

Thomas Merton and Nature

Some personal reflections

Jim Walker

*Living away from the earth and the trees we fail them.
We are absent from the wedding feast.¹*

Introduction

In this paper I am exploring Thomas Merton's connection with nature and its ongoing importance and relevance for us today. Merton wrote freely about his love of nature, particularly after he began spending time in the hermitage. In many ways Merton was ahead of his time and anticipated some of the current interest in the healing power of nature. Recently there has been a lot of interest in the media in the ways in which nature can calm anxiety and heal us, helping to improve our mental and emotional health, happiness and wellbeing.

For the past three years I have been living in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea in the country's Central Region. In many ways it is a very challenging place to live. However, it is also extremely beautiful, and I have found it possible to have a deep connection with nature there. There is a stillness about Asmara, and I experienced it as a 'thin place' where the distance between heaven and earth collapses.

Several aspects of nature in Asmara became important for me: the colours in the city throughout the year are beautiful. In spring the jacaranda trees in flower provide a spectacular sight as they light up the city. Other plants and flowers such as bougainvillea, oleander, geraniums and roses are in flower throughout the year. The city is alive with strong, bright colours; the birds in Asmara are beautiful and extremely tame. Black kites are common and draw one into contemplation, as I will discuss later. A highlight for me was watching a pair of beautiful bee-eaters feeding their young in the spring; finally, because of the lack of

light pollution the night sky is spectacular. I was frequently struck by how dark it was when there was no moon, and how light it was at the full moon.

In this paper I am exploring a number of aspects of Merton's thoughts about living close to nature. In a previous paper I wrote about Merton's struggle with shame and his instinctive response to withdraw and hide away from others.² I believe that exposure to nature throughout his life, and particularly in his later years, was one of the factors that significantly counterbalanced and helped to reduce his feelings of shame. Where shame disconnects, exposure to nature connects us one to another.

Thomas Merton and nature:

In 1967 a sixth-grade student who was studying monasticism wrote to Merton asking for information about Monasticism. Amongst Merton's reply was the following: 'I live alone in the woods with squirrels and rabbits and deer and foxes and a huge owl that comes down by my cabin and makes a spooky noise in the night, but we are friends and it is all ok.'³

Thus Merton was saying that he both lived alone and lived with other animals. I love the playfulness of his language and the simplicity of his words. What comes over to me is his sense of belonging in nature and the feeling of being at home. It was through such passages that I came to realise how important nature was to Merton.

Merton originally applied to join the Franciscans but was not accepted by them. In many ways he had a Franciscan heart and a close affinity to St Francis of Assisi. Like St Francis he believed that God reveals Himself in the beauty and diversity of nature. Merton recognised this himself:

I turned my eyes to the trees, to the woods. I looked up the valley, back in the direction from which I had come, at the high wooded hill that closed off the prospect. I thought: 'I am a Franciscan. That is my kind of spirituality, to be out in the woods, under the trees.'⁴

Once Merton began to spend time at the hermitage at Gethsemani he became strongly connected with nature, coming to know the area around the hermitage in an intimate way: 'I love the woods, particularly around the hermitage. Know every tree, every animal, every bird. Sense of relatedness to my environment.'⁵ He had a particular affinity with the

birds: 'I know the birds in fact very well, for there are exactly fifteen pairs of birds living in the immediate area of my cabin and I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance.'⁶ Merton also wrote about his connection with the earth. Reading a new book, he 'walked barefoot in a mossy spot under oaks and pines.'⁷ And for Merton, nature could be one's spiritual guide: 'No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees. These pages seek nothing more than to echo the silence and the peace that is "heard" when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forest.'⁸

We are part of nature:

Merton believed that humans are very much part of nature: 'How absolutely central is the truth that we are first of all *part of nature*.... In solitude, one is surrounded by beings which perfectly obey God.'⁹ As such the natural world became an integral part of Merton's life, as he recorded shortly before his move to the hermitage:

Perhaps we have a deep and legitimate need to know in our entire being what the day is like, to *see* it and *feel* it, to know how the sky is grey, paler in the south, with patches of blue in the southwest, with snow on the ground, the thermometer at 18, and cold winds making your ears ache. I have a real need to know these things because I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in all this is no day at all. It is certainly part of my life of prayer.¹⁰

Feeling connected and grounded is the opposite of shame: shame is the sense of feeling alone, isolated and disconnected from everyone and everything. I believe that Merton's connection with nature, as described above, was fundamental in giving him a profound sense of belonging, enabling him to feel a sense of connection with God and with his environment.

One way of understanding the healing power of nature is in terms of our past and how we have evolved, a concept expressed by the poet Rumi:

We began
as a mineral. We emerged into plant life
and into animal state, and then into being human,
and always we have forgotten our former states,
except in early spring when we slightly recall
being green again.¹¹

Living close to nature can therefore enable us on an unconscious level to recall our roots, where we have come from and how we have developed. The nature writer Richard Mabey illustrates how images from nature are echoed within much of our language:

We constantly refer back to the natural world to try and discover who we are. Nature is the most potent source of metaphors to describe and explain our behaviour and feelings. It is the root and branch of much of our language. We sing like birds, blossom like flowers, stand like oaks. Or then again we eat like gluttons, breed like rabbits and generally behave like animals.¹²

However, as a society we are spending increasingly less time outside and in nature. Research by the National Trust shows that children spend now on average only 4 hours each week playing outside, half that of the time their parents did as children.¹³ Similarly, our 24/7 society is eroding the distinction between day and night. A friend who works in a university library tells me that it can be as busy at 3 am as at 3 pm.

Anxiety

In the mid 1950s Merton: 'Ours is a time of anxiety.'¹⁴ He would certainly concur with that statement today. Anxiety can sabotage surrender, trust, intimacy and connection, and consequently keep us apart from God. Anxiety keeps us caught in our own small world, inhibiting joy, intimacy and relaxation. Before we can experience the love of God in our lives we need to loosen the grip of anxiety: anxiety and tension can make it hard for us to trust and believe that we are safe and loved. Merton was very aware of the need to relax. He understood that nature can have a vital role in allowing us to relax: 'Landscape is a good liberator ... for it calms

and pacifies the imagination and the emotions.'¹⁵

My experience in Asmara was that spending frequent time in nature calmed my anxiety and enabled me to relax. On the ground kites in Asmara are not particularly attractive birds. But in flight they are transformed into wonderfully elegant and graceful birds. They always seem to be calm and unhurried in flight. They exemplify trust and surrender as they glide on the air currents. I find that watching them in flight is deeply calming and relaxing. Merton also writes about birds of prey: 'A red-shouldered hawk wheels slowly over Newton's farm as if making his own special silence in the air - as if teasing out a circle of silence in the sky.'¹⁶ Making a circle of silence in the sky is a beautiful way of describing kites in Asmara.

Modern research is confirming Merton's belief that exposure to nature can calm anxiety and stress. Studies have shown that spending as little as 20 to 30 minutes sitting or walking in a place that provides you with a sense of nature can be beneficial. Getting out of an office block and just sitting next to a tree can be enough. I suspect that one of the reasons for the great increase in anxiety in the West is due to our disconnection from nature.

The false self:

As a young man Merton developed a strong false self as an unconscious response to the significant traumas that he experienced in his childhood. A person who has a strong false self is always likely to want to remain in control, and to avoid any form of vulnerability. It protects one from pain but at the expense of being authentic, open and capable of loving and being loved. However, I think that as he grew older the dominance of Merton's false self significantly reduced. One contributory factor behind this change was his involvement with nature. For Kathleen Deignan, Merton's true self was his green self:

He chose to live alone in the forest as refuge for his own existential pain.... Ever in search of his 'true self' beneath his distress and artifice, he came in time to realize it was none other than his 'green self' - his original nature healed of inner agitation, congestion, drivenness, turmoil and suffering by entrainment to the merciful rhythms of the elements, the season, the creatures.¹⁷

Although Asmara has more rainfall than the surrounding areas, drought can still be a problem. After a period of four months without rain our garden was beginning to look parched and dry. One day there was thunder and lightning, and I could see heavy rain falling on the hills nearby. I hurriedly got out all our water tanks to collect water. However, no rain fell at all in our garden. The next day I learnt that there had been heavy rain in virtually all of Asmara except for a small area where we live.

Living close to nature such events can teach us patience, and the fact that there are things which we cannot control. They also encourage humility, simplicity, surrender and wonder — all things which the false self strongly resists. They can teach us an awareness of forces greater than ourselves.

Nature and rootedness:

A deep connection with nature can also enable us to feel a sense of rootedness. Simone Weil writes that 'to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul.'¹⁸

When I first arrived in Asmara I was surprised to discover how colourful, healthy and alive the plants and trees are. I was even more surprised when I was told it had not rained for four months. How did the vegetation remain so healthy and fresh without rain? I learned that Asmara sits on top of a lot of underground water. Plants that survive do so because they are able to reach down to the water, even at times when there is no rain. When we later moved into a house with a garden I discovered that the plants had extremely long roots which enabled them to reach deep into the ground and find water.

Rootedness was an important concept for Merton, synonymous with the monastic vow of stability. Describing the founding of Cistercian monasteries he wrote: 'When the monks had found their homes, they not only settled there ... but they sank their roots into the ground and fell in love with their woods. ... Forest and field, sun and wind and sky, earth and water, all speak the same silence language, reminding the monk that he is here to develop like the things that grow all around him.'¹⁹

Feeling connected and grounded is the opposite of shame, the sense of feeling alone, isolated and disconnected from everyone and everything. Without roots one is an alien, a foreigner, disconnected. On moving into the hermitage Merton felt a deep sense of rootedness and belonging: 'In this wilderness I have learned how to sleep again. I am not alien. I close

my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it.'²⁰

Non dual consciousness:

Absorption with nature can help lead to a deep connection with the world in which all distinctions between 'I' and 'the other' are transcended. Cynthia Bourgeault refers to this as non dual consciousness: 'You discover that you, God, and the world "out there" are not separate entities, but flow together seamlessly in an unbreakable dynamism of self-giving love, which is the true nature of reality and the ground of everything.'²¹ This is mirrored by Merton in his description of his experience in Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut: 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.'²²

I believe that for much of his life Merton had felt separate and disconnected from other people. His journey in faith involved moving from a sense of isolation and loneliness to a position of connection with other people. Implicit within this journey was the much deeper connection he developed with God, a journey that was in part facilitated by his absorption with nature. Being in nature helped him to experience a sense of kinship with the world around him., especially the birds and animals around the hermitage:

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them. I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, their hissing and chirpings, the yellow spot on the back revealed in flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being?²³

In time such connections with nature enabled Merton to experience a much stronger connection with the world and with other people. Most importantly, it also seemed to greatly deepen his relationship with God. More succinctly he wrote that 'There is no more disconnection between the I and the not-I.'²⁴ He came in time to understand that, whether we

recognise it or not, we are all connected with one another.

Conclusion:

Like the plants in Asmara we can only grow if we are deeply rooted in our world. One of the characters in Cecilia Ahern's book, *Love, Rosie*, muses that 'I've learned that home isn't a place, it's a feeling.'²⁵ But many of us probably need connection to a place, to a home, to set down roots before it can become internalised into a feeling of being safe and belonging wherever we are. For Merton the sense of being rooted at the Abbey of Gethsemani and then at the hermitage deepened his connection with God, with the universe and with humanity, his natural surroundings fundamental to this process. Thus rooted Merton felt a deep sense of harmony with God and the world:

Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all.²⁶

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love, Journals, Vol.6*, ed Christine Bochen (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), entry for February 17, 1966, p. 19.
2. Jim Walker, "'Perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers': Reflections on Thomas Merton's childhood, with particular emphasis on his relationship with his mother", *The Merton Journal*, vol 20:2, Advent 2014, pp. 31-40.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy – Letters to Old and new Friends*, ed. Robert E Daggy (London: Collins Flame, 1990), letter to Susan Chapulis, April 10, 1967, p. 351.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK Classics, 1990), p. 331.
5. *Learning to Love*, entry for March 23, 1967, p. 208.
6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, Journals, Volume 5*, ed Robert E Daggy (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), from 'Day of a Stranger', May 1965, p. 239.
7. *Learning to Love*, entry for September 2, 1967, p. 284.
8. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1979), p. 15.
9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1995), p. 294.
10. Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World, Journals, Volume 4*, ed Victor A Kramer (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), entry for February 27,

1963, pp. 299-300.

11. Rumi, 'This place is a dream', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2015), p.112.
12. Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Vintage, 2015), pp. 19-20.
13. See <https://www.childinthecity.org/2018/01/15/> (accessed 19/01/21).
14. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Part 2 – The Love of Solitude, section iii (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), p. 82.
15. *Thoughts in Solitude*, Part 2 – The Love of Solitude, section xiv, p.107.
16. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, Journal, Volume 3*, ed. Lawrence S Cunningham (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), entry for March 19, 1958, p. 181. In the entry Merton goes on to record his experience at 4th and Walnut the previous day.
17. Thomas Merton, *When the trees say nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), pp. 33-34.
18. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1978), p. 41.
19. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), pp. 273-274.
20. Thomas Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), p.8.
21. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016) p. 39.
22. *A Search for Solitude*, entry for March 19, 1958, p. 181.
23. *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, entry for November 4, 1964, p. 162.
24. *Love and Living*, p. 20.
25. Cecilia Ahern, *Love Rosie* (London: HarperCollins, 2014).
26. *Thoughts in Solitude*, Part 2 – The Love of Solitude, section vii, p. 91.

Jim Walker first heard of Thomas Merton in 2010 when he began practising centering prayer. He is a retired social worker and psychotherapist living on the south coast. He spent three years living in Asmara which inspired him to write this article.