

Wide Open to Heaven and Earth: Contemplation, Community, Culture

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By **Paul M. Pearson**

Introduction

“Listen.”

“Listen, my child, to the teaching of your master and turn your heart to hear...”¹ Those are the opening words of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the monastic rule that governed Thomas Merton’s life at the Abbey of Gethsemani and the rule in which he was responsible for guiding the formation of others for many years. I want to spend some time reflecting on “listening” in Thomas Merton’s life and thought and its application to our world in the twenty-first century, and more specifically to us here this weekend.

The title for our conference this year, “Wide Open to Heaven and Earth,” comes from the Preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*, which was published in 1966, a Preface that not merely introduced *Thoughts in Solitude* to a Japanese audience but expanded and extended it, undoubtedly drawing on Merton’s own experience in the ten years that had passed since *Thoughts* was first published. Central to this essay are the themes of listening and hearing, solitude and silence, as Merton writes in the opening paragraph:

These pages seek nothing more than to echo the silence and peace that is “heard” when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests. But what can the wind say where there is no hearer? There is then a deeper silence: the silence in which the Hearer is No-Hearer. That deeper silence must be heard before one can speak truly of solitude.²

It is then from this solitude, Merton writes, that a person can be one in “the unity which is love” as it is only the undivided person who can be open to all. As Merton writes: “He is truly alone who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one” (*HR* 112).

In our noisy, busy, too frequently violent world this essay has an important message for us. It is a message, I would like to suggest, that grew out of Merton’s own experience of listening and

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hearing as he developed within the monastic ethos of St. Benedict. The singer and songwriter Paul Simon sang of “people hearing without listening”³ but the problem that we so often face is the opposite of that – “people listening without hearing.” And this is what St. Benedict is getting at in his *Rule* – the monk is not just to “listen” but to “listen with the ear of the heart” or “to turn your heart to hear.” The following story expresses this difference well:

A holy lady died and went to heaven. St. Peter took time to give her the full guided tour. As they went from place to place they came upon an enormous warehouse – a warehouse even Wal-Mart would be proud of. This warehouse was stacked high to the rafters with pairs of ears. The lady was just intrigued by this and turned to St. Peter to ask him what this was all about. St. Peter answered her: “These are the ears of all those who heard the Word of God, but who never took it to heart. Their ears were saved, but they were not.”

Unless we take the word to heart it is just falling on deaf ears. Merton writes of this, saying “the foundation of the monastic life . . . is learning Christ *in the heart* (by deep assimilation and experience) and not only ‘in the ear’⁴ or, put another way, “He who simply reads the word without responding in his actions is like a dead man over whom a thousand trumpets are blown. He does not move” (*PBM* 284).

For St. Benedict, God “cries out to our hearts” every single day. Hence Benedict’s choice of the invitational psalm for the first office of each day: “O that today you would listen to His voice! Harden not your hearts.” He admonishes his monks to begin every day with those words. As Merton points out, Benedict puts those words in the office because “God cries out to us every day . . . and He speaks to us in everything,”⁵ if we would only listen.

The listening that Benedict requires of his monks is not a subjective listening, but a listening that demands a constant *metanoia*, a constant response of the heart, a listening that entails a change of heart, so that we can change and play our part in changing our world too. It is a listening not just to the Words of God in sacred scripture, but in the various ways that word can be manifested – through our families or communities, one another, and the world around us.

Out of this listening the monk can eventually learn to speak. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, “only he who listens can speak.” Through monastic silence and attentive listening the monk can begin to speak, uttering not just the babble of useless words, but partaking in the creative Word of God. As the Word of God emerges from silence, so the monastic regime calls the monk back to that silence where the One Word can be heard. If we listen hard enough we will learn to see the world as God sees it, a truly prophetic view of the world.

Through listening Thomas Merton became wide open to heaven and earth. We see him listening through his prayer and contemplation; through his monastic community and his abbot, through his friends and correspondents, his wider community; and finally, through his reading, his awareness of history, and of other peoples, times and places, through culture.

Merton the Listener

Over the course of his life Thomas Merton’s ability to listen often seems to be the most finely attuned of his senses. Even from his very earliest days Ruth Merton recorded in *Tom’s Book* his response to sound: “When he hears music he begins to dance, changing to fast or slow steps as the music changes.”⁶ “Sometimes when he is playing, he sings,” she writes on November 1, 1916, though she goes on to add “but without much tune!” (*TB*). His careful listening was undoubtedly

one of the reasons his vocabulary, as recorded in *Tom's Book*, was so extensive at such a young age, no doubt assisted by his ear for music inherited from his parents. This attention to sound would also develop into an ear for languages.

His love of music would continue throughout his life – he owned his own phonograph whilst at Oakham and Cambridge; frequented jazz haunts in New York; took time to listen to music, especially jazz, in free moments at the Louisville Free Public Library; and finally, in his last years at Gethsemani, had access once more to a record player in his hermitage along with an eclectic collection of records ranging from Coltrane's "Ascension" to the Grateful Dead, whose beat he described as "good for the hermit life"⁷ – though I could find no mention of Elvis Presley! As novice master he would occasionally treat the novices, on special feasts, to recordings of classical music, Shaker spirituals and even, over Christmas 1963, the dulcet tones of the singing nun!⁸ Recordings at the Thomas Merton Center even include Merton making recordings of himself singing Gregorian chant⁹ up at the hermitage and attempting to create an "experimental Jazz meditation."¹⁰

Equally he found the noise at the monastery a major distraction, whether it was other monks who kept him awake with their snoring in the common dormitory or later, from the croaking of frogs at the hermitage, or those supposedly silent monks who went around slamming doors, operating jackhammers and bulldozers or who bellowed "like a bull" in choir (*PBM* 189). As Merton wrote of the Trappist silence in one journal entry: "We make signs, but drown everything in the noise of our machines. One would think our real reason for making signs might be that it is not always easy to be heard."¹¹ In *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in his journals, we see Thomas Merton listening to the spirit of God in a number of different ways:

- Listening to the advice of friends such as Bob Lax, Dan Walsh and Mark Van Doren in New York; listening at St. Bonaventure, to the direction of the friars, to the advice of Catherine Doherty;
- Listening to the voices of the children in the Church of St. Francis, in Cuba, joyously shouting out after the moment of consecration "Creo en Dios . . .": "I believe in God";¹²
- Listening in the grove at St. Bonaventure to "the great bell of Gethsemani ringing in the night The bell seemed to be telling me where I belonged – as if it were calling me home" (*SSM* 365).

Then, throughout his years at Gethsemani, listening to the voice of God in a myriad of ways. Everyone who has read Merton could think of examples but I would like to just point to one – through the course of 1965, in the months leading up to his departure for the hermitage on August 20, 1965, we can see the effect of Merton's listening in a series of novitiate conferences on Philoxenos, conferences he humorously titled, "In Church with Louie: Monastic Life in the Raw."¹³ Merton was teaching his novices, but you can also hear Merton's thinking developing as he delved into Philoxenos and related subjects. The peak of this comes with Merton's final address as novice master. The agenda that Merton sets himself, the vision he shares of monastic life in that talk, have clarified for him in the previous months.¹⁴ Through his listening Merton came, as he said in that final address: "to see that things become transparent. They are no longer opaque and they no longer hide God. The thing that we have to face is that life is as simple as this. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time."¹⁵

Listening to the Wider World

If we listen with the ear of our heart the voice of God can come to us, sometimes even from the places we might least expect it. We think of Moses and the burning bush, of the prophet Elijah and the gentle breeze passing by the cave on Mt. Horeb, or of Merton at the corner of Fourth and Walnut; or again, of the effect on Martin Luther King, Jr. of reading a 1967 issue of *Ramparts* dedicated to “The Children of Vietnam.” After reading it he vowed “never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam.”¹⁶ Or maybe we will hear it on the corner of Third and Beale. Conversely, if we are not listening, or if we stop listening, we are in danger of passing God by without even noticing.

Joan Chittister described this modern scourge of deafness as follows:

Our entire generation has gone deaf. Scripture and wisdom and relationships and personal experience are all being ignored. We are, consequently, a generation of four wars and of the most massive arms buildup in the history of the world – in a period called peacetime. We are a generation of great poverty in the midst of great wealth, of great loneliness in the center of great communities; of serious personal breakdowns and community deterioration in the face of unparalleled social growth; of great spiritual ennui in the middle of our great claims of being a God-fearing country.¹⁷

Far removed from newspapers, CNN Headline News and so many other supposed sources of communication, we see the intensity of Merton’s listening when we realize how he could read the signs of his times and speak to them with a clarity which can still amaze us almost forty years after his death. Vincent Harding made a similar assessment of his friend and colleague Martin Luther King, Jr., writing of King that: “He has moved on ahead of us. By 1968 he was already ahead of where most of us dare to be now” (Harding 57). I want to reflect now on some of those issues still pertinent to us today.

Firstly, Merton’s insights on racism, and no doubt we (and Merton) would want to broaden that to include issues such as gay rights, immigration, and the way we welcome the stranger in our midst, reflecting St. Benedict’s exhortation to his monks to welcome every stranger as Christ. Or as Merton would write: “God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*.”¹⁸

Merton’s insights on race went far beyond the conventional thinking of many of those writing at that time, especially those writing from within the white establishment. Merton took to task not just those who were openly and frequently aggressively racist, but also those white liberals who believed they were doing the right thing. Merton could see the white liberal position for what it really was, a much subtler form of racism.

In a book review of *Seeds of Destruction*,¹⁹ the theologian Martin Marty criticized Merton for the pessimistic tone of much of his writings on racial issues, especially his “Letters to a White Liberal.” Marty had taken issue with the pessimistic picture Merton had painted in the midst of what Marty describes as “white liberalism’s good days, half way between High Point Number One, ‘the Washington March’ and High Point Number Two, ‘Selma to Montgomery,’” suggesting that Merton was writing from his “safe, romantic refuge” and from his frustration at only being able to watch the “civil rights and peace parades go by.” However, just over two years later Marty publicly apologized to Merton, writing: “Recently I had occasion to re-read the book [*Seeds of Destruction*]. What

bothers me now is the degree of accuracy in your predictions and prophecies in general. At the time you seemed to be trying to be a kind of white James Baldwin. Now it seems to me you were ‘telling it as it is’ and maybe ‘as it will be.’”²⁰

Racism continues in our day, less as the openly physical aggression that characterized so much of the American South, but in subtle, and often not so subtle forms. The frequently racist selection of individuals for security screening at airports is a prominent example, or the images of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina – who were the major groups left behind? Or take inherent racism in the U.S. Justice system so clearly expressed in Rachel Lyons’ recent film *Race to Execution*. For example, black or Hispanic defendants whose victims were white are much more likely to be charged capitally and sentenced to death than their white counterparts – 5½ times more likely in Mississippi, 30 times more likely in Texas. The price of a life, the film concludes, depends on its color. White people have the power and anyone who encroaches on that will be dealt with severely. Such evidence demonstrates how little things have really changed since Merton wrote his “Letters to a White Liberal.” As Oneal Moore’s²¹ widow said recently, speaking of her husband’s murder: “They’ve changed their white hoods for black suits, white shirts and black ties.”

A more subtle scenario played itself out at a small Catholic liberal arts college in recent months. A student began sporting an armband with a fascist symbol emblazoned upon it. Various minority groups on campus were deeply upset, offended and troubled by this. As has happened in similar situations on other campuses the real issues at stake ended up mired in a debate about freedom of speech for which the administration at the university seemed to feel justified in saying how good it is that it has really got people talking, that it’s created a real debate on campus for once. The real issue though was not about debate. Only those who have been the target of genocidal agendas would know in their guts that much more is at stake in such a moment than freedom of speech.

In his book *White Like Me*, the activist Tim Wise talked about his own privilege and the experience of being part of the “debating circuit” at the school he attended, a group that, due to the expenses involved, generally only included white, privileged students. Wise points out that the only group in favor of the Iraq war was white men – whilst white women were fairly evenly split on supporting the invasion and less than one-fifth of blacks or Latinos were in favor. Wise continues: “When you haven’t ever been the target of the kind of mass death we were fixing to unleash on the people of Iraq – and whites in this country, let’s be clear, have not been – it’s hard to conjure up the empathy necessary to say no to those who seek to do it to others. . . . I found myself thinking that these people would have made fine debaters, all of them.”²² This forcefully reminded me of the attitude of the university administration and of Merton’s “Letters to a White Liberal.” Merton too knew that such issues are not about debate. Far, far more is at stake. As he realized, “the time had come to move from the role of bystander (guilty by association and silence) to that of declared witness.”²³ The vocation of the bystander is to speak the truth at all costs. It was a vocation Merton learnt in silence, listening intently to the pulse of the world with the ear of his heart. As Merton would write in his journal in November 1961: “I need patience to listen, to learn, to try to understand, and courage to take all the consequences and be really faithful. This alone is a full time job. I dread it but it must be done, and I don’t quite know how. To save my soul by trying to be one of those who spoke and worked for peace, not for madness and destruction” (*TTW* 179).

The madness of that world was also brought very closely home to Merton as he listened in the hermitage to the noise of the guns and the SAC planes.²⁴ These intrusions occur again and again in

Merton's personal journal at that time: "A constant thumping and pummeling of guns at Fort Knox. It began last night when I was going to bed. Then there were big 'whumps,' unlike cannon, more like some kind of missile. Now, it sounds like a new kind of rapid-fire artillery."²⁵ Later the same day he adds: "2:15. Bumps and punches at Fort Knox faster and faster" (*DWL* 177). Or again, a few days later: "the guns were pounding at Fort Knox while I was making my afternoon meditation, and [unlike the noise of the monks, the frogs or the hunters] I thought that after all this is no mere 'distraction,' and that I am here because they are there so that, indeed, I am supposed to hear them. They form part of an ever renewed 'decision' and commitment for peace" (*DWL* 182). Recall this is December 1964. The early sixties saw Merton's most intense writings on war and the nuclear arms race, his cold war letters, and the ban on his publishing *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. The previous month, November 1964, saw Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Jim Forest, John Howard Yoder, A. J. Muste, Tom Cornell, Ping Ferry and others at Gethsemani at Merton's invitation for a meeting on violence and non-violence. We see Merton's "decision and commitment for peace" – these are not hollow words. Merton moves from listening to speaking, but a speaking that grows out of silence, a speaking far removed from the media bombardment and techno-babble with which we are continually faced. As Merton wrote in *Seeds of Destruction*: "[W]hen speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts [one could interject: rhinoceroses], perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to try to speak."²⁶

Conclusion

For Merton, it is our loss of silence that has led to the breakdown of communication, and consequently to the loss of communion, which is the grave danger we face, and the reason why we must work to restore authentic communication with one another: "To live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others is absolutely necessary if [we are] to remain human."²⁷ In one episode of the classic English comedy "The Goon Show," a telephone rings and the goon answering says: "Who is speaking? Who is that? Who is that speaking? Who is it? Who is there? Who is speaking?" and when he eventually pauses a voice replies, "You are speaking." Silence is necessary for real communication to take place; we have to be silent and listen. Not just to listen, but to hear, and to hear, as St. Benedict reminds us, with the ear of the heart.

This loss of silence is also at the root of our alienation. Silence enables one to discover their inner depths, ultimately leading to their discovery of who they really are, their true self. I think Walker Percy summed up modern alienation very clearly and simply in his wonderful essay "Bourbon," where Percy suggested the aesthetic effects of bourbon drinking were to "warm the heart, to reduce the anomie of the late twentieth century, to cut the cold phlegm of Wednesday afternoons."²⁸ I think Merton's approach would be different from Percy's. Merton certainly wouldn't refuse the glass of bourbon, but his means for overcoming the alienation we face would be different. For Thomas Merton it is out of silence and listening that all true communication springs. Out in the woods Merton listened to the valley awakening at dawn and he heard the New Testament or, as George Eliot wrote in *Middlemarch*: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."²⁹ Are we able to hear the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat? Can we hear that roar which lies on the other side of silence? Maybe we need to stop from time to time and ask ourselves those questions.

Merton reminds us that if we could just learn to listen – listen in and to the silence – we would realize that we are not alone in our solitude, and we would be able to develop our latent capacity

to understand and live life more deeply, more contemplatively, and communicate more wholly and authentically at the level of communion. In our world of baffling noise, endless media demands for our attention and political spin, we can become a listening people. Listening with the ear of our heart, listening to our neighbor, listening to the stranger, and above all, listening for God. So Merton encourages us to be Wide Open to Heaven and Earth, Wide Open to the Spirit, Wide Open to one another. In these few brief days we are together, I encourage you to listen – listen to the Spirit of God speaking where it will; listen to one another; listen to the wonderful talks and presentations we will hear, and listen to your own heart.

Listen, what did you hear?

Listen.

1. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Bernard Basil Bolton, OSB (Newport, Gwent: R. H. Johns, 1969) 1.
2. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 123; subsequent references will be cited as “*HR*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Paul Simon, “Sounds of Silence” (1964).
4. Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006) 282; subsequent references will be cited as “*PBM*” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, “The Rule of St. Benedict,” a set of conference notes for a course given by Merton as master of novices and found in volume 18 of “Collected Essays,” the 24-volume bound set of published and unpublished materials assembled at the Abbey of Gethsemani and available both there and at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY (subsequent references will be cited as “*TMC*” parenthetically in the text).
6. Ruth Merton, *Tom’s Book: To Granny with Tom’s Best Love 1916*, ed. Sheila Milton (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2005) [November 1, 1916]; subsequent references will be cited as “*TB*” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 312.
8. Thomas Merton, tape #77.2 [recorded 12/22/1963]: unpublished recording of a conference to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani (TMC).
9. Thomas Merton, tape #191.1,3 [recorded 9/22/1967] (TMC).
10. Thomas Merton, tape #213.3 [recorded 4/22/1967] (TMC).
11. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 171; subsequent references will be cited as “*TTW*” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 284; subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.
13. Thomas Merton, tape #144:2 [recorded April 25, 1965] (TMC).
14. The expression of this can be seen in some of Merton’s conference notes from the period just before moving to the hermitage, now available in the recently published volume *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*, and in his wonderful essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros” (Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* [New York: New Directions, 1966] 9-23).
15. Thomas Merton, *Solitude: Breaking the Heart* (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1988) [tape #AA2099.1].
16. Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 100-101; subsequent references will be cited as “Harding” parenthetically in the text.
17. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990) 23.

18. Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 82.
19. Martin Marty, review of *Seeds of Destruction* by Thomas Merton, *Book Week (New York Herald Tribune)* (17 January 1965).
20. Martin Marty, "To: Thomas Merton. Re: Your Prophecy," *The National Catholic Reporter* 3.43 (30 August 1967) 6.
21. Oneal Moore, one of the first black sheriff's deputies in Louisiana, was killed in 1965 after shots were fired at his patrol car from a pick-up truck bearing a confederate flag. No one was ever convicted for his murder (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6699925.stm> – accessed 4 June 2007).
22. Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005) 36.
23. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 368.
24. I was always a little skeptical that Merton could hear these sounds at Gethsemani, but Frederick Smock in his recent book *Pax Intransigentibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2007) recalls hearing the guns of Fort Knox as he lay in bed at home in Louisville (13-15).
25. 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) 177; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
26. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 243.
27. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 55.
28. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991) 103.
29. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Signet Classic, 2003) 207.