reviewed by **Walt Chura**

One of Thomas Merton's most endearing paradoxes, for me, is his prophetic challenge to establishment Catholics of his day to act courageously on the peace and social justice implications constitutive of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while persistently admonishing radical Catholic leftists, whom he served as a kind of chaplain, against "activism and overwork," which "neutralizes [the activist's] work for peace [and] . . . kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful" (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 73). Jesuit priest John Dear is heir to that Mertonian challenge and conscientiously attendant to that admonition. His week in the Merton hermitage, chronicled in this journal, evinces his heartfelt desire to protect and nourish that root of inner wisdom.

Dear is well known, even beyond the Catholic community, for his advocacy and activism on behalf of peace and justice. Currently he serves as executive director of the American branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international, interfaith association of non-violent activists. (Merton biographer Jim Forest served as international director of the FOR for several years.) On St. Valentine's Day this year, Dear was arrested with 85 others from across the US and Canada for an act of civil disobedience at the US Mission to the UN in New York City in protest against the US-backed UN sanctions against Iraq. (According to UNICEF figures, 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of five have died as a result of the sanctions. Iraqi civilian infrastructure has been decimated.)

He's been behind bars before. He makes several references in this journal to his time in prison for anti-militarism actions with the Berrigan brothers-inspired Plowshares movement. He enters this retreat in November, 1996, after a stressful year and a half as director of a community service center for low-income families in Richmond, Virginia. In fact, the initial entries in *The Sound of Listening* are a litany precisely of the inner consequences of the kind of activism and overwork Merton cautions against.

Dear inventories his demons: sadness, restlessness, fears, hostilities, anguish, depression, failure, despair, "inner turbulence" (31), "my own stubborn, disturbing will" (30). One hears Merton's warning: "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is

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Walt Chura teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the College of St. Rose, Albany, NY. He offers retreats and other programs related to Merton, the Catholic Worker movement and the Shakers. He is a founding member of the Thomas Merton Society of the Capital Region of NY State. His essay, "The Seeds of Thomas Merton," appeared in the Autumn, 1997 issue of *The Merton Seasonal.*

to succumb to violence" (*Conjectures* 73). One also hears the monk say, "Believe me, I know. Been there – done that."

As John Dear settles in to "the solitude and silence of God" (40), he demonstrates his determination to allow the root of his inner wisdom to be healed of the violence done to it. "This is not an ego trip," he writes, "a tourist stop, or a research project. My soul is at stake" (40). When he hears at Mass the words of the repentant thief, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom," he makes them his own. "Coming here, feeling hurt, bruised and battered, I say them and repeat them." In the silence of the hermitage, he hears Jesus respond, "Today, you will be with me in paradise" (59).

John Dear is clear that he is not a Trappist, but a Jesuit, and a Jesuit with a particular mission. His meditations tend to be paradigmatically Ignatian, image-filled, placing himself in a Gospel scene or transposing a biblical scene to Gethsemani, Kentucky. He reads a lot, thinks a lot, writes a lot.

He experiences a significant transition when, summoned to fix a chimney problem, Brother Anthony, OCSO strikes up a conversation with John Dear, SJ and offers him "a Zen koan for you to ponder . . . . *What is the sound of listening?*" (55). Brother Anthony reminds Father Dear that he needs "no books, nothing at all. Just sit. Breathe in. Breathe out. And listen" (56). From this encounter onward, the healing of John Dear's root of inner wisdom is palpable.

Nevertheless, Dear's meditations reveal the ongoing paradox of the activist-contemplative. As his soul heals, he relishes the spiritual consolations. "I taste the peace of the resurrection," he writes (71). Yet, he knows that his Jesuit vocation "thrusts me into the hurricane of the world" (75). And so he makes a most activist resolve: "I must discipline myself to cling to inner peace" (75). Clinging, Brother Anthony might have reminded him, is antithetical to contemplation. Contemplative peace is the peace of letting go. It, as John Dear also knows, "is a gift freely given" (82), but one which requires the sacred space of silence and solitude in which to be received.

The gift of this book is the mirror it holds up to all of us non-Trappists, to all of us with vocations to minister in the midst of the whirlwind of the world's violence and avarice. One comes away from it with a prayer for John Dear, that he can keep the commitment he has made to himself and his God to nurture the gift he has been given in this privileged, sacred time, in this privileged sacred place, and with a prayer for oneself for an equal resolve to cherish that "root of inner wisdom" which a frenzied activism kills, neutralizing all our work for peace, making it fruitless.

John Dear quotes Merton's remark to Brother David Stendl-Rast, "As a Christian, I intend to become a very good Buddhist" (106). Pray God that Dear, and all of us, as activists may become very good contemplatives.