

The Seeker and the Monk:
Everyday conversations with Thomas Merton
Sophfronia Scott
Forward by Barbara Brown Taylor
Broadleaf Books, 2021
ISBN 978-1-5064-6496-1 (pbk) 202 pages
£10.99

Deep friendships are transformative, allowing space for the exploration of ideas and feelings, honest yet loving dialogue, and provide a place to rest, be renewed and encouraged. Deep friendships are rare and when found, need to be treasured and cared for tenderly.

Sophfronia Scott has done just that through her new book, *The Seeker and the Monk*. It is the story of the author's deep friendship with the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, one of the most influential thinkers and writers of the 20th Century. We as readers are invited into their conversations to learn, be challenged and grow.

We are given an intimate insight into their relationship and how Merton, though dead, speaks to her through his private journals and how she responds to him. It is a wonderful story of a friendship that is not bound by time, that lives in God's time.

On the face of it, it is an unlikely friendship:

Thomas Merton was a white Catholic monk who lived most of his life in a monastery in Kentucky and died over fifty years ago. I'm a black woman, not Catholic but Episcopalian, with Baptist notes from my childhood. We have nothing in common other than Ivy League educations (p.2).

But the author has 'a searching nature when it comes to faith', and like Merton, she is 'a seeker into the mystery of what tethers my life to the divine (p.2.)'

We learn how their friendship began, how she grew to know him well through reading his seven private journals which cover his life from 1939 to 1968 when he died at the age of 53, and the conversations she has had with him on issues that are important to her and were important to him. She likens their conversations, in the words of Merton, to 'a dialogue of 'deep wills'.¹

In each chapter, in her conversations with Merton, Scott covers issues that were relevant to Merton in the 1960s and are still relevant to us today. Chapter Two explores our attachment to material goods and Merton's encouragement to let go. She quotes one of Merton's prayers:

'Stanch in me the rank wound of covetousness and the hungers that exhaust my nature with their bleeding (p.26).'² She talks of her own journey of letting go of the desire for more material goods and how God 'wants us to have more — not more stuff but more of what's good for us: more of what inspires us and more of what brings us joy (p.33).'

Chapter Three covers the struggles both Merton and Scott have with ambition, with the demand of their egos for publication. For Merton, Scott sees that the issues with his ambition go back 'to his notion of there being two versions of himself: the monk Brother Louis on the one hand, and the Thomas Merton who sneaked into the monastery with him, on the other (p.44).' And for herself: 'I wanted to do big things. I wanted my work to be recognised and rewarded. ... Can my work and God's work coexist?'(p.43) The author explores how each, in their separate ways, have resolved this conflict.

Further chapters range over finding God in nature, how both she and Merton learned to grow through times of desolation, the preciousness of friendship, making a difference in our complex and overwhelming world, prayer practices, racism, love and, in the final chapter, death.

In this chapter, 'In sight of the Harbor', the author describes her visit to Gethsemani one December. Visiting the monk's cemetery she writes:

Thomas, when I saw your grave, I cried. I thought of how it had been another December, eight years ago, when I first heard your words and how my journey had brought me through so much to be at your grave. I looked out over the garden walks, and this aching void welled up within me. I wanted to be on those paths with you and I mourned you as a friend (p.178).

Through her friendship with Merton, and by his guidance, the author has shown us that 'as much as we seek our paths and have questions about the journey, there is a sense deep within us, like a primeval compass, that show we already know where to go (p.183).' Merton has awakened that sense within her, revealing 'a place pulling me homeward. Pulling me into a safe harbour (p.184)'.

In *The Seeker and the Monk*, we get the chance to witness Scott's intimate relationship with her *anam cara*. In the early Celtic church an *anam cara* was a teacher, a companion, a spiritual guide, 'someone with whom you could share your inner-most self, your mind and your heart.'³ The vulnerability of Merton in his journals and Scott in her conversations with Merton shines through this book and makes for a compelling and transformative read. Don't miss it.

Notes

1. From chapter 3, 'New Seeds of Contemplation', in Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*.
2. From chapter 6, 'Pray for your own discovery' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.
3. John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, p. xviii. Also see *The Seeker and the Monk*, p. 80.

Emily Miller is a mediator and restorative practitioner in London and Worcestershire. She is the London West Area Minister for the Third Order Society of St Francis, and is a member of the TMS committee. She grew up in Kentucky and now resides in Worcestershire.

Franz Jägerstätter was beatified at a ceremony in St. Mary's Cathedral in Linz on 26th October 2007. Diocesan Bishop Dr. Ludwig Schwarz and Bishop Dr. Manfred Scheuer issued the following statement concerning the beatification:

The Church is hereby expressly recognizing the courageous attitude of this faithful man, who still has so much to say to us today.

The commemoration of Franz Jägerstätter stands within the context of many interrelated aspects: his wife, his children and his family, the Church, through his beatification, questions of saintliness and martyrdom, social and political issues in the examination of our own wartime past, the war generation, inhumanity and the terror of the Nazis, and the ethical and educational issues of war and conscientious objection, non-violence, peace education and disarmament, of authority, conscience and obedience.

Franz Jägerstätter is a prophet with a global view and a penetrating insight which very few of his contemporaries had at that time; he is a shining example in his fidelity to the claims of his conscience, an advocate of non-violence and peace, a voice of warning against ideologies, a deep-believing person for whom God really was the core and centre of life. His prophetic witness to Christian truth is based on a clear, radical and far-sighted analysis of the barbarism of the inhuman and godless system of Nazism, its racial delusions, its ideology of war and deification of the state, as well as its declared program of annihilating Christianity and the Church. His educated, mature conscience led him to say a resolute 'No' to Nazism and he was executed due to his consistent refusal to take up arms as a soldier in Hitler's war.