

Silence – The Promised Land

By Joanne Flynn

In my intercultural training while a missionary in Bolivia, I was once advised to take a week break alone. The further suggestion was a surprise: to find a church with the Eucharist and each day spend six hours silently praying; “and if you can’t tolerate the silence, bring a scripture.” At the end of the course, I found myself in the Altiplano of Bolivia, one of the highest plateaus in the world. It is also one of the starkest areas on the planet, with peaks of active volcanoes off to one side and the Atacama Desert, one of the driest areas in the world, on the other. Nevertheless, the clarity with which one sees in high altitudes is astounding, and the night sky becomes more real than the earth we stand on. In future years, I came to compare the uninhabited area of the Altiplano to the land of silence as described by Thomas Merton. You can follow the panorama through an uninterrupted view of land that ends with the sky. On the one hand, the panorama seems vacant, yet the simplicity of the area conveys a completeness. Merton’s words in *Hagia Sophia* speak to this: “There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all. . . . There is in all things . . . a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being.”¹

Thomas Merton was not able to describe this silent land as one would draw a map, and he was realistic about the fact that this gift of silence was given to a divided and turbulent world. There are divisions between persons in communities; between churches unable to agree on a definition of their God and the rules for following Him; and divisions between cultures who can’t hear each other’s expression of life. But it was this very world – fragmented and in turmoil – that seemed to call Merton to the land of silence. Early on, Thomas Merton was a proponent of the choice to enter a silent land. He rapidly expanded his earlier religious insights, and invited all persons – lay as well as religious – into this promised land of silence. He presented ways that people from all professions and ways of life could benefit from a silent approach to life. Merton gives hope to all as they put their feet on this unfamiliar silent terrain.

Merton indicated that a person’s day, place and time were the doorways to this silent land. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, he gave a directive on how to embrace one’s day: “To deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself completely to the silence of a wide landscape of woods and hills, or sea, or desert; to sit still while the sun comes up over that land and fills its silences with light. To pray and work in the morning and to labor and rest in the afternoon, and to sit still again in meditation in the evening when night falls upon that land and when the silence fills itself with darkness and with stars.”²

To follow this directive we are summoned to explore silence, to inhabit silence, and to transform and be transformed by silence.

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Exploring Silence

This silence was something Merton recognized and cherished from an early age. He later writes of being drawn into the silences of the English landscape as a schoolboy: "I have known the silence of the marsh between Rye and Winchelsea, and the silence of the little roads that led back into the downs. Silence of the Rother's cool stream below the hill of Wittersham, on the way to Bodiam Castle. Silence of the fens at Ely. Silence out toward Norwich. . . . And all the little roads and hills and villages and fields and hedges and corners of woods around Oakham. The tower of Oakham church and the broad vale."³ After the restlessness and disorder of the years that followed, leading ultimately to his conversion and entrance into the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani, his prayer became: "Teach me to go to the country beyond words and beyond names,"⁴ to the land of silence. As a monk at Gethsemani, the most important part of Merton's search into the realm of silence was the practice of silent prayer. He grew beyond the expected silence demanded by the rules. He added time in quiet corners of the monastery like the Scriptorium, the little tool shed named for St. Anne, the tops of the knobs, Vineyard Knob, McGinty's Knob, Cross Knob, the lakes, the ponds and the woods that enhanced his silence, and finally the hermitage. In his poem "In Silence" we read:

When no one listens
To the quiet trees . . .

One bird sits still
Watching the work of God:
One turning leaf,
Two falling blossoms,
Ten circles upon the pond. . . .

Closer and clearer
Than any wordy master,
Thou inward Stranger
Whom I have never seen. . . .

Seize up my silence
Hold me in thy hand!" (ll. 1-2, 12-16, 24-27, 30-31; *CP* 289-90)

Thomas Merton's prayer was a gradual progression into silence. Nature was a good spring-board, but his foundation was Benedictine: living the rule, praying the office and living in a community. Minute by minute, and day by day, Merton found choices in his monastic life that were more mature. Jonathan Montaldo sums up this growth in the forward to his collection of Merton's drawings and prayers, *Dialogues with Silence*: "Merton had learned early to keep vigil in silence with his heart's eye on the horizon of the next moment. The next moment could reveal in light or in shadow the presence of the Beloved he awaited. He kept his mind's eye open for the unexpected epiphany. Waiting without projecting his own needs into the next moment became a dark form of hope."⁵ As we hear in Merton's words, he emphasized that we need to be present to the present, if we want to enter silence. Welcoming each moment with openness tends to cut through the list of projects based on our own ego needs and wants. Raw hope, silently, helps us to place our steps with steadiness. We will no longer be looking for exits. Our steps grow firmer as they are guided by a

more committed choice to silent prayer. Merton's insights for exploring silence are very practical: "You have to learn . . . by practicing, by making choices . . . [Y]ou develop a habitual preference You can't have interior silence by pressing a button and say 'Got to have interior silence.'"⁶ This does not eliminate struggle but allows struggle to be fruitful: "The idea is first finding your heart, getting completely centered inside where the struggle is going on" (*MH* 471).

Inhabiting Silence

With Thomas Merton as an example and his words for guidance, one learns to inhabit the land of silence. Merton knew all the ways into silence and read a lot about the various stages. He searched in will, and mind and heart. He longed to get silence right. In the course of examining how Merton inhabited this land of silence, I found that some believed he was a failure. Nevertheless, as one studies the writing related to the hermitage years, one hears a clear, silent vocation. I believe that Merton's silence wasn't arranged like a straight line in a concrete walkway, nor was it a clear, easy-to-follow path. He experienced many setbacks or followed circuitous patterns to silence. One can say definitely, though, that he longed to find the grace that would address his fragmented choices and bring his whole person into the fullness of silence.

In *The Inner Experience* he writes: "The worst thing that can happen to a man [or woman] who is already divided up into a dozen different compartments is to seal off yet another compartment and tell him that this one is more important than all the others The first thing you have to do is to recover your basic natural unity."⁷ Unity was the great talent of Merton. In his interior journey, he was able to incorporate successfully the great traditions of silent prayer in Christianity as well as the insights of various religions and cultures. He did not seal off sections of himself, nor did he seek conversations with just certain elite groups of people. Merton calls us to go beyond duality, beyond difference: "The contemplative is . . . one who, being perfectly unified in himself and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object" (*IE* 151). With this mindset, Merton inhabits life fully, eliminating ego and duality. He is in the silent present. Yet to be sure, it was a gift that Merton arrived at after great struggle. Time would tell that the isolation of the hermitage was in many ways too difficult for Merton. So Merton transparently shares some of his conclusions: "So perhaps I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness that is at the center of all other loves. I attempt to cultivate this plant without comment in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence. It becomes the most rare of all the trees in the garden, the *axis mundi*, the cosmic axle, and the Cross."⁸

He faced reality as it was, even the reality of the decline of his physical body. He was characteristically alive to this sometimes unpleasant development, as he records in his journal: "An arthritic hip; a case of chronic dermatitis on my hands for a year and a half (so that I have to wear gloves); sinusitis, chronic ever since I came to Kentucky; lungs always showing up some funny shadow or another on ex-rays (though not lately); perpetual diarrhea and a bleeding anus; most of my teeth gone; most of my hair gone; a chewed-up vertebra in my neck which causes my hands to go numb and my shoulder to ache – and for which I sometimes need traction."⁹ Merton inhabited his reality: his body, his sacred history, not other people's lives; his life relationships, his community and his faith and those faiths that providence sent him in his search. Yet he was present to all this without putting others down or finding some exclusive group to find a place in.

In Merton's deepest work on silent prayer, *The Inner Experience*, he didn't go into discussions about the Cistercian way or his own special way of silent prayer as the only way. Rather, he wrote

about a founder of another order, the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, the one-time Trappist Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916). Merton writes that Charles not only did not live in a monastery, but he “lived among the Tuaregs (whom he had selected as the poorest and most abandoned people on the face of the earth). . . . [H]is formula for the ‘contemplative’ life seems simply to have been to go off into the desert” (*IE* 144-45). Merton further remarks that this way of life included a great deal of silence and adoration, but no pastoral ministry.

In my own training for South America, I spent a week with the Little Sisters of Jesus. The life style seemed to be very applicable to the life of a lay contemplative. Indeed, all of us have a choice to live a deeper life in our ordinary neighborhoods by doing such things as replacing TV and radio with silence in our own homes. With more committed hearts, we can inhabit simply our own lives in their quiet ordinariness. We can make choices that “grow” our ability to spend longer periods in the land of silence, to inhabit rather than visit there. With periods of prayer, we can add silent jobs around the house and garden and silent reading and writing.

Transforming Silence

Though inhabiting the land of silence and transformation in this silent land may appear close, the difference lies in the word “transformation.” By fully embracing this silent realm of prayer one is transformed into a new man or a new woman. This new person is best described in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, where Merton’s insights come from Dr. Reza Arasteh: “Final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment The man [or woman] who is ‘fully born’ has an entirely ‘inner experience of life.’ He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense ‘cosmic’ and ‘universal.’”¹⁰ Thomas Merton’s integration leads him to define this new person, this inner person, in transcultural and transreligious terms. In *Mystics and Zen Masters*, he borrows thoughts from D. T. Suzuki who in turn is reflecting on Meister Eckhart: “*Prajna*, therefore, is not attained when one reaches a deep interior center in one’s self. . . . [O]n the contrary it is liberated from any need of self-affirmation and self-realization ‘[E]mptiness’ is no longer opposed to ‘fullness,’ but emptiness and fullness are One. Zero equals infinity.”¹¹ In these insights one sees that the research mentality is not the primary focus. We need to grow in an emptiness that only comes from the abandonment of silent prayer. Duality is replaced by a new hearing and a new seeing. The space, now called silence, is no longer a journey that can be described in detail, nor can it be discussed with accurate words. These reflections remind one of a letter Merton wrote to a friend, Abdul Aziz, dated January 2, 1966: “I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. . . . One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as ‘being before God as if you saw him.’”¹²

From the beginning of Thomas Merton’s hermit period until his final days in the Far East, he emanates a deep sense of one’s place in time. All are in the mundane present which is cosmic. This multicultural awareness of unity and interrelatedness is all-inclusive. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton joins our limited, particular place in the world with all that exists: “For the world and time are the dance of the Lord . . . the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, 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.”¹³

In the last weeks of his life, Merton traveled to Calcutta, New Delhi, the Himalayas, Madras,

Ceylon, and Bangkok. He met with many of the leaders of the Eastern faiths. In his *Asian Journal*, one can read his applications of their wisdom to his own quiet prayer. In closing the interfaith conference in Calcutta, he prayed: “O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection.”¹⁴ At the end of this Asian trip, Thomas Merton unexpectedly died, and with his death, he began his permanent time in silence before the Lord. Certainly, it was and is a new experience of time that can only be imagined by us. Yet as we continue into the land of silence, we are hearten to know this international guide, Thomas Merton. He is referred to as “Silent Lamp” (“Mei Teng” in Chinese) by John Wu, a scholar and diplomat (*HGL* 632-33). Very confident in Merton’s guidance, we can also expect that he is interceding for us. What better guide and intercessor can one have than this Silent Lamp!

1. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 101.
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 168.
4. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 46.
5. Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001) xiv.
6. Thomas Merton, “Love for God and Mutual Charity: Thomas Merton’s Lectures on Sufism,” in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003) 460-62; subsequent references will be cited as “MH” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 49.
9. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 326.
10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 211.
11. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 28.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 63; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 318.