

## Personal Kaleidoscopic Spirituality

By Alan Kolp

On the last day of January, 2015, Thomas Merton still matters because he offers new readers his personal kaleidoscopic spirituality. Before detailing what this means, let me say that Merton still matters because he still speaks to the current generation of college students who must live most of this century in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Merton will not provide answers as much as he will model what the process of making sense in a VUCA world might look like.

I like to use the image of a kaleidoscope to picture Merton's process of spiritual evolution. Because he is dead, there are no more pieces to be added to his life's kaleidoscope. All of his writings and most of what we know about him are now within the Merton kaleidoscope. But as any reader of Merton knows, there are many ways to read Merton and multiple ways of understanding and appreciating him. This is Merton's perpetual gift to new readers and new generations. It is easy to prophesy that this will last through the twenty-first century.

Picking up a Merton book or talking to someone knowledgeable about Merton is like picking up a kaleidoscope. You peer inside and see something that may be very clear. For example, picking up *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a journey of reading the interpreted narrative history of a guy born in France who ends up joining a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. It is the story of personal spiritual evolution. That will be the story of nearly everyone in a VUCA world. Rather than despairing at this evolutionary prospect, Merton's journey gives hope that to "live the questions now," as Rilke encouraged, is indeed the way to find identity, a sense of belonging and meaning. It is also inspiring to know that landing in the Abbey of Gethsemani was not the conclusion of Merton's evolution, but it merely was the place and the space for ongoing spiritual growth and development. It became the center – the *axis mundi* – of a global citizen engaged in a global search for a kind of ultimate unity, truth and beauty. He was born in France, died in Thailand, but his heart was in Gethsemani.

We know that a twist of the kaleidoscope yields a different perspective – a changing pattern. That is true when you read Merton. For example, *No Man Is an Island* is a wonderful read in its own right. It provides insight into how Merton thinks, how he borrows ideas and develops his own theological perspective. At one level, it does not matter that it was written in the mid-1950s. Picking up another book, such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, written near the end of his life in 1966, is to engage a thinker and writer who seems related to the guy who wrote *No Man Is an Island*, but who also is different.

Reading Merton is kaleidoscopic – he is the same guy, but different themes and patterns emerge at different times and in different contexts. In



Alan Kolp

---

**Alan Kolp** holds the Baldwin Wallace University Chair in Faith & Life and is Professor of Religion there. A lifelong Quaker, he is also a Benedictine Oblate. Previously, he was Dean and Professor of Historical and Spiritual Studies at Earlham School of Religion. He is the author of *Fresh Winds of the Spirit* and *A Canopy of Light & Love*.

a VUCA world with the likelihood of more “Nones” and “Spiritual but Not Religious,” Merton is going to be even more attractive as a model of the process of spiritual evolution, rather than the answer-giver. Like the kaleidoscope, Merton appears able to offer a way of engaging and thinking about multiple issues that arise in life. Not only was he on a quest to make sense of his own life, he sought to discover a way to make sense of his world.

The same challenge faces everyone in his or her own VUCA world. In a world still at war with our enemies, with the economy, with climate change and even more, Merton still models a process of dealing spiritually with problems. He used faith as a way to make peace. Reading Merton is to hear a prophetic voice proclaiming that peace will not be until justice comes to be. His spirituality also required a simplicity that challenges a greed economy. In a world where the richest one percent owns half of the global wealth, Merton’s spirituality offers a sane alternative to a building economic crisis. He revered nature and would, like Thomas Berry and others, serve as a mentor for all who want to become new people living in a new ecological age.

One last turn of the kaleidoscope reveals the possibility of changing phases in life. This certainly was true for Merton. Just as life has an inherent dynamism, so does spirituality. Merton exquisitely models this. While his pilgrimage from atheism to Catholicism is interesting, perhaps more revealing is his pilgrimage from a 1950s Catholic monk to spiritual global citizen. Merton teaches us how to be a deep and wide person. The depth of a person comes from finding and living from our center – the Divine Center within. From this centered place we are free to live widely among the spiritual people of the world.

It is at this point Merton’s writings offer what I suggest can be an antidote to living in a VUCA world. In the face of volatility we can find vision. It is fair to say that Merton’s kaleidoscopic spirituality, in fact, evolved in a way that led to vision and re-visioning. Vision is necessary for a spiritual life in a volatile world. The antidote to the uncertainty of a VUCA world is a sense of understanding. It is important to understand the fundamentals of our faith and our tradition. But that understanding also necessitates the requisite flexibility to deal with the uncertain world characteristic of our twenty-first century.

The VUCA world is complex, sometimes confusingly complex. That became true for Merton’s generation – particularly in the 1960s. The temptation is to be pulled toward relativity or, at the other end, a kind of fundamentalism. I would argue the real antidote to complexity is character – a life of virtue. In fascinating ways Merton shows how this is lived out in real complexity and will inspire others to follow suit. Finally, a VUCA world is an ambiguous world. Ambiguity can slow our creative response to life or even freeze us into inaction. The antidote to this is an agility that is rooted in the Spirit at our center and is lived out in our trust of the Spirit. Merton has survived his death. Soon his memory will also have survived anyone who knew him first-hand. His memory will continue to thrive, because there is in place a personal kaleidoscopic spirituality in his books, tapes, etc. Regardless of who picks up the kaleidoscope with whatever question, there is a Merton perspective that can offer a way to understand life in a VUCA world. His ministry goes on.