

Seeing Merton in the Wild Goose

By **J. Patrick Mahon**

The fifth Wild Goose Festival, an annual celebration linking spirituality, justice and art, took place in Hot Springs, North Carolina on July 9-12, 2015. It takes its name from a characteristic image in Celtic spirituality of a life's journey filled with grace and unpredictability. The days are filled with music, speakers, scheduled and spontaneous conversations and community-building.¹ Among the more than one hundred speakers at the festival were John Dear and myself, who independently submitted proposals that were combined in a session entitled "Seeing Merton." This was for me a wonderful reunion that brought me full circle to an event that changed my life – a retreat with John Dear about fifteen years ago on the non-violent God, at Kirkridge Retreat Center in Pennsylvania. There I took a quantum leap in my understanding of what the Good News of the Christ was all about. Entering retirement at about that same time, my wife and I decided to commit our retirement years to working for justice and peace. We became very involved with Pax Christi, the national Catholic peace movement. Our pastor asked us to go to a Jim Wallis Sojourners training weekend on Voting out Poverty. We went. When we returned, the pastor assembled a group of leaders from both parishes he served in western North Carolina. Their reception was less than friendly. A little beaten up at this point in our peacemaking efforts, we needed some solitude. I called the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, the Trappist abbey we usually went to in Conyers, Georgia, but there was no room in the inn. I said to my wife, "Why not go to Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky?" I knew that Thomas Merton had been a monk there. What a wonderful bit of divine serendipity! If I had gone to Conyers, I would not have met Thomas Merton. What a fantastic experience! We participated in a Jonathan Montaldo retreat on "The Poetry of the Sacred: Thomas Merton and Mary Oliver." On Saturday afternoon, Jonathan had arranged for us to meet with Brother Paul Quenon, a student of Merton and a photographer and poet in his own right, at Merton's hermitage. At that point, Thomas Merton became what my Irish forbears refer to as my *anam cara* – my soul friend.

Merton changed a lot during his twenty-seven years at Gethsemani. The monastery had provided the structure for him to get his life with God, his fellow humans and all of creation together. During the last decade of his life, Merton delved deeper into Zen, which teaches living in the present. Merton had a deep sense of the importance of the arts for truly human living and experimented with calligraphy, brush paintings and photography. Merton said that art humanizes us, "Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."² Merton knew that, if civilization is to survive, we desperately need prophets and poets. We need the arts if we are to develop fully as human beings capable of love. Merton lived in the age of concentration camps, nuclear weapons and



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the Watts riots. He knew that we needed new approaches to religious and artistic beauty if we were to become what we already are. It was this realization that grounded my presentation at the festival, which focused on Merton's, and my own, photography, which is presented here in revised form.

I am going to give you the bottom line and then explain how we come to it. The arts – including photography – take us out of our false, selfish selves and bring us into union with God, one another and all of creation. Photography is a spiritual practice. It is contemplation pure and simple. This awareness of our fundamental unity with all that is forms the foundation for peacemaking. In one of his final speeches in Asia, Merton said, “My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”⁷³ Richard Rohr nailed this when he wrote: “Those who live in close proximity to the natural world seem to come to know the universe as benevolent much more easily, despite its inherent violence and changeability. This belief leads to very different values than when your whole worldview begins with a theological or moral problem to be solved.”⁷⁴ The sacred we receive through the lenses of our cameras convince us that “The Earth itself *is* Christos, *is* Buddha, *is* Allah, *is* Gaia.”⁷⁵

Merton had always struggled with his need for solitude and his writing. Along came John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black Like Me*. Griffin was a photographer and loaned Merton several cameras. One was a Canon FX – a film camera which I found on Ebay and which I really enjoy using for black and white photography. Griffin described Merton's photographic skills as “like placing a concert grand piano at the disposal of a gifted musician who had never played on anything but an upright. . . . The camera became in his hands, almost immediately, an instrument of contemplation.”⁷⁶ Merton loved his “Zen camera.”⁷⁷ Perhaps, unlike with writing, Merton could receive photographs that grounded him in the here and now – tree stumps, windows, doors, simple Shaker buildings, chairs sitting in light and shadow. The images he produced were icons that represented the reality he had captured. The icons spoke for themselves and described the indescribable, the hidden wholeness in reality. No need for him to delve into lengthy written explanations. Merton's camera was his constant companion on his journeys in solitude on the monastery grounds and, at the end of his life, in California, Alaska, New Mexico as he scouted out a possible site for a hermitage. He then thrived on photographing mountains, monks and Buddha statues in Asia.

Merton wrote his master's thesis at Columbia University on William Blake.⁸ Merton understood Blake's main message: “for everything is holy.”⁹ This realization informs Merton's contemplative photography. Merton adopted Blake's way of seeing, “To look through matter into Eternity.”¹⁰ Merton summons us to become our true selves, becoming all that we can be, in simple terms. He wrote, “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree.”¹¹ We give glory to God by becoming what we are meant to be – people who forget themselves and serve others in love. All creation gives glory to God. In his wisdom poem, *Hagia Sophia*, Merton said, “There is in all things a hidden wholeness”¹² – the spark of God in creation. This echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.”¹³ Writing about Merton after his untimely death, John Howard Griffin says: “He worked for photographic images which, when viewed without haste or pressure, might accomplish the slow work of communicating ‘a hidden wholeness,’ and perhaps reveal some hint of that wordless gentleness that flows out from ‘the unseen roots of all created being.’”¹⁴

Picking up on another Hopkins' theme – inescape¹⁵ – Merton wrote: “The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inescape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them” (*NSC* 30). Creation reveals the glory of God. Our Jewish forbears called it *Shekinah* – God’s loving presence to us. Grounded in the present moment, we are filled with a sense of wonder and awe at what the Creator has wrought. Writing about Celtic spirituality – and the Wild Goose Festival is grounded in things Celtic – Richard Rohr drew from the insights of John O’Donoghue, the Irish mystic poet: “For the Celtic people, [the great divinity called] nature was not matter, rather it was a luminous and numinous presence that had depth, possibility and beauty” (Rohr). They had learned to respect the “First Bible” of creation before they started arguing about the second written one.

Photography grounds us in this numinous glory of God in the present moment where the edges are always thin places. The camera lens is a window into the hidden wholeness and inescaped sanctity of creation as we whirl in the cosmic dance. Theologian Walter Burghardt described contemplation as “a long, loving look at the real.”¹⁶ Merton reflected:

When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Bashō, we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash – at such times the awakening . . . provide[s] a glimpse of the cosmic dance. (*NSC* 296-97)

Merton calls us to wake up and join in the cosmic dance. Photography is one door into the dance. Contemplation lets us look at things and to see deeply into their hidden inner meaning. We awake to the sacredness of life all around us. We become connected with God, one another, and all of creation. We dance the cosmic dance. Job got it long ago:

But ask the animals and they will teach you;
The birds of the air and they will tell you;
Ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
That the hand of the Lord has done this? (12:7-9)

One of the photographs I exhibited in the Art Tent at the festival is a photo of two great blue herons building a nest. I was with a group on a field trip when we came upon the nest-building activity. I was so enthralled with what I was seeing and photographing that I later realized I had been standing behind my camera for one and one half hours. I had been in another zone.

At the end of his life, Merton traveled the western United States, including Alaska. His final destination was a monastic conference. Throughout Asia he took photographs. His peak expertise came at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka where he visited a garden with Buddha



statues. Merton entered the zone: “Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . [E]verything is emptiness and everything is compassion” (*AJ* 233, 235). A similar realization is evident in this Buddha statue from the White Sands Buddhist Center in Mims, Florida.

Beauty, whether in stone statues, in other people or in creation, empties us. Thus emptied we become capable of compassion.

Merton could be nonviolent because he was emptying himself to enter into deeper communion with life. At the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammed Ali) in Louisville, Merton realized he was one with all people. “Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others.’ . . . There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”¹⁷ As he ambled through the monastic woods, he knew he was one with all of creation. Beauty is transcendent and opens the door to the “is-ness”¹⁸ of things. Let us seek beauty in life whether it is in poetry, paintings or photography. It will open us to the reality that we are already one. It will help us become the peacemakers we are meant to be.



1. See <http://wildgoosefestival.org/festival-2015>.
2. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 34.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
4. Richard Rohr, “Meditation on Native and Celtic Spirituality: Original Blessing”; retrieved from the Center for Action and Contemplation: <https://search.yahoo.com/search?fr=mcafee&type=C211US105D20140817&p=Richard+Rohr%2C+%E2%80%9CMeditation+on+Native+and+Celtic+Spirituality> [accessed 8 July 2015]; subsequent references will be cited as “Rohr” parenthetically in the text.
5. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, *Earth Prayers: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations from Around the World* (San Francisco: HarperOne: 191) xxi.
6. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 10.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 141.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 385-453.
9. William Blake, “A Song of Liberty,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1988) 45.
10. See Michael Griffith, “Thomas Merton and William Blake: ‘To Look Through Matter into Eternity,’” *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005) 115.
11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 29; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363.

13. "God's Grandeur," ll. 1-2, in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953) 27; subsequent references will be cited as "Hopkins" parenthetically in the text.
14. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) 4.
15. Hopkins refers to the inner nature of things as their inscape: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; / Selves – goes itself, *myself* it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*" ("As Kingfishers Catch Fire," ll. 5-8 [Hopkins 51]).
16. Walter Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," in George Q. Traub, SJ, ed., *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008) 89-98.
17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.
18. Meister Eckhart said: "Where there is Isness, there God is. Creation is the giving of Isness from God. And that is why God becomes where any creature expresses God"; retrieved from <http://heartsteps.org/2014/isness/#sthash.wmX5Um9.dpuf> [accessed 6 August 2015].