

I'm up to my gunnels in Merton and all those books. Good grief, how did he do so much and still write so much and pray and all that. He must have been several people with several life-times. I only have one. Schweitzer had one, Mother Teresa had only one. Gandalf tells Frodo that too, doesn't he? What to do with the one we have is the question. Funny, I can see myself in Merton doing the things he did. Why is that? I'm looking into those deep-well eyes of his and I see myself opening and opening and opening.

Too late. I'm Lutheran. He bashed us Lutherans pretty good. Why is that? But I didn't mind it. Why is THAT?

The semester is over and I'm not selling or returning any of my Merton books. The picture you gave me of him is on my wall and I'm taking it with me when I graduate next week, plus the prayer card and all the good talk we had about him. I can't take it all in yet, but he's the only philosopher or theologian I can read and stay awake, because I'm reading about me. I'll bet he didn't know what a mirror he was going to be and how many people look into him and find something and someone for the very first time. And like what they see. Thanks for showing him to me.

If God gives me direction and strength to travel the road, maybe someday somebody will see a picture of me and think, "I can see a little of myself in those eyes." Who knows? Maybe.

## Slow, Deepen, Shine: Why Merton Still Matters

By Susan McCaslin

Recently, while reading up on the overwhelming scientific evidence for global warming and corporate capitalism's vested interest in denying or ignoring it, I considered how the life and writings of Thomas Merton address what I see as one of the central issues of our times. Merton's insistence on contemplation as the ground of effective action suggests that contemplative deepening, if pursued not only individually, but collectively, holds an essential antidote to our current environmental crises. What in earlier ages was an individual call to the contemplative life, an optional deepening for a few, has now become a collective and global imperative. The most singular and consistent



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preoccupation in Merton's life and writings is his almost single-handed revival of medieval and earlier contemplative practices, his call for interior transformation. The etymology of the word "contemplation" suggests the discovery within the self of a *temenos* or sacred space, a placeless place where our essential being coincides with the mysterious center of all being and knowing. Merton's call for the re-emergence of contemplative being-in-the-world is not merely for a scattering of monastics, but for us all.

Ancient monastic forms of asceticism may seem old fashioned to some, both self- and world-denying. However, religious and non-religious people alike are now acknowledging that the human pace, our insistence on unlimited economic growth and continuous material progress, has accelerated exponentially since Merton's time. The sheer quantity of information we are required to process through the electronic media has become overwhelming. Scientists, philosophers, artists and ecologists warn that humans' incessant exploitation of the earth's limited resources has created greenhouse gas emissions causing potentially catastrophic global warming. In short, since Merton's time, it has become clear that we as a species are destroying the very ecosystems that sustain us.

Toward the end of his life, Merton was faced with the challenge that monasticism no longer seemed relevant to many. His friend Rosemary Ruether, emerging feminist theologian, argued in their 1967 correspondence that she was "radically out of sympathy with the monastic project."<sup>1</sup> Yet they agreed that new kinds of ecumenical centers were needed where men and women alike could go periodically for renewal and reconnection to nature. Merton never suggested that it is feasible or desirable for all of us to opt out of the system and become monks or nuns. Yet what people today might embrace in increasing numbers are inter-spiritual centers that welcome a diversity of people from both within and without institutional religions.

Recently, I have become aware of young people who are discussing the need to unplug, get off-grid and carve out periods when they are not required to be at the end of their texting, tweeting, emails or Facebook pages. A recent program on the CBC radio featured youth who are drawn to Internet-free cafes where they agree to be automatically disconnected from social media on entering the venue. Many of my husband's environmental associates complain of "eco-hero burnout." As Merton, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized, effective activism requires a spiritual base.

Merton himself was fascinated with technology and, were he here today, would no doubt take advantage of the Internet. Yet even in the mid-60s, he observed that our rush and haste is tied to unregulated corporate capitalism with its ethos of exploitation. In a retreat given to contemplative sisters not long before his journey to Asia, Merton stated: "If we're going to live up to our prophetic vocation, we have to realize that, whether we're revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society. And we're in it. It's not a society that's coming, it is here."<sup>2</sup> So the contemplative path Merton advocated still holds the capacity to be a mode of resistance to the depersonalizing forces that would disconnect us from our inner selves and from the earth. These new-old contemplative practices of silence, meditation and contemplative prayer have the capacity to nurture new forms of non-violent resistance and bring about systemic change.

Merton wasn't one to seek a paradise elsewhere but loved this planet. He didn't separate loving this planet from the immaterial mysteries of being. He wrote and acted out of his experiential

knowledge that this world isn't merely material, but a union of spirit and matter. He punctuated his journal entries and essays with Zen-like poetic observations on nature. In 1962, on discovering Rachel Carson's ground-breaking book *The Silent Spring*, documenting the effect of pesticides on birds and ecosystems, he wrote: "We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way."<sup>3</sup> Later, on January 12, 1963, he wrote Carson a letter<sup>4</sup> that scholar Monica Weis calls a "watershed moment in the evolution of his ecological consciousness."<sup>5</sup>

If Merton were alive today, he would be standing with his friends Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama to express our need to become fully inter-spiritual beings. As Merton points out in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, "In the contemplative life, actions exists for the sake of contemplation and vice versa."<sup>6</sup> They are reciprocal dynamics of a single process. If we can establish periodic disconnections from the rat race, spend more time in nature, and deepen into the hidden ground of our individual and collective being, we might be better equipped to move beyond mere self-fulfillment and on to planetary rescue. By accessing the wells of contemplation we might be able to strategize more effective, non-violent means of social transformation.

Merton provides hope that by our becoming centers of creative energy, imaginative solutions will emerge. As a poet, he insists that art, which springs from contemplation, connects us to our essential selves, to each other and to the earth. Contemplation awakens creativity. When a person is creatively engaged, the temptation to be restless, continually dissatisfied consumers, to operate from a sense of scarcity and deprivation, diminishes.

Merton will be remembered for his revitalization of ancient contemplative practices. Yet his profound exploration of the Christian contemplative and mystical streams and their connections to those of other religions does not have its end in simply helping a few people awaken. It is now essential for our collective survival. Merton remains far ahead of his time, and ours, pointing the way to the place where we are interconnected and whole, where we have the capacity to slow, deepen and "shin[e] like the sun."<sup>7</sup>

1. Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 27.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 133.
3. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274 [12/11/1962].
4. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 70-72.
5. Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 137.
6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 141.
7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.