

Old Silence, New Story

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If it had not been for Thomas Merton, whom I never met, my new book about the power of silence in daily life might never have been written. Back in the 1970s his work held open a door that otherwise could have closed forever. In particular, a footnote in his published *Asian Journal* introduced me to Tibetan refugees in Scotland from whom I learnt something about the value of silent meditation.

So it was a delight to be able to spend a month in early 2009 at the

Abbey of Gethsemani while I was researching and writing my manuscript. Rising with the monks in the middle of the night, or watching wild turkeys near Merton's hermitage, I had a chance to reflect on the value of monastic life and fret about the possible future loss of beacons such as Gethsemani. Not for me, I admit, the celibate life of a monastic, but I am glad that someone is up for it.

The little beehive huts and ruined stone chapels scattered along the

Atlantic coast of my native Ireland once housed monks of the Celtic church and are both a poignant inspiration and a reproach to those who never face the void that is silence. In writing about silence, I hope to facilitate a better understanding of the present place of silence in our lives, and also an appreciation of the need to honour and respect that place.

This book has been about seven years in the making, and a lot longer if time spent down the decades actively encountering silences is taken into account. Some publishers whom I approached recoiled from the topic of silence. They considered it unmarketable. But I have cast my net wide and discovered just how pervasive and significant a phenomenon silence is across many areas of our daily lives. Karnac Books, a London house best known for its works of psychology and psychotherapy, responded enthusiastically to the idea.

One chapter is devoted specifically to sacred silences, including the monastic. In preparing it, I not only spent a month at the Abbey of Gethsemani but also went into retreat at the ancient Cistercian Abbey of Notre-Dame de Sénanque, near Gordes in Provence, and Kagyü Samye Ling monastery, near Lockerbie in Scotland.

As both an academic and a journalist, I have written this book with a general readership in mind. It is about silence in practice, about how we encounter it and make

sense of it in personal relationships, in arts and business, in the caring or therapeutic professions, in politics and religion. It is about the negative as well as the positive aspects, and not a mere romantic jaunt through moments of peace. The constrained silence of the oppressed and the silence of God in the face of suffering are both confronted.

There are various types of silent person and of silences, including wise, modest, cunning, eloquent, dumbfounded, culpable, strong, weak, ceremonial and satisfied. I illustrate my description of these with what I hope readers will find are entertaining and interesting examples and quotations from literature, poetry, theology and philosophy. There are chapters on busy silence, theories of silence, silence in film and the other arts, and silence in therapy.

The library at the Abbey of Gethsemani is marvellous, and I felt privileged to be let to wander freely among its stacks. Not far away is the comfort of a Trappist fudge factory, if intellectual life becomes too demanding. The monks, who kindly helped me, were simply doing what they do in various ways for so many visitors. I love the orderly round of psalms, and kept time with the offices of worship as the community observed them at what seemed like all hours of the day and night. Cardinal birds buoyed up my spirits as I walked in the woods of Kentucky in early spring.

One day at Gethsemani, alone in Merton's hermitage and leafing through his published journals, I was again struck by how flawed the man was, how tempted to depart from the path that he had chosen, how inconvenient. He was no plaster perfect saint. For me, his imperfections have helped to make his reflections compelling.

Born in Dublin in the same street as lived the fictional Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses*, and schooled as an Irish Catholic by Jesuits whose predecessors had schooled James Joyce, I have stayed around the city that Joyce left. But I have shared his dissatisfaction with the intellectual and moral calibre of the Irish Catholic Church in the twentieth century. It has disintegrated within my lifetime. Repressive, obsessive and ultimately at times, as it transpires, criminal, this institution that was entrusted with caring for the faith of our fathers has (in my opinion) betrayed a generation and left many in my children's generation anchorless.

But there were always exemplary priests and nuns and other Christians and, even as a great deal of the 'religious knowledge' in which I was schooled melted under the sun of everyday experience, one member of a monastic order put a copy of Thomas Merton's *Elected Silence* my way. This was the abbreviated edition of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as published in England. I had mixed feelings about it. In parts it smacked

too much of old style religion for my liking. But there was an underlying energy that appealed to me.

Did silence then seem to be a safe retreat from the pressures that I was starting to feel as a young man, alienated at heart from a powerful and sometimes smug church and facing the challenge of making my way in the world? Silence can be both a balm and a threat. It is the ever-present condition, running through our lives and summoning us out of ourselves. It hints at death but enriches life. Not just the absence of sound, it is intrinsically inter-related to words. As a very verbal youth, it may be that I was simply attracted to what seemed like an opposite.

A couple of years later I encountered a somewhat different Thomas Merton, grittier and more in tune with what I was experiencing in daily life. This encounter was though the pages of a copy of his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that I picked up at a bookshop in Harvard Square, Boston. I was in the USA to make money and see the world, being one of the first Irish undergraduate students to take advantage of a new J-1 visa scheme that allowed us to work in America during the summer break. My job was as a busboy and then waiter at *The Wentworth*, an old resort hotel on the short shores of New Hampshire.

What a book! It remains on my bedside table as one of my favourites and I have returned to it again

and again for more than a quarter of a century. Full of clear observations and what I call agit-theology, it and others by Merton have probably imbued me with even more of Merton's influence than I realise.

During the two summers that I worked in New Hampshire I was still sometimes attending mass, and would borrow a bike to cycle to the local church a few miles away. Fired up by Merton's *Conjectures*, I even wrote to the Abbot of Gethsemani to find out how I might make a visit and I harboured some thoughts that this could lead to a realisation that the monastic life was for me. But the idea passed and, although the abbot then kindly sent me information, it would be more than thirty years before I crossed the threshold of his monastery.

While in the United States in the 1970s I stayed briefly with the parents of a good friend who happened to live in Douglaston, Long Island, just around the corner from where Merton had once lived with his grandparents. One day in the city, visiting the Museum of Modern Art, I fell into conversation with a much older man dressed in overalls. We were both admiring Edward Hopper's *Gas* (1940). He turned out to be involved in the *Catholic Worker* movement and brought me on a rambling but informative walk through Manhattan to meet Dorothy Day at a house of hospitality for down and outs. Unaware then of

what a special person she was, I have only a vague memory of being there.

By the time that I graduated from university I had more or less had enough of conventional Catholic religious practice. However, Merton had not finished with me. He now introduced me in turn to the Tibetan Buddhists. That happened when I was working for a couple of months as a volunteer with the Cyrenian community in Bristol, England, in the mid 1970s. Like the Simon Community, the Cyrenians help down-and-outs and I was stationed in one of their long-term houses. Merton's *Asian Journal* came my way from the local library.

The *Asian Journal* is a collection of Merton's scribbles and thoughts during that fateful journey he made to India and Thailand in 1968, when he was killed by an electric shock. In it he mentions meeting in India one Chogyam Trungpa, who with other Tibetan refugees had founded a Tibetan Buddhist Centre in Scotland. Merton wrote in his *Asian Journal* that he hoped to visit the centre in Scotland. But he never got to do so. I am glad that I did.

Armed with Merton's *Asian Journal* I went to the public library in Bristol and in the Dumfriesshire telephone book unsurprisingly found just one entry under 'Tibetan'. Before long I was making my way up to Samye Ling Tibetan Centre, set in quiet hills fifteen miles from the town of Lockerbie.

By then it was being run by Akong Rinpoce, with Chogyam Trungpa having moved on to the USA to found other centres in Colorado that I would later also visit. So began for me a fruitful acquaintance with Tibetans that has lasted to this day. From them I learnt how to meditate, even if I do so only sporadically and badly. The Buddhist Centre in Kilmainham, Dublin, is affiliated with them and I sometimes visit it.

During the 1990s the Tibetan community of Samye Ling in Scotland bought a small island in the Firth of Clyde as a retreat centre and as a place of interfaith dialogue. The island is called Holy Island (not to be confused with the better-known island of that name off the north-east coast of England). The Tibetan's Holy Island was so named because a certain Irishman had lived as a hermit there before returning to Ireland to found a once famous but now forgotten medieval monastery at Leighlin in what is now County Carlow. I have written a little book about that man, *Molaise, Abbot of Leighlin and Hermit of Holy Island*, in which I not only tell the story of Saint Laserian (Molaise) but also contextualise current contacts between Christians and Buddhists and acknowledge my personal debt to Thomas Merton.

As a result of a conversation about my work on Holy Island I was invited by Fr Laurence Freeman of the World Community of

Christian Meditation to join his 'Way of Peace' pilgrimage with the Dalai Lama. I thus became one of a small group of people that attended all three, three-day sessions, which took place between December 1998 and November 2001: the first at Bodhgaya in India where the Buddha, it is believed, sat under a Bodhi tree and reached enlightenment: the second at a former monastery in Tuscany: the third, which was combined with the annual John Main Seminar, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. These were wonderful encounters, and Thomas Merton was with me on them.

This was so not least in Varanasi on the banks of the holy river Ganges on 10 December 1998. The moment was exactly thirty years to the day and almost even to the hour of Merton's death by electricity on that same continent. Varanasi is the city where some Hindus go to die. You may have seen pictures of the steps down to the river and of the burning funeral pyres. The town is also adjacent to the wonderful Deer Park of Sarnath where Lord Buddha gave his first teachings. Sarnath is a place of silence and peace quite different in its atmosphere from what seems to me to be the darker and more fraught Varanasi.

A group of about twenty of us had travelled with Fr Freeman by train overnight from Delhi, en route to Bodhgaya, and were stopped for a couple of days in a small hotel in Varanasi to rest and sightsee be-

fore completing our long journey. I guessed that this was the sort of group to whom Merton would mean quite a bit but nobody seemed to have noticed that it was the thirtieth anniversary of his death. So I decided to say a few words after dinner. As the meal ended I rose and started to say that I wished to recall the memory of someone very special to me, someone who had died exactly thirty years ago on that continent, on that day, at that hour, by electrocution. Then, just as I went to pronounce Merton's name, the electricity failed and the room was plunged into darkness. I think that Merton would have enjoyed the coincidence and laughed at the subversion of formality. Later that night in Varanassi we prayed and invoked his memory. I should add, in fairness to those who eschew the celebration of coincidence that power-cuts in India occur quite often.

Merton himself was a man of humour and of quest, sometimes of an uneasy quest. There is a whisper of the whirlwind in the notes of his visit to Asia. "What are your motives?" he was asked on that last journey by the Tibetan, Khamtul Rimpoche, and the way that Merton recorded the query suggests to me that he considered it to be most valid and relevant.

Merton had stepped off his 30-foot Zen pole and was not sure where he might land. It is not his fault that I am still clinging to mine. But through Merton's work I have

encountered Buddhism in its traditional form and that has helped me to understand what Christianity might be. So am I a Buddhist or a Christian? I find it very hard to be tied down, if the truth be known, dabbling here and there and hoping for the best. I once asked a Tibetan teacher if one could not simply take the best from each religion and, after a momentary pause (no doubt to regain his equilibrium in the face of such arrogance) he replied that one would need to be very wise to do so (meaning, presumably, for one to be able to discern what is the best).

Today I am a professor of communications, and my continuing tenuous involvement in matters of faith has continued through the creation and coordination of an optional module at Dublin City University that is entitled 'Belief & Communication'. It is taught jointly with some colleagues from other disciplines, and students have responded warmly to it as a non-sectarian space in which to discuss meaning and motivation. Ireland may not be entirely post-Catholic but its religious profile is certainly not what it used to be. Visiting US students also choose the module. To inform myself better for the task of coordinating the module I took courses leading to the award of a diploma in theology at the Milltown Institute, Dublin. The Jesuits and myself have almost forgiven one another.

In seeking out in 2004 an appro-

priate international conference at which to share insights from this DCU module and to learn about related developments I happened upon the imminent Fourth International Conference on Media Religion and Culture, and it happened to be scheduled to be hosted by the University of Louisville. Having submitted a proposal for a paper that was accepted, I found myself travelling to Kentucky. The hotel in which the conference organiser Prof. John Ferré happened to have lodged me turned out to be on the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard), that very place where Merton was suddenly overwhelmed with a realisation of love and a sense of inadequacy when it came to finding a way of 'telling people that they are walking around shining like a sun'. His account of this experience had long been one of my favourite passages in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

Before going to Louisville in 2004 I made sure that I would have a day free when I could travel out to the Abbey of Gethsemani. Five years later, in 2009, I returned. On this occasion I had arranged with the abbot to live there for a month. Staying in the old house at Gethsemani, I had reason to thank the Tibetans. When the Dalai Lama and his entourage visited the abbey in 1996, some bedrooms were fitted out with a toilet and wash-hand basin en suite and I benefited from this luxurious addition!

Among the kindred spirits whom I met during my stay was Brother Gregory Cavalier, who after a long lifetime of service with his religious order in Central America and elsewhere now spends up to five months every year with the Trappists at Gethsemani. Although not a Cistercian, he has been nicknamed by the community 'The Winter Monk'. He is the sort of Catholic who keeps hope alive, and a type that is sorely needed for young people such as my students and sons in the kind of world in which we now live, if Christianity is to be a radical force for good. He features in one of the poems that I then wrote, a poem that expresses my appreciation of the silence of monks who have devoted their lives to being witnesses of a truth to which I pay lip service.

It seems to me that, down the years, I have been very fortunate to have people open windows and doors for me onto a spiritual vista that I might not otherwise have glimpsed. But I have remained something of a bystander and have not responded as well as I might have in my daily life. Perhaps my book on silence is a kind of reparation.

My aunt, Maura, who joined the English Dominicans and became Sister Mary Hyacinth O.P., was a friend of the well-known theologian and radical thinker Herbert McCabe. She encouraged me to believe that one can be a Catholic without forcing oneself to accept

what appears to be untrue or inauthentic. She had earlier left another order in Ireland, because she found it so narrow. Partly because of her I have continued to attend mass sporadically, even if the experience at parish level frequently depresses me compared to how I have found it celebrated in monasteries. But without having encountered the works of Thomas Merton I am not sure that her hints would have carried enough weight to keep me even somewhat connected to the church in which I was raised.

One day at Gethsemani, leafing through Merton's journals that have been admirably published in an apparently unexpurgated form, I was again struck by how imperfect and human he was. The more renowned or even famous that he became, the more difficult it may have been for him to avoid feeling superior. His confessions of doubt and desire in later life, like the rumours of his having fathered a child

before becoming a monk, are healthy antidotes to any false cult of perfection. Hagiographies are harmful when what people need is examples of lives lived honestly. Lies of omission are a kind of silence that is culpable. In my new book on silence, I quote one minister who has admitted frankly that, 'My belief in God's presence has on some occasions been little more than a small knot tied at the end of a threadbare rope'. For people like that, and for people whose faith or hope are even thinner (and that is very many people in today's world), a silent but serious witness may speak as loud as any earnest or exhortational words.

Colum Kenny teaches at Dublin City University and lives in Bray, Co. Wicklow. His *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* is published by Karnac Books and will be reviewed in the next issue of the *Merton Journal*.