

of unity or communion. He exemplified what this might mean through his correspondence, his writing, his private talks with people like the Dalai Lama and his public talks, particularly in Asia. He never had an opportunity to exercise this role to the full extent of his capability; but his work and example remain powerfully illustrative and informative.

It is not hard to extrapolate from Merton's thinking and example, to suggest that all of us, as a matter of human vocation, can follow a path, however modest, which helps us contribute to the creation of a world in which communication, dialogue and community are more firmly rooted in an older unity, a love unity. The path may never be fully clear, but in facing the uncertainties Merton again is a heartening guide.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.
2. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 137.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); subsequent references will be cited as "CWA" parenthetically in the text.

“I Have Become an Explorer for You”

By Fiona Gardner

I have chosen to illustrate why Thomas Merton still matters by taking a short extract from a letter that he wrote in August 1967 to the Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Frattocchie near Rome, Dom Francis Decroix. The letter was requested by the abbot as a “message of contemplatives to the world.”¹ Merton explains that his response, composed the day he received the letter, was written directly and simply, but with undoubted speed and spontaneity, in order to be returned to the abbot in time. My suggestion is that this same extract, so quickly penned, can speak poignantly and with much relevance nearly fifty years later.

The extract is prefaced by Merton who says that from his exploration of the contemplative way of life he has no answers; rather he has merely begun to seek the questions. The questions are those that ultimately lie at the heart of each person. What is the meaning of life? Can any explanations answer that? Why is there evil? What might it mean to live a good life? Merton in the ten or so lines that follow offers three crucial and challenging thoughts.

The first: “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” (*HGL* 156). The truth that Merton touches on is that silence which is such an anathema and rarity, to be avoided at all costs in the contemporary world, is indeed a place of confrontation, rather than easy consolation. Silence, and encountering God in the silence, opens up the inner world where all sorts of feelings, some acknowledged and others repressed, lie in wait. Merton



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understood that here are all those parts of us that have been denied and repressed, where the root of projections and prejudice lurk, and where the unpalatable human emotions of rage, lust, envy and hatred lie.

This reality is further acknowledged by Merton in his next couple of sentences when he writes: “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 specters which men studiously avoid except in their nightmares” (*HGL* 156). Merton takes us here to the heart of the experiential where rational, coherent, conceptual thought has no place; down into the deep unconscious where the primitive, strange, uncontrolled heat of passion and anger and the ghosts we would rather banish from the civilized world are encountered.

Merton’s final sentence in this chosen extract confirms the personal journey that he has taken through this unforgiving terrain when he writes: “I have learned that one cannot truly know hope unless he has found out how like despair hope is” (*HGL* 156). This is the mystical recognition that beyond the usual sense of good and bad, black and white, lies the darkness which is itself light – where the apparent emptiness contains a fullness, and so where dualistic thought includes an immanence beyond the separation. Later in the same message Merton tells us that the hope in the despair is from the love of Jesus that also is found by those who search within: “Hope because Jesus is with those who are poor and outcasts No one on earth has reason to despair of Jesus because Jesus loves man” (*HGL* 157.)

Rather than find answers for big existential questions Merton urges us first to seek our inner world, to know ourselves in all that complexity. As Merton wrote elsewhere, “I am realizing more and more that my big task is within myself.”² This then is the message for now – far from any triumphalism or intellectual certainties Merton returns us to, at the very least, an awareness of the “log in our own eye” before rushing to sort out “the speck” in another’s (Matt. 7:3).

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 154-59; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 134 (9/16/1960 letter to Mother Angela Collins, OCD).

Soul Brothers

By Robert Grip

I admit to being part of a generation who read Thomas Merton, but worried that we might be the last to appreciate his enormous gift both to those of the Christian faith and to the world in general. It is perhaps opportune

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