

Growing A Merton Workshop Within

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It is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to the One who lives and speaks in both!

Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections On My Work*, p.67

SINCE 1993 I have been most grateful for the opportunities of attending Merton Conferences in North America and England. The presentations, both academic papers and workshops, have been thought-provoking, enlightening, challenging and even life-changing. As a lay person – a retired organizational counsellor as I like to describe myself – I am increasingly motivated to experience my solitary life in a spiritual context. The fact that I am not from the academic community nor theologically trained has never been a drawback, nor have I ever sensed that lay people are not welcomed and appreciated for the grassroots perspective that they bring to the Merton studies of experience.

I consider myself a relaxed, slow-paced, long-time reader of Merton. Indeed in recent years, as I have spent more time in his company, I've come to view him as a companion. My first ITMS Conference in 1993 in Colorado Springs – when I had the opportunity to meet Donald Allchin in his concurrent session 'Solitude and Maturity' – was a life-altering experience for me. I realised that, living alone, I have my own built-in hermitage. How could I have missed something so obvious!

In time I began to sense within me a yearning to do something at a Merton meeting. I kept trying to squelch the urge. What did I have to offer in the way of information, scholarship, experience or insight? Eventually I realised this urge inside me was coming from what I was missing – recognition of the *individual contemplative* aspect within the *group action* programme. Perhaps this was intended to be implicit in the presentations, but I needed it to be explicit. This began, of course, before the days of workshops when the total conference was comprised of paper deliveries – of quality, yes, but a tad too much quantity. Some other options were needed for those of us who wanted time with Merton to integrate and reflect in a smaller, more intimate, group. Some of this sharing, of course, could be done at meals, between sessions, over an appropriate Merton beverage, but I was looking for more intentional planning within the programme. As the years and conferences went by my thoughts began to consolidate around what I was being urged from within to do.

The title and outline for a workshop suddenly came into view just before dawn one morning at the 1997 ITMS Conference in Mobile, Alabama – 'Thomas Merton As Guide For Those Who Live Alone.' I submitted a proposal for the 1999 ITMS Conference at Waterloo, Ontario and it was accepted. One of the things I learnt from this experience related to the varied messages that a word can send. Those who attended my session helped me to see that my use of the word 'guide' was really

more like 'companion,' so my proposal for the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland's Third General Meeting in 2000 made that change.

I believe increasingly that we are short-changing Merton if we only study him and his writings, and not give more explicit thought and voice to how we, as individuals, are affected by him and his works, and might carry on his vision and work for the world. The thrust of my workshops, therefore, could be described as self-integration – a time for quiet, intimate reflection and, if appropriate, some sharing and dialogue of how Merton's works, specific to each conference theme, might be urging, inviting and moving us as individuals. How do we experience and explore our perceptions of those themes? How might we convey his concerns and insights to those around us and improve our world? Whatever time not consumed in talking is given to silent reflection – an oasis as one participant described it.

My reason for describing my journey is to illustrate how each of us can grow our own Merton workshop within regardless of the theme. In this way we integrate Merton's ongoing circle of *action* (presentations) and *contemplation* (inner reflection), with our own circle of *action* (responding) and *contemplation* (reflecting).

The following is a sample of past conference themes and questions to help you design and experience your own inner workshops:

2000 TMS Theme: 'Thomas Merton – A Mind Awake In The Dark'

Workshop Title: **Thomas Merton As Companion For Those Who Live Alone**

1. How does Merton's phrase 'a mind awake in the dark' touch me?
2. If I was asked for 'some journal passages that would describe a typical day in my life' (as Miguel Grinberg asked Merton), what would I write?
3. Do I have a day? Do I spend my day in a place?
4. Would I call my journal-like essay 'Day of a Stranger'?
5. What are my woods in which I live alone?
6. What is the monastery and novitiate to which I go daily and whose questions I (try to) answer? What is the choir with whom I chant and (try to) blend?
7. What/where is the cool back room and the hot cabin to which I return?
8. What are the simple daily duties I perform that move me to profound thoughts and insights?

2003 ITMS Theme: 'The Hawk's Dream: Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes'

Workshop Title (not included in the conference programme):

Exploring My Sacred Landscapes With Thomas Merton

1. What are the places in my life (not necessarily geographical) that have been significant markers/guiding stars on my spiritual journey?
2. What has made these places significant to me?
3. Were they short stopovers or did I linger for a time? Do I revisit some?
4. Do they connect with any of Merton's places?
5. If I traced a path between my places (i.e. connected the dots) would a direction or pattern be discernible (a constellation of stars perhaps)?
6. If I were to use Merton's life/journey as a template, where would we be similar and where would we differ?

Questions such as these help us turn inward with Merton, making him the *subject* of our self study in addition to the *object* of our academic enquiry. His ongoing occupation of exploring the place of contemplation and the place of action can be a guide for us in our action and studies of his life and his writings, and how we contemplate and integrate his insights.

In response to a comment following his address at the ITMS Conference at Vancouver in June 2003, James Finley remarked, "We're missing Thomas Merton as long as we set up Thomas Merton. The whole point of Thomas Merton is to give voice to the mystery of God in ourselves."

In his article, 'A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute To Thomas Merton,' (*Merton Journal*, Advent 2002), the now Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams closes with these words:

... being interested in Thomas Merton is not being interested in an original, a 'shaping' mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities. Merton will not let me look at him for long; he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking.

In her Presidential Address to the ITMS Seventh General Meeting in June 2001, Christine Bochen noted:

Merton challenges each of us to confront simple yet difficult questions: what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of people do we want to be? What would happen if we, like Merton, began to confront the urgent issues of our day, with eyes open to the reality of God that is within each one of us? What would happen if we, like Merton, looked critically at our actions – as individuals and as communities and as nations and asked what our actions say about what kind of a people we are? Merton reminds us that eyes, opened by faith, and a spirit, enlivened by prayer, see things in a different light.

I believe we can start 'looking in the direction that Merton is looking' and 'looking critically at our actions' by growing workshops within, designed by ourselves for ourselves. Identifiable steps in the process might include:

- selecting a theme container of suitable size;
- filling it with the rich soil of Merton writings;
- planting the right number of questions for answering;
- watering regularly, perhaps with tears of frustration, disappointment, excitement and joy;
- fertilizing with insights and experiences, both positive and negative;
- positioning the project in mind and heart to receive the right amount of warmth and light;
- pruning gently its growing edges to help it find its own shape; then
- stepping back to admire its growing beauty, spotting the buds of blossoms to come – all the while giving thanks to God ... and to Thomas Merton!

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