

4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 143; subsequent references will be cited as “CWA” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140.
6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 198-99; subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 141; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 107.

## Merton and Young Adults in the Wilderness

By Padraic O’Hare

I reread Robert Ellsberg’s warm and gracious twenty-fifth-anniversary remembrance of Dorothy Day recently and came across these eloquent words about why nineteen-year-old Ellsberg would leave Harvard College and head for St. Joseph House in the 1974 Bowery and stay five years and leave transformed: “I was tired of living for myself alone and longed to give myself to something larger and more meaningful.”<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, commenting on William Deresiewicz’s book, *Excellent Sheep*, the author’s critique of elite US schools, David Brooks writes of time spent at these colleges and universities: “Instead of being intervals of freedom they are breeding grounds for advancement. Students are too busy jumping through the next hurdle in the résumé race to figure out what they really want. . . . They have been inculcated with a lust for prestige and fear of doing things that may put their status at risk.”<sup>2</sup>

On the last day of January 2015, Thomas Merton matters to young adults (as does Dorothy of course), if we can render their striving vivid for our young adults. Merton matters if we assist young adults to get inside his yearning, his bumpy search from youth onward for authentic living, for something to give himself to which would be worthy of his sense of the eminence of his own being, a sense that warred in young-adult Merton with his self-loathing. He writes later, but in prose redolent of his own youth: “Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich full of inexhaustible interest opening out into infinite further possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> Merton matters to young adults if we portray him effectively as he deserves to be portrayed: a young man striving to go beyond illusion, self-absorption and the trivial, and to live abundantly, creatively, generously. I’ve taken this on for a good part of the last twenty years, offering the course “Ethical Witnesses: Dorothy

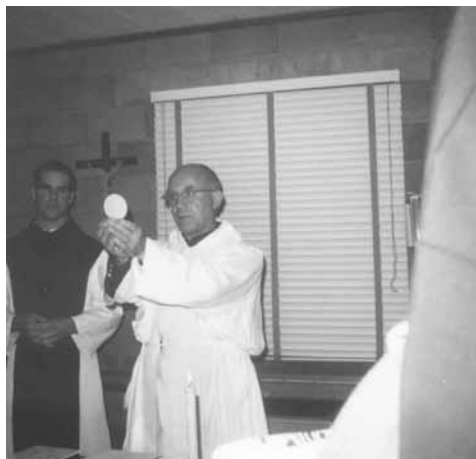


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Day and Thomas Merton,” sponsoring young adults’ engagement in monastic retreats and coaching young adults cultivating the skill-set of listening to their own hearts, coaching contemplative (meditative) practice. In this the young adults with whom I work often experience that the monastic life affirms “basic human values which the world most desperately needs to regain: personal integrity, inner peace, authenticity, identity, inner depth, spiritual joy, the capacity to love, the capacity to enjoy God’s creation and give thanks”;<sup>4</sup> and that “In active contemplation a man becomes able to live within himself. He learns to be at home with his own thoughts. He becomes to a greater and greater degree independent of exterior supports.”<sup>5</sup>



Added to which (no commercial intended), I am nearing completion of a book, *Lions in the Desert: Contemplation and the Young Adult*, a book utterly indebted to Merton and directed to young adults themselves and to those who care for them. The book sketches my practice over these twenty years and takes its title from Nietzsche’s “Three Metamorphoses” in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: how the young lion in the desert has set aside child-socialization (being a dutiful “camel”), and “conquer[s] his freedom . . . [and] . . . fight[s] . . . the great dragon . . . ‘Thou shalt,’ insisting ‘I will.’”<sup>6</sup> The young adults entering the realm of autonomy and ambition are in danger (as are we all) of digging for themselves and residing for the duration in a deep hole: superficial notions of success, glib notions of eloquence, obsessive pursuit of diversions (Merton’s “fun”<sup>7</sup>), and corrupting habits of wielding dominative power over others.

Nietzsche’s answer, transformation, a third time, back into a child, into a “sacred yes” of “innocence, forgetting and new beginning,” parallels Merton’s young adults inhabiting the desert of their own inner solitude, who over time can achieve their full “spiritual identity,” and therefore live without the “need to kill”; the young adult who avoids the habit of “trending” toward becoming a Rhinoceros, a “sucker” who “suffer[s] all the needs that society demands” (*RU* 22).

This is the real pay-off with Merton: that he himself was likely to grow up with what the 60’s educational critic Neil Postman labeled “crap detectors,”<sup>8</sup> and well-developed ones, shines through his characterization of his parents’ take on superficial living: “Neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what’s in the ice-box and what’s in the papers and which neighbors are getting a divorce.”<sup>9</sup> He is a supreme model and mouthpiece for not living a manipulated life, not living the life of “stubborn conformity” that is “unfaithful . . . to experience, to love, to other people, to one’s own deepest self,”<sup>10</sup> is a principal way Merton lives for us today.

What a message for young adults: “Reflect, sometimes, on the disquieting fact that most of your statements of opinion, tastes, deeds, desires, hopes and fears are statements about someone who is not really present. When you say ‘I think,’ it is often not you who think, but ‘they’ – it is the *anonymous authority of the collectivity* [my emphasis] speaking through your mask” (*IE* 4); and again: “Futile? Life is not futile if you simply live it. It remains futile, however, as long as you keep watching yourself live it. And that is the old syndrome: keeping a constant eye on oneself and on

one's life, to make sure the absurd is not showing, that one has company, that one is justified by the presence and support of all the others" (*LL* 322-23). And we can hope the more serious and politically responsive among young adults will follow Merton beyond the realm of personal authenticity, beyond forging personal patterns that sidestep bourgeois hypocrisy and homogenization<sup>11</sup> and see the awful societal consequences of failing to work on our true selves, failing, in Hopkins' word, to "selve."<sup>12</sup>

"If we push our analysis of collective thinking a little further we will find that the dialectic of power and need, of submission and satisfaction, ends by being a dialectic of hate . . . and destroy[s] whoever cannot be absorbed. . . . one of the needs of collectivity is to reject certain classes, or races, or groups, in order to strengthen its own self-awareness" (*RU* 22).

So tell young adults Tom's story (Dorothy's too); experience with them concretely the integrity and joy of a real and healthy community of monastic women or men, and with Merton's help nurture and cultivate the young adults' yearning to have some access on a regular basis to the vast inner landscape of stillness at their center, deeper than the superficial inner strata which is all chatter. Teach them to contemplate, to meditate. In Merton's words, nurture a few more young-adult "active contemplatives" whose "mind[s] are pacified not by passive dependence on things outside themselves – diversions, entertainments, conversations, business – but by their own constructive activity. That is to say, young-adult active contemplatives who derive inner satisfaction from spiritual creativeness: thinking their own thoughts, reaching their own conclusions, looking at their own lives and directing them in accordance with their own truth, discovered in meditation and under the eyes of God – young adult active contemplatives deriving strength not from what they get out of things and people but from giving themselves to life and to others. They discover the secret of life in the creative energy of love – not love as a sentimental and sensual indulgence but as a profound and self-giving expression of freedom" (*IE* 59 – slightly paraphrased).

Louie matters!

1. Robert Ellsberg, "Five Years with Dorothy Day," *America* 193.16 (November 21, 2005) 8-10.
2. David Brooks, "Becoming a Real Person," *The New York Times* (September 8, 2014).
3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 45 [7/17/1956].
4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 81.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 59; subsequent references will be cited as "*IE*" parenthetically in the text.
6. *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1964) 137.
7. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 13; subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text.
8. Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969).
9. Thomas Merton. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3.
10. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 345; subsequent references will be cited as "*LL*" parenthetically in the text.
11. A characterization ("hypocritical and homogenous") of bourgeois being, especially as criticized by the members of the Frankfurt School, contained in a review of Lawrence Friedman's *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* which appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (August 15, 2013).
12. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," l. 7 (*Poetry and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953]) 51.