

Afterword

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“Like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.” (Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*)

On December 10, 1968, at the end of his Asian tour, just after delivering a public talk outside Bangkok on “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” Thomas Merton suggested the crowd take a little break, maybe have a Coke. His body was discovered a few hours later in his room where he had been electrocuted by a faulty fan. Yet Merton’s legacy, as the gathering of essays in this volume amply witnesses, has not disappeared. On the contrary, his unique wedding of contemplation and action, interior awakening and social justice continues to inform our culture both locally and globally.

What Donald Grayston calls the “boon” of Merton’s earthly pilgrimage can best be accessed through his writings. Several of the distinguished authors in this splendid gathering of Canadian writing on Merton claim him as the premier spiritual writer in the West in the twentieth century, and I would concur. Yet what exactly is Merton’s legacy? How does he speak to us now? How is it that a spiritual teacher from the twentieth-century speaks so profoundly to our current situation?

I’d like to begin with my own decades-long love affair with his work and witness. Like scholar Lynn Szabo, I discovered Merton’s poetry early on. Yet his prose is itself poetic, grounded, particular, sensual, and imagistic. It’s not an exaggeration to say that in my late twenties Merton became for me a spiritual mentor.

While I was an undergraduate at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1968, Merton’s bestselling autobiography, *The Seven*

Storey Mountain (published in 1948, just the year after I was born), practically tumbled off the shelf into my hands. I had had a Presbyterian upbringing in the States, but had grown disaffected with conventional institutional Christianity during university. In the 1960s I was more interested in Tibetan Buddhism and world religions than Christianity. In fact, when I first read Merton I was taking a course with the renowned Buddhist scholar, Edward Conze, then visiting at the U of W. Like so many others of my “boomer” generation, I was a spiritual seeker, socially engaged in protesting the Vietnam War.

In fact, just a year after discovering Merton (who also was critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam) my draft-resisting boyfriend and I headed over the border to Vancouver, British Columbia where he could continue ignoring his draft notice and I could pursue graduate studies at Simon Fraser University. Though my friend returned to the States, I remained in Canada, eventually developing a career as an English and Creative Writing instructor as well as my vocation as a poet.

What continues to draw me to Merton is his exploration of the mystical stream of Christianity in relation to the mystical streams of other world religions. His writings demonstrated unequivocally for me at the time that it was possible to return to the roots of my own Christian heritage with authenticity. Inspired by his commitment to the contemplative life, I began going on long silent retreats on the Gulf Islands, all the while developing my poetic craft. A part of me (as is true of all of us) was social, but another part hungered for regular intervals of solitude and silence. Merton revealed that I didn't have to choose between contemplation and action, but that the two were like yin and yang. I wasn't about to join a nunnery or sign up for a monastic experiment, but Merton's sense that one could be a “lay monk” in the world opened up a model for holiness as wholeness. Because of Merton, I came to associate the word “monk” less with one set apart from the world, and more with oneness or unitive being.

More recently, I have been thinking that the things that drew

me to Canada are things that might also have attracted Merton. When I first arrived in Vancouver, this northern country struck me as a relatively peaceful, socially cohesive place. Tommy Douglas' vision of universal health care was in place and most Canadians honoured their vast expanses of wilderness. Trudeau welcomed to Canada those opposed to the Vietnam War. Although health care and wilderness have since come under attack, I wonder (perhaps somewhat fancifully) if Merton shouldn't have considered Canada as a candidate in his restless quest during the 1960s for a new contemplative home. Canada's French heritage, multiculturalism, and vast spaces still make it a suitable habitat for the contemplative life.

Decades later in 1999, after neglecting Merton in my pursuit of other studies, I stumbled quite fortuitously upon the Thomas Merton Society of Canada (TMSC). This active and dynamic group of Merton readers, scholars, and aficionados were hosting public lectures by acclaimed Merton scholars as well as organizing lively conferences and contemplative retreats. I consider one of the great pieces of luck in my life to have walked into a lecture in Vancouver by the provocative and always articulate Michael Higgins, whose Blakean approach to Merton resonated with my own. In Lynn Szabo, the editor of a much needed new selection of Merton's poems, I found instant rapport on the subject of Merton as mystical poet. Within a year, I found myself sitting on the Board of Directors (2001-2003), attending a pilgrimage to Merton's birthplace in southern France, and giving papers and public talks. Poet and essayist J.S. Porter expresses how hard it is to shake Merton once he gets in your bloodstream: “It's not easy saying goodbye to a monk...Monks with moon faces, with beautifully flawed and cracked porcelain lives, with warm, human laughs who are sometimes mistaken for Henry Miller or Pablo Picasso are especially hard to let go of. They're stickier than gum, as unshakeable as smoke.”¹

But why say goodbye to such a catalyst to awakening? When Merton was a young man at Columbia University, his best friend Robert Lax urged him to aspire not just to the priesthood, but to sainthood. If a saint is one who consistently measures up to an

externally established code of perfection, you can rule Merton out. But if a saint can be defined as an imperfect, complex, multi-layered, bundle of apparent contradictions caught in the belly of a paradox, but consistently embracing a path toward integral being, we can put Merton (and maybe even ourselves) back in the running.

As the authors in this volume have all variously noted, Merton is complicated. He's a liminal person fleeing to the periphery who ends up at the centre of the world. He's a prolific and loquacious seeker after silence, an orthodox heretic, a restless trickster seated at the very pivot of interiority and exteriority. He's a celibate whose love affair with a young nurse, "M," at the end of his life would surely make a riveting feature film. Yet these apparent contradictions are what make him real. Although none of the contributors claims to be writing hagiography, each writer reveals Merton as someone who sneaks up on wholeness as a hiker might steal upon at a deer in a clearing, giving full attention to its unspeakable grace.

Now that Merton has disappeared from his temporal embodiment as Father Louis and Thomas Merton, we can only speculate about whether he would have forged a new synthesis of East-West spirituality, left his monastic community in Kentucky, changed his mind and married M after all, or advanced his thinking about this or that.

The point is that Merton isn't just about Merton. He isn't just about the personality, the mask, the quicksilver, multiple faces. Rather, he mirrors each one who takes the journey with him or meets him along any part of its trajectory. After all, we are all complex, contradictory, multi-faceted, suffering, luminous beings. His writings help us know that the centre of each of us dovetails with what Merton called the "*point vierge*" or ontological centre of the universe. If we can embrace our imperfections, receiving Merton's words and legacy not just as beliefs and concepts, but as experience, then we too might just become contemplative activists or action-oriented contemplatives.

What these rich and varied essays announce is that Merton's writing has the power to open us to the place where periphery and centre converge. Each writer here names this condition of

consciousness somewhat differently. Ross Labrie calls it "the inclusive imagination," while others refer to it as pure Being (the ontological ground of being and becoming), the non-dual, final integration, enlightenment, salvation, rebirth. Merton's writings reveal how this named and nameless jewel, this darkly luminous core dwells at the heart of each of us.

Reading these essays is like sitting with intimates in a small room with very large windows. As a whole, the book constitutes an intimate and cadenced conversation. Themes overlap without repeating. One has the feeling of being at an outdoor gathering with people who truly listen to each other. The depth and range of the volume is exceptional, for the topics cover cultural studies, politics, ethics, philosophy, social activism, peacemaking, theology, poetics, and inter-spirituality. Because of Merton's integrative approach, all these subjects are intertwined.

Recently, I had a dream that I fell off the edge of my bed. And there were my mother and father. And there were other lost and found companions. And there was Merton. Strangely, for a few timeless seconds, I had somehow fallen out of what we call ego; yet every part of who I had been was included. Was I in the Buddha mind, the Christ consciousness, a portion of divinity? Then came Merton's words in my inner ear: "Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." Somehow, though this state felt like a kind of death, I didn't feel quite so limited. If it was death, then death wasn't all that bad.

What this continually-evolving monk seems to be saying is that we only think the centre is lost. We are in it and it in us all the time. As Angus Stuart points out in his essay on Merton and the Beats, Merton reminds us we are not mere deadbeats, not merely beaten or marginalized, but beatific, small heartbeats within the one all-encompassing heart.

Endnote

1. J. S. Porter, *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* (Ottawa, Saint Paul University: Novalis, 2008), 62.