

Merton's indictment of white Americans in his "Letters to a White Liberal"²⁴ continues to be ignored as much as when he penned it. The racial problems of the nineteen sixties led Merton to write to Robert Lax: "I am trying to figure out some way I can get nationalized as a Negro as I am tired of belonging to the humiliating white race. One wants at times the comfort of belonging to a race that one can like and respect."²⁵ And yet, almost fifty years later, 33 percent of African American children live in poverty, compared to 10 percent of white children. On average white families possess ten times more wealth than do families of color and, since 1998 that "wealth gap" has grown with white families seeing a 20 percent boost in their net wealth, while African-American families have seen their wealth decrease. Or, as in the US Justice System, white people have the power and anyone who encroaches on that, or appears as a threat, will be dealt with severely. Similar statistics can be found for country after country around the world and the escalating extremism in numerous countries, the rise of the far right, and the all-too-frequent scapegoating of immigrants and other groups would, I feel certain, be a subject of Merton's pen were he writing today.

In 1964 Merton heard the guns of Fort Knox calling him to "an ever renewed 'decision' and commitment for peace."²⁶ He would no doubt hear that same call to "an ever renewed 'decision' and commitment for racial justice and racial harmony" in the growing tragic litany of names such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and all too many others.

1. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 34.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 82.
3. Martin Marty, "To: Thomas Merton. Re: Your Prophecy," *The National Catholic Reporter* 3.43 (30 August 1967) 6.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.
5. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 251.
6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 182 [12/22/1964].

Awakening and Propelling

By Dan Phillips

When one meets Thomas Merton for the first time, it is like a pregnant thump in one's heart. For me it was 1969 and I was a seminary student, often reading poetry, and I came upon Merton's poem "Elegy for the Monastery Barn"²⁷ in Hayden Carruth's anthology *The Voice That Is Great within Us*.²⁸ For Merton, the burning barn was a sacrament: "The brilliant walls are holy / In their first-last hour of joy" (ll. 34-35). The barn served as an awakening for me and from that moment Merton's writings have served as a propelling venue for my life:



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- His journal writing started me on a path of writing my own journals, now at 45 volumes and still counting.
- His “Fire Watch” essay³ showed me that even in darkness a tiny beam of lights could focus on times when God’s presence is near.
- Finding his first hermitage, St. Anne’s, hidden on a lonely path in woods surrounding Gethsemani gave me a perspective of silence and meditation that could be found on the edge of nowhere.
- Standing by the altar in his real hermitage I saw the strength of his vision where he worshipped alone in the darkness.



But Merton was more than that. He was a guide for my spiritual life, somehow invisible but present. In retreats I led, the ears of participants were attuned to the part of Merton that touched them, His aloneness, psalms speaking in silence, a sign at Fourth and Walnut that opened up his world to new vistas, were a few of the ways that people’s lives reflected the inward image of Merton.

Merton’s words have led me down uncertain paths – from the first retreat at Gethsemani, to Merton retreats in Montana, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, ITMS reflections in Alabama, California, Vancouver and Kentucky. Special times, with Merton as an invisible guest, include a trip to Rome where I prayed in St. Sabina, where Merton prayed for the first time in a sanctuary. I have prayed standing by his grave. I celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1998, and the dedication of his library at Bellarmine. On my desk is a rhinoceros, a reminder that it often rains when I am at the abbey, but also a reminder of the ITMS meeting in Mobile in 1996.

Merton seems to tie us into people that we need to meet, that might be a guide for our lives. As a chaplain at a hospital in Nashville, I received an urgent call late at night. A person undergoing surgery at 6 a.m. requested that I pray with him and go with him to the operating room. After we prayed and they began moving him to the door, I said, “I almost forgot, I always give a copy of Thomas Merton’s famous prayer to those I pray with.” As I passed the card to him he began to cry and said, “Last night I told my wife that I wished I had a copy of Merton’s prayer.” He took the prayer to surgery, holding on to it during the operation, and that began a friendship that has lasted until this day.

In his autobiography, Merton says, “God brought me and half a dozen others together at Columbia and made us friends, in such a way that our friendship would work powerfully to rescue us from the confusion and the misery in which we had come to find ourselves.”⁴

And so I can say, “Thomas Merton as part of my life has made all the difference.” Amen.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 288-89.
2. Hayden Carruth, ed., *The Voice That Is Great within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 349-62.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 178.