

As in the tradition of the poet Basho, with whom Merton shares a haiku mind (a mind at play with jumps and multiple connections), whatever Merton sees or thinks or feels or even dreams he records. And like Basho, he displays great sensitivity to nature, one of the constants in his life. He is always aware of the weather, how the day is, where the birds and butterflies are. “Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally, in the air, then depart in different directions” (*AJ* 107). Birds and butterflies receive as much comment in *The Asian Journal* as the Buddha statues in Polonnaruwa.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
3. James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Crossroad, 2006) 207.
4. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) 53.
5. 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.
6. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1945).

Where the Gospel Requires Us to Be

By Christopher Pramuk

In Calcutta just weeks before his death, Thomas Merton famously described the monk, and thus himself, as a “very strange kind of person . . . a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience.”¹ Some forty years later, Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan took issue with Merton’s self-assessment. “I thought maybe his work, and mine as well, was not to look upon ourselves as at the edge of anything. We were creating a new center. We were where the Gospel required us to be, and the people who were giving in to violence as a Christian assumption, they were the people at the edge, not me.”²

Merton’s “marginal” location and Berrigan’s “new center” are not, I think, two different places, but one vocation of the heart, animated by the dance of freedom and grace in which each of us must discern where the gospel requires us to be. But here’s the catch. Where the gospel requires you to be may not be where the gospel requires *me* to be. Why? God blesses each of us with particular gifts, and a Spirit who blows where it will through conscience and freedom and the wisdom of the community all at once. The call to discernment involves navigating “my place” in response to the Spirit who moves freely in all these realms and beckons diverse gifts into life and being.

How difficult it is to discern the path between conformity and critical dissent! For most of his days Jesus was a faithful Jew and a subject of the



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Roman Empire. But there came a time to be born again and to break free, to overturn the tables of the moneychangers, to refuse allegiance to Empire, to be crucified. Berrigan took to the streets and temples of military-industrial power. Merton went to the woods and sung his protest in Psalms. “I ought to learn to just shut up and go about my business of thinking and breathing under trees,” Merton wrote in 1967. “But protest is a biological necessity.”³

I wish we lived in a world where Berrigan’s demanding spirituality of nonviolent resistance was not so easily dismissed as marginal but reclaimed by people of faith as the truly humane and Christ-haunted center from which we might realize our joy and flourishing as persons in community. Yet so long as the “powers and principalities” are running the show, Merton’s description of spiritual life at the margins feels more apt. To be haunted by the God of the prophets, it seems, is to become ever more a marginal person, a “creative extremist” (Martin Luther King, Jr.), perhaps even “the most maladjusted person in society” (Abraham Joshua Heschel). A God who commands “thou shalt not kill,” “care for the widow and orphan” and “love your enemies” has never found many advocates at the centers of power, nor, for that matter, among young people lingering at the front of lecture halls eager to sign up for such an adventure. If success is a numbers game, Jesus during his lifetime was an unqualified failure.

It was a much younger Berrigan, of course, whom Merton welcomed to Gethsemani for counsel and supported in his social essays. “It was a long, hard road,” Berrigan remembers, “and we needed help along the way and he gave it. He was very important to all of us” (Atkinson & Montaldo 143). One would be hard pressed to name a twentieth-century Catholic who sought after the vocation to unity and peace more tenaciously, publicly and prophetically than Merton. The fruits of his witness are still being harvested today in many who take courage from his example. But is it enough?

“My ideas are always changing,” Merton once confessed, “always moving around one center, always seeing the center from somewhere else.”⁴ Perhaps Berrigan has it right after all: Merton remains a marginal figure only because the rest of us have yet to catch up with him, have yet to discover the “one center,” who is Christ, the Prince of Peace, in whose Spirit he lived. The way of love is a long, hard road. We still need Merton’s help to discern the way.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 305.
2. Morgan C. Atkinson with Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) 144; subsequent references will be cited as “Atkinson & Montaldo” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 240 [5/27/1967].
4. 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) 67 [1/25/1964].

Thomas Merton, Prayer and Us

By Gregory J. Ryan

Like many other people, I have been reading and learning from Thomas Merton for more than 40 years now. (I came late to the party!) For a number of years I have been leading a Merton discussion group. Now and again, I sometimes wonder *why*? What is it about Merton that attracts lay people for