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# Meeting Thomas Merton for the First Time

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It is perhaps presumptuous to include Thomas Merton in any roster of saints since he is not canonized, nor likely to be, since he was careful to write in his voluminous journals sufficient material regarding his failings, doubts, and misgivings to cheer the heart of any devil's advocate. But if a saint is someone who relentlessly searches for God and inspires others to do likewise, then Merton deserves to be included. Monica Furlong writes of him: "Yet for to those who look on, Merton seems one of the very few in the twentieth century who dared to follow in the footsteps of the saints, who revealed some of their love and self-forgetfulness (as if they had found a center outside the ego and were focused on that). He refused to be a 'dummy' for our illusions of holiness."<sup>1</sup>

His influence, fifty years after his death, continues to be extraordinary. Numerous biographies, doctoral dissertations, television specials, and even plays continue to pour out around this man who was and is a dividing spirit. When, at fifty-three years of age, he was electrocuted in Bangkok in 1968, on the twenty-seventh anniversary of his entrance into monastic life, there were those who saw his death as that of a saint, emblematic of his desire to serve the “burnt men” of Christ, and those who saw this bizarre death as God’s punishment for dabbling in Zen and yoga—obvious works of the devil. He was and is a sign of contradiction because he attempted in his life to be a marriage broker of many opposites: European and American cultures; art and religion; medieval (monasticism) and modern consciousness; the priestly and the prophetic; the romantic and the everyday; the contemplative and the political activist; the obedient and the rebellious; passionate faith and passionate doubt; sensitivity to personal sin and occupation with social sin; strong personal independence and deep friendships; stability and restlessness. And though he had, as one person remarked, four times the psychic energy of the ordinary person, these “marriages” were often wobbly and broken, as he was the first to admit. He wore no masks of wholeness; his face—and his writings—concealed nothing. He was content to live the truth of the contraries in himself, leaving the perception of wholeness to be a hidden one, hidden in Christ with the identity, the singleness of being, that would be manifested on the last day. He wrote: “Our supernatural identity is hidden in . . . the hand of God. If we do not accept it, we shall never know our true name.”<sup>2</sup>

Merton sought relentlessly for the deepest self, not to be garnered by himself from the cultural fantasies of his time, nor even from roles encouraged by religious structures, but the identity revealed in the dark night of faith where the soul, stripped of certainties, encounters God. His search for the self, grounded in God, is recorded meticulously from his first writings to his last. In his

early novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, he says: “If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between the two answers you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is.”<sup>3</sup> He was looking for the person God wanted him to be, hidden in Christ, and as the protagonist of the novel says, “While I’m waiting for news to guide me, I write down everything I know.”

Some are scandalized that at the end of his life he seemed still to be searching (isn’t a saint someone who has certitude?). I take it as a witness to his belief in the Paschal Mystery that even in his fifties, the youth of old age, he was willing to let the old Thomas Merton die once more to be born again on a distant shore.

I write of Merton not only because his life seems to suggest that we might need to question if the category “sanctity” has itself become a fossilized one that encourages the very worst sorts of imitation, but also because my own life and those of so many that I meet have been radically altered by their encounters with Merton’s writings.



In my sophomore year in high school, 1948, Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was published. After devouring it, I determined that nothing else would satisfy me but religious life. In the novitiate, during my late teens and twenties, I read and reread his *Sign of Jonas*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Bread in the Wilderness*. As my involvement in apostolic ministries changed me, through the fifties and sixties, I found that Merton’s books grew along with me: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* spoke to profound spiritual and social concerns. I heard the rumors of his dissatisfaction with religious structures, and I understood this all too clearly.

Merton's death came as a private, personal loss. I was deeply moved by the description of his funeral by a nun who had been privileged to be there. Forty friends assembled from all over the United States to await his body for eight hours, delayed in flight. The amazing diversity of these people, their ardent love for the dead monk, the deep communion of sorrow and love and thanksgiving they celebrated at the funeral mass—I thrilled to this description and to the fact that he had had a premonition of an early death and had left details of what and who he wanted at his funeral. He died the monk he had defined as “a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human existence. . . . The marginal person, the monk, the displaced person . . . all these people live in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life” (*AJ*, 305).

When I heard that he had written fifteen thousand letters, I berated myself for never having written him. I was desperate for a spiritual director in a time when the meaning of life was deeply questioned. Inspired by Ira Progoff's method of dialoguing with inner wisdom figures, for several years I made Merton my spiritual director and was much consoled by what he said. I put his picture on the wall of my room, where it has greeted me every morning since. I taught his *Contemplative Prayer* to our novices; I taught courses about him at the College of Marin; I took tapes of talks he had given to his novices with me on private retreat; I gave weekend retreats on his life and work at an ecumenical retreat center in northern California. The response to Merton never fails to surprise me, and I have met many who call themselves Merton's “children.” When the sterility involved in being celibate tends to overwhelm, I am drawn to write a book called *Merton's Children*. (One woman sheepishly admitted asking her mother if she hadn't lived in London in the late thirties when Merton fathered a child there.) How could so many people with such divergent backgrounds feel such

a bond? An outline of his life and some of the archetypes that he lived—monk, orphan, solitary, writer, priest, prophet—reveals that, like him or not, Merton's influence will not go away.



Thomas Merton was born January 31, 1915, in wartime France, of two artists—his father from New Zealand, his mother from the United States. His mother, a rather cool woman, kept detailed descriptions of the young child and sent them to relatives. He remembers sitting under a maple tree, trying to understand what she said. I am touched by her description of the three-year-old Merton listening at a stormy window saying, “Oh, oh, Monsieur le Wind, what he say?” When he was six years old, his mother died of cancer, and he recalls that he was not allowed to see or touch her, but was given a letter from her telling him goodbye.

Though his younger brother, John Paul, stayed in America, Thomas was educated at private schools in France and England near his father painter, a confirmed wanderer. When Merton was sixteen, his father died; the youth records sobbing into the blanket on the deathbed, utterly helpless. Under the guardianship of a family friend, he continued his schooling in England, falling into a somewhat dissolute life of womanizing and drinking that was to leave him with an illegitimate child, the anger of his guardian, and a ticket back to America, where he matriculated at Columbia University. He entered fully into campus life there, was briefly a card-carrying Communist, and worked in a Harlem settlement house. It was there that he was led to study St. Augustine through meeting a Hindu, where studying William Blake for his master's thesis led him to Christ, and where he was converted and baptized a Catholic.

After graduation, he taught English at a Franciscan college in New York and considered becoming a Franciscan himself, but was rejected when he revealed his past mistakes.

In 1941, when he was twenty-seven, he entered the strictest of Catholic religious orders, the Trappists, to vow himself to a life of silence and penance. He was prepared to give up writing, but his abbot wisely encouraged him to continue. As closure to his secular life, and at what was the midpoint of his biography, he wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which was published and became an instant best seller, much to his surprise and that of his superiors. For the next fourteen years, his days were taken up with long hours of prayer, reading, writing, and teaching first the young professed monks and then the many novices who had entered, swelling the ranks of the monastery, inspired by his book. Some of what he wrote was poor; later, he was ashamed of some works and even of the autobiography for its simplistic separation of the sacred and secular, for its arrogance. He was much loved by his students, for he was a fine teacher, and their love opened his heart as did the many friendships he made through letters that came flooding to him. Through all these years, the friends he had made at Columbia remained constant and devoted.

To the other monks Merton was simply Father Louis, of whom about a third would come to hear the talks he was asked to give on Sundays. His abbot for most of his religious life was a man exactly his opposite, the source of some affliction for both of them. James Fox, a business major from Harvard, was business-minded, meticulous, militaristic, pietistic (signing his letters, “to Jesus through Mary with a smile”), forbidding, suspicious, and punishing. He forbade Merton to leave the monastery for any reason, and fought his efforts to enter another, more eremitical order, the Camaldolese. Merton knew that he was not an easy subject, yet he always obeyed his abbot even if he didn’t like to do so, and he radically criticized the spirituality of cheese making (the monks at

Gethsemani were making a lot of cheese as one of their industries), which he thought Fox fostered.

Merton wrote comprehensively and compulsively during these years: fifty-five books, five hundred articles, hundreds of lectures, eight volumes of history, and then all those letters. Many of the letters were written in the years when he was forbidden to publish because of his outspoken criticism on civil rights issues and Vietnam, and his support of pacifism. The influential made their way to his door, among them Eldridge Cleaver, Boris Pasternak, Joan Baez, Jacques Maritain, Dorothy Day, and John Howard Griffin—a tremendous variety of types and interests. The Catholic Peace Movement began in his hermitage. My favorite image of the opposites Merton sought to bridge is the picture Griffin gives of Merton playing Bob Dylan tapes to a puzzled Jacques Maritain, asking, “Isn’t this great poetry?”

Permission to give up the arduous work of novice master, and something of the burden of communal living by moving to a hermitage, was granted to Merton three years before he died. Bidding farewell to his novices, he assured them that he was not leaving because “good old Uncle Louie had finally succeeded in twisting the abbot’s arm,” but because the old idea that religious life should be a convoy of trucks, everyone going thirty miles an hour, in mass production was not real monasticism. He was going to the hermitage to cast his cares upon the Lord. Although they leave behind worldly cares, religious often take on other, phony cares, and he believed that in the hermitage he could better learn to get rid of the care by going through it. Only when we are not clouded with anxieties can we see that the world is transparent of God. And in the end, he was going out to the hermitage to be kissed by God, as the hermits used to say.

He gives beautiful descriptions of his life in the hermitage. One senses the centeredness, the peace, the humor, and the simplicity of Merton’s days. Some inner war was over—though not all wars.

His reading was prodigious, and like St. Thomas Aquinas, he was respectful of truth wherever he found it. When he received permission from the new abbot (one of his former students) to travel to the Far East to attend a conference on monasticism, he was as eager as a child. His *Asian Journal*, published posthumously, gives wonderful details of his openness to the Far East. The photographs of his meeting with the Dalai Lama show men whose faces look remarkably alike.

Merton died from contact with a defective electric fan in the early afternoon of December 10, 1968. His body was flown home with the bodies of American youths killed in the Vietnam War, which he had so bitterly protested. Born in the First World War, having entered the monastery at the outbreak of the Second World War (three days after the Pearl Harbor bombing), and dead in another war—it is no wonder that pacifism was his fitting prophetic plea. The effects on his dead body were listed by the State Department as follows:

1. Timex watch, value \$10.00
2. One pair of dark glasses, value nil
3. Two breviaries, value nil
4. One broken rosary, value nil
5. One wooden ikon, value nil

Value of his goods: nil, nil, nil, except for the watch he wore when time stopped for him. Fitting end for a monk whose vocation he described as being that of a “marginal person.”



I think one reason for Merton's profound influence is the depth to which he lived the archetypes of a monk, orphan, solitary, writer, priest, and prophet—archetypes compelling for our age, which has witnessed so many displaced persons; so many orphaned by

war, or orphaned by systems they no longer believe in; so many deceived by the written and spoken word, unable to articulate and trust their own lives, unable to connect any longer to the written word of God in scripture; so many abused or deceived by religious thought or ritual, unable to find priestly people and structures to help them know they were created by a loving God; and so many outraged by abuses of power, needing a prophet to tell even in high places how God feels about injustice, how he feels, now, about the very future of the planet.

There are other archetypes that Merton lived: student (he studied and read deeply all his life), teacher, friend, and lover; but I leave the exploration of these roles to others.

Monk, orphan, solitary: I group these under one heading. The person who is called to suffer isolation, to embrace it, despite the fact that the first word spoken by God about man in the story of Genesis was, "It is not good for man to be alone." In each of the first three decades of his life, Merton lost a member of his immediate family by tragic and untimely death: at six, his mother; at sixteen, his father; and at twenty-eight, his only brother, shot down in an English warplane. The poem he wrote to his brother on the afternoon he received that news, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943," is one of the loveliest Merton ever wrote, containing a deep love, a profound theology of the Communion of Saints, and a belief in the efficacy of Christ's death to heal all our deadly disconnections. It ends, "The silence of Whose tears shall fall / Like bells upon your alien tomb. / Hear them and come: they call you home."

Notice the last word, "home." It is only in Christ's silent tears that one is called home. Only in the monastery did Merton find the stability so lacking in his early life; but even there he came to feel alien, not one of the convoy system, not totally at home with what he was expected to be. The contemplative has not fiery visions, but is he who has risked his mind in the desert beyond

ideas where God is encountered, and in the nakedness of pure trust.

It is in solitude and aloneness that the masks and illusions we wear in order to buy love and respect soon crumble and we are confronted with the nothing from which we were made, and we either despair in self-hatred and anger or we turn ourselves over to the Father, who can from chaos bring forth life.

Merton knew well the terrifying emptiness that can come from solitude that relentlessly confronts us with our false self. He writes poignantly: “[The false self] is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown to God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private life is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion” (*NSC*, 34).

Merton thought that “a person is a person insofar as he has a secret, a solitude of his own that cannot be communicated to anyone else” (*NMI*, 244). Merton challenges each of us to have the courage to embrace the loneliness and alienation we experience, no matter what the nature of our bonds to others. By his life, he encourages us to make a part of our lives that solitude without which we cannot encounter the self that God intended us to be, that solitude where Christ may find us to teach what he learned in his temptations in the desert. It isn’t that Christ cannot be found in the marketplace; it is that something of us cannot be found when we are in a crowd.

The second archetype he lived, excessively and even compulsively, was that of a writer. He says about himself, “Writing is a moral matter and my typewriter is an essential factor in my asceticism” (*SOJ*, 40).

His approach was as a questioner, not selling answers as ready-made cheeses: personal, informal, tentative, singular, existential, and poetic. The range of his writing was astounding: history,

biography, theology, a novel, poetry, a play, literary criticism, and hagiography. There are passages of unparalleled beauty and clarity scattered throughout his works. He was what Ernest Becker calls an “erotic” thinker—one who is seeking to connect opposites, who circles about his materials, who somehow manages to leap from the page and touch deeply the reader in what he himself described as a “blaze of recognition.” He used his writing as a tool in his search for God:

If I am to be a saint—and there is nothing else that I can think of desiring to be—it seems that I must get there by writing books in a Trappist monastery. If I am to be a saint, I have not only to be a monk, which is what all monks must do to become saints, but I must also put down on paper what I have become. It may sound simple, but it is not an easy vocation. To be as good a monk as I can, and to remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issues: this is very hard, because I am all mixed up in allusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down. (*SOJ*, 233–34)

What a challenge he is to us to be honest about our lives, to seek to tell the truth, to be willing to write down all we think and feel so that we can better sift the wheat from the chaff. To write is both nature and work. Merton’s simplicity in telling out loud his own story through his journals manifests a profound courage and faith that God is revealing himself in our lives as he has revealed himself also in the great stories of biblical revelation. His Son is his Logos: his Word made flesh. As we attempt to speak the Word, the logos of God which has never been said before we existed, we are purified and conformed to God’s word that is Christ, living our lives as truly as he lived his. Others can do my work, my role;

only I can be me, the word God spoke from his creative mouth when I was conceived.

Merton also lived the archetype priest, and in a very deep way. His ordination on the Feast of the Ascension, May 26, 1949, was the happiest day of his life. It was as a priest that he craved for souls, willed to be part of the process that consumes and is sacrificed for others. He wrote of the priesthood: "More than anything else, more than ever before I beg You, my God, to kindle in my heart the love of Christ and teach me how to give myself to You in union with His Sacrifice. It will not be the first time I have reflected on the marvelous prayer the priest says when mingling a drop of water with the wine in the chalice. But I want that prayer to symbolize all that I live for" (*SOJ*, 27).

From daily crying to God and holding him in his hands, Merton learned the uncertainty of words before that powerful ritual; he learned to take his own confused, small meaning and suffering and to unite them to a greater world. From that security, he learned not to demand that everything be secure, or make perfect sense.

Through the daily Eucharist, that is *thanksgiving*, Merton grew full of that gratefulness of heart that is the essence of all prayer. His loving descriptions of nature—the wonderful rain pouring down, selling nothing; the king snake guarding his outhouse; and the trees—were all part of his priestly act of offering all creation to God, all creation that is transparent with God, if only we will still ourselves to see it.

The loving-kindness he extended to all types of men and women seems, too, characteristic of a priestly, humble, forgiving heart. As he broke the bread of Christ's life daily, so he learned to break open the bread of his own life and feed others. If the priest is that person who stands as mediator between us and God, supporting, deepening, facilitating their interchange, Merton is priest par excellence in leading others to search for the truth and depths of God's loving presence in an age of doubt and ambiguity. His

witness is all the more telling because he never denied that doubt and ambiguity plagued him, too; he denied that it was an obstacle to seeking and loving God.

The beauty of Merton's priesthood shines from its simplicity, understatedness, pervasiveness, and depth. It was a Catholic priesthood, so catholic that it encompassed and mediated for the non-Catholic, too. Hard thing, that. Merton calls us by his priesthood to live the heart of the Eucharist in our own lives, to seek a sanctity in which we are sacrificed, consumed, and transformed. His willingness to let the old Merton die and be transformed indicates that he had learned not only to speak the words of transubstantiation.

If as priest Merton was deeply conservative in the most traditional sense, as prophet he was an irritant and rebel to the institutions of state, monastery, and church that had formed and nourished him. What is a prophet? One who witnesses to the fatherhood of God by expressing God's feelings. He is one seized by God to speak of his outrage against the corruption of power. The prophet is not domesticated but carries credentials of resistance—not just against the king and the people, but even against God. The prophet is one who speaks God's name with his own life, who stands in the breach, who says, "Here I am. Send me." By his "I am," the prophet witnesses to Yahweh: *I am Who I Am*. The prophet must speak, whether what he says pleases or not.

Merton spoke out about social justice, about war and civil rights, so clearly that he was silenced. He obeyed and continued to mimeograph letters. How could a monk know about these issues, locked away as he was in a monastery, his critics would chide. How could a monk *not*, if he had rightly understood the contemplative life and prayed it, was Merton's response. He wrote: "Creativity has to begin with me and I cannot sit here wasting time urging the monastic institution to become creative and prophetic. . . . What each one of us has to do, what I have to do, is to buckle down and