

From Cloister to Classroom: Thomas Merton and Today's College Student

By **Alan Kolp**

The traditional college-age student of today was born in the early 1990s. It is a generation which often claims to be “spiritual, but not religious.” And even if the student is religious, he or she typically does not know too much about his or her own faith tradition. The difference between Thomas Merton’s death in 1968 and their birth is hardly more than a quarter of a century. But in many ways it is a chasm. When one thinks about our world and the world of 1968 – and especially the monastic world – the daunting task of teaching Merton’s spirituality to the current college student is obvious. The key question is: how can Merton’s spirituality be taught to undergraduates? As daunting as it is, surely it is possible to bridge the chasm from the cloister to the classroom. In fact, it is quite rewarding to see contemporary college students cross that bridge – coming to know, appreciate and even emulate Merton.

My own experience teaching Merton’s spirituality is two-fold. One context is a beginning, core class for undergraduates, most of whom would not be in the class if they did not “have to fulfill a core requirement.” When I go into that classroom, most students would only have a vague idea about what spirituality is. Therefore, it is important to provide them a foundational definition that can fit their experience, yet provide a link to how Merton might have talked about spirituality. Sandra Schneiders offers a good, albeit fairly sophisticated, definition. Spirituality “is the capacity of persons to transcend themselves through knowledge and love, that is, to reach beyond themselves in relationship to others and thus become more than self-enclosed material monads . . . the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”¹ Elements of this definition will appear throughout the paper.

I also have experience teaching Merton in an upper-level seminar for Religion majors and minors. This seminar focuses exclusively on Merton’s spirituality. Students in this seminar have an awareness of spirituality and have already begun the spiritual development process, as outlined by Schneiders. Engagement with Merton hastens and deepens that process. For the sake of brevity, this paper focuses more on the seminar.



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The approach taken here is constructed around four facets of Merton’s spirituality. These four facets inform a process that takes the student who has never heard of Thomas Merton from ignorance to emulation. Using Merton’s spirituality facilitates the student’s own pilgrimage from ignorance to appreciation in the meaning-making in his or her own life.

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I. Biography

The first task is to acquaint the student with Thomas Merton. To that end, the student is first asked to read *The Seven Storey Mountain*.² This book establishes the Merton baseline. It helps students see the human Merton before he became religious and before he entered Gethsemani. This helps the student understand how Merton came to enter the monastery. And it enables students to understand that even in the monastery, monks are still human! Becoming spiritual does not mean unbecoming human. In fact Merton says, “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”³ This is not a monastic question. It is a human question.

The theme of “finding out who I am” is a life-long pilgrimage for Merton and will be likewise for students. Developmentally, college is a significant new phase for this journey. *The Seven Storey Mountain* charts Merton’s pre-Gethsemani years as a youth, his uneven collegiate years, the spiritual searching, and then the decisive move to the monastery. Merton is a good guide and effective challenger to the students to become active shapers of their destiny. Merton may be dead, but he still confronts students with powerful life-questions.

Merton attests to the fact that the deepest quest in life will include the spiritual dimension. Merton’s cloister answers spur the classroom discussion. The following passage illustrates the depth of the quest – the quest of the human soul.

My brother, perhaps in my solitude I have become as it were an explorer for you, a searcher in realms which you are not able to visit – except perhaps in the company of your psychiatrist. I have been summoned to explore a desert area of man’s heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts. An arid, rocky, dark land of the soul, sometimes illuminated by strange fires which men fear and peopled by spectres which men studiously avoid except in their nightmares. And in this area I have learned that one cannot truly know hope unless he has found out how like despair hope is. . . . I can say to you that I have experienced the cross to mean mercy and not cruelty, truth and not deception; that the news of the truth and love of Jesus is indeed the true good news, but in our time it speaks out in strange places.⁴

In this quotation Merton notes that “only experience counts.” That anticipates the second facet of Merton’s spirituality, which becomes key for students as well.

II. Experience

Experience counts. Experience is the arena where spirituality becomes real and not just a collection of ideas. Experience is the crucible where what happens to us in life is charged with our interpretations and some kind of meaning is attributed. Gethsemani was a primary crucible for Merton. Through various writings over a twenty-year period (1948-1968) students can watch Merton engage what Schnieders described as the “conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”

Merton is an effective guide in this project of life-integration, because he was so consciously and publicly doing it. In effect, he says: “This is how I am doing it. How are you doing it?” It is important that students see that this project involves them in their own lives where they are in the moment. It is not a monastic project; it is a life project. And the only time they can do it is “now.”

Merton provokes all of us – student and professor – not to put off life, not to wait until we graduate or get older before we transcend ourselves through knowledge and love.

Merton speaks clearly to this point. For example, in *No Man Is an Island* he acknowledges, “One of the most important – and most neglected – elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God.”⁵ A passage like this one affords a wonderful opportunity for students to ponder their own response to reality. And the pondering often leads students to participate in life in deeper and profounder ways.

The role of the query is essential. Merton’s writing adroitly poses questions. What is your reality? Do you see the value and beauty in your ordinary things? What is the value you see there? His questions carry inherent requests: “Please share the beauty you see. Enable me to see it, too.” And even more challengingly, Merton asks students to “come alive.” He challenges them and us to come alive to the splendor that is all around us.

Seldom is the splendor around us obvious. With a line from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton shows us how the splendor becomes evident: “The soul of man, left to its own natural level, is a potentially lucid crystal left in darkness. It is perfect in its own nature, but it lacks something that it can only receive from outside and above itself. But when the light shines in it, it becomes in a manner transformed into light and seems to lose its nature in the splendor of a higher nature, the nature of the light that is in it” (*SSM* 170). The educational venture itself becomes a crucible for students. It can be the place where the light shines and transformation occurs. When this happens students realize that spirituality is not a matter of the cloister or classroom. It is a matter of experience and that concerns the interior life. When this happens, they have something to talk about. Experience described, then, is the beginning of theology.

III. Theology

Spirituality is never devoid of theology. But it does not begin with theology. Spirituality begins with experience and then leads to theology, which interprets the spiritual experiences. When it comes to theology, Merton is a wonderful tutor to students. As his biography teaches us, theology’s role in Merton’s life ranged from irrelevant to necessary to instrumental. This means the students need to pay attention to particular Merton life-phases. Generally, we need to be attentive to the context for theology to be applicable.

The Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* is still the Roman Catholic monk who wrote *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.⁶ But he also is not the same person. Experiences had changed him and so likely will experiences change students. Again, in this sense there is no difference between cloister and classroom. Experience often leads to change. It did for Merton. But this does not mean Merton gave up everything from his earlier years. We may change, but the earlier theological formulation will always be foundational. Experience can cause theology to change, deepen and broaden. Merton’s life experience allows students to see that after years in the monastery, the advent of the Vietnam War, feminism and the racial issues of the ’60s, and finally exposure to Asian spiritual traditions, meant that Merton’s theology could not be rigid. He becomes for students an important model of openness, attentiveness and adaptability. This is precisely what is needed in students’ consciousness, as they prepare to live spiritually meaningful lives through much of the twenty-first century. In some real way Merton’s time is not much different than our own time.

Merton speaks directly to this. He laments that

We are the prisoners of every urgency. . . . Having lost our ability to see life as a whole, to evaluate conduct as a whole, we no longer have any relevant context into which our actions are to be fitted, and therefore all our actions become erratic, arbitrary, and insignificant. . . . For it is not humanly possible to live a life without significance and remain healthy. A human life has to have a human meaning, or else it becomes morally corrupt. (CGB 102-103)

College students can hear Merton tell them that they need a life of significance in order to be healthy. They don't have to do it the same way he did it. But they need to figure out how they will do it. Significance and meaning are not a given in life. This anticipates the last facet of Merton's spirituality, namely, the existential.

IV. Existential

To consider the existential dimension of life comes full circle to the biographical. It is possible to see these two meet in a passage where Merton reflects on his conversion. He says, "I think that, like most other converts, I faced the problem of the 'religiousness' and came to terms with it. . . . [M]y conversion to Catholicism began with the realization of the presence of God *in this present life*, in the world and in myself, and that my task as Christian is to live in full and vital awareness of this ground of my being and of the world's being" (CGB 292-93).

The goal of teaching Merton is not to precipitate religious conversion, nor to create Christians – although both are good outcomes. A worthy goal, however, would be to provoke awareness and realization of God in this present life of the student. And if she or he does not believe in God, then the goal is to facilitate an awareness of and commitment to what Schnieders calls "the ultimate value one perceives." For many people, God is the "ultimate value." But we need to leave the space and grace for someone without that particular value to participate in studying Merton, too. With this awareness and commitment to ultimate value, any person has increased chances of having an existentially meaningful life.

Merton often used existentialist language to talk about this human developmental process. In *Mystics and Zen Masters* Merton identifies four arenas in which "authentic personal identity" is created: freedom, responsibility, dialogue and love.⁷ Again Merton becomes paradigmatic for student development. Learning how Merton developed as a person through his own engagement with freedom, responsibility, dialogue and love is important. But the crucial question is how each student will negotiate these four arenas as they develop their own authentic personal identity. Merton can be a good guide.

My experience with contemporary students always tells me that a key goal in life for them is, in their words, "to be happy." There is nothing wrong with that; most people want to be happy. But most students have not lived long enough to understand how that goal probably will be tempered through life. And certainly most students have not lived long enough to know how the process of reaching the goal of happiness may turn out to be surprising.

A middle-aged Merton poignantly remarked, "Hence I do not find in myself the power to be happy merely by doing what I like" (*NMI* 25). A comment like this one can be used to direct the student's attention beyond happiness as chief goal. Merton joined a contemplative group of monks when he

went to Gethsemani. Perhaps for the student in the twenty-first century, becoming a contemplative is a more worthy and higher goal than just happiness (but can include happiness). The good news is they don't have to join a monastery to become contemplative.

Merton opens *New Seeds of Contemplation* with some scintillating words. He says, "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being" (*NSC* 1). If a professor could give any gift to a student, this might be the best gift of all – this gift of contemplative living. Contemplation is a gift. But it is not one given by a professor! Merton inevitably helps students see what contemplation is and what they can do to position themselves to be given the gift.

Merton knew that God was behind, in and through life lived contemplatively. I can imagine Merton wanting to tell students to live life with "a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith. For contemplation is a kind of spiritual vision" (*NSC* 1). With these words from Merton, we have the secret – the paradox – that it is not about Merton. It is about God – the Source.

When the student gets that, he or she has a kind of spiritual vision. And with a spiritual vision the student leaves the classroom for the world in order to love, to be a peacemaker and a co-creator of the Kingdom. This will be their true commencement of life.

1. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3.2 (2003) 165-66.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 31; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 171-72.
5. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 33; subsequent references will be cited as "NMI" parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 263.