The Birds Ask: 'Is it Time to Be?': Thomas Merton's Moments of Spiritual Awakening

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WHENEVER ONE THINKS OF Thomas Merton's moments of spiritual awakening, one is drawn immediately to his experience in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, when he was astounded by the sight of the great reclining Buddhas at Polonnaruwa. Having taken off his shoes to walk "barefoot and undisturbed in the wet grass, wet sand"[1]—reminiscent of biblical admonitions for walking on holy ground—Merton confided in his journal three days later how awesome this experience had been. He felt grasped, captured, and "jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied [or half-tired] vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious." As he probes this experience further, Merton elaborates: "I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination...I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for...I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise."[2]

Certainly this experience was profoundly moving for Merton and one that readers now regard as mildly prophetic since several days later, Merton—by his untimely accidental death—indeed went "beyond the shadow and the disguise." What on December 1st was spiritual insight

became on December 10th spiritual reality. Merton's transitory experience of Divinity at the feet of the great Buddhas was transformed into full communion with God. Insight became Sight. Prophetic hint became Eternal Vision.

But in cataloguing moments of spiritual awakening in Merton's life, we could also attend to his retreat days at the Mim Tea Estate when Merton realized from his dream about the Tibetan side of Kanchenjunga, that it is always the other side of the mountain—the hidden reality—that is worth seeing;[3] we could also focus on his March 18, 1958 epiphanic moment in Louisville, Kentucky on the corner of Fourth and Walnut when at age forty-three Merton became startlingly aware of his connection to all the men and women crossing the busy intersection. It was, he writes in *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*:

> like waking from a dream of separateness....This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud....Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others....a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate....and if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.[4]

The Influence of Oakham

Thinking of Oakham, where Merton spent three and a half years studying classics as well as independently learning modern foreign languages, we could focus on the seeds of solitude sown in his heart by the magnificent colours of the sky and the peace of Brooke Hill that quietly nourished his spirit. In contrast to Merton's noisy dormitories, his enthusiasm for the school debating society, his cherished records of American jazz, and his disdain for organized religion; in contrast to his adult evaluation of his adolescent self as being "a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs...a man with veins full of poison, living in death"[5]; in contrast to all this, Merton, the searcher, Merton the orphan was often Merton the seeker of solitude. In his unpublished novel, *The Straits of Dover*, Merton lyrically revels in the power of this landscape to feed his hungry spirit. He writes:

> I liked to be alone on top of it [Brooke Hill] and not have to talk to anyone...not have to listen to anyone else talk. Then I would walk, or

> sit, up there for hours, not waiting for anything or looking for anything or expecting anything, but simply looking out over the wide valley, and watching the changes of the light across the hills, and watching the changes of the sky....Sometimes I took paper and pencils up there, and sat under a tree drawing for an hour or two. But most of the time I just went up there to be there....[6]

What a contrast this is to the schoolboy with the reputation of being "something of a rebel" (G. Talbott Griffith, headmaster of Oakham, March 3, 1942).[7] What a contrast to the budding orator who frequently took the less likely position on a debate topic; what a contrast to the self-proclaimed agnostic who pressed his lips tightly together during required chapel attendance and the recitation of the Apostles' Creed. Listen again to this rebel's developing inner life as he describes the contemplative power of Brooke Hill:

> Most of all, I remember early winter sunsets on the hill. The sky would get streaked with slate colored clouds, and the west would fill with a soft pale crimson haze, with the sun a diffuse, red blur in the middle of it, hanging there for a long time, while the valleys darkened, and smoke spread flat over the frosty thatch of the villages, and the trees held their bare branches utterly still in the cold and silent air. Then you would walk home into the darkness of the valley, with your footsteps ringing loudly before you on the stony road.[8]

This heart of the painter's son was being nurtured and shaped by the colours and contours of the country setting. Those seeds of contemplation were, as William Shannon has suggested, a subtle spiritual awakening on Merton's individual "holy way."[9] He who had trod the path between chapel and library multiple times—now called the "Sacred Way" in honor of the dead from two World Wars—was unconsciously laying down his own sacred path and nourishing seeds that would later blossom into a life of fruitful solitude and contemplation to be shared with readers and seekers around the world.

While we enjoy probing these obvious moments of spiritual awakening in Thomas Merton's life, I want to propose that these well-known episodes are satisfying verbalizations of moments of communion with the Divine—verbalizations of going "beyond the shadow and the disguise." Furthermore, I want to propose—and propose strongly—that Merton's deeply-embedded love of nature not only nourished—but also

evoked—such moments of spiritual awakening, enabling him to discover that "the gate of heaven is everywhere."[10]

The Power of Nature

Shortly after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, while finishing his master's degree at Columbia University in New York City, the young Merton felt drawn to become a priest and so applied to the Franciscans. When that possibility met a dead end, Merton took a teaching job at a Franciscan college, St. Bonaventure, at the far western end of New York State. Here he loved to walk the snow-covered paths, reciting the Hours from the Breviary; in good weather he loved to climb the grassy hill behind the academic buildings—now known as "Merton's heart"—for solitude and meditation. What would the future hold for him? Where was he being called? At the nudging of his university mentor, Mark Van Doren, Merton made a Holy Week retreat in 1941 at the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. As he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain,* the "silence and solitude of the Kentucky hills" spoke to his soul. The "rolling country" and the "pale ribbon of road...stretching out as grey as lead in the light of the moon" beckoned to him.[11] Once inside the monastery, the beauty of the liturgy and the rigour of the lifestyle captivated his heart. He reveals in his journal that he experienced the whole earth coming to "new fruitfulness and significance, " with Gethsemani as the "center of America...holding this country together...This is a great and splendid palace...I tell you I cannot breathe."[12]

Back at St. Bonaventure with the spring blooms intoxicating the senses, the decision to leave all behind was a difficult one. Nevertheless, that next December, Merton once again made the long train journey to Bardstown, Kentucky to begin a life, as he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain,* within the "four walls of my new freedom."[13] If Merton's reveling in nature was somewhat subdued in those early days, it was primarily due to the living conditions in an overcrowded monastery. With 270 men packed into a space intended for 70, Merton and his monastic brothers were, as he says, at a "moment of crisis and transition."[14] New daughter houses, new outbuildings, and expanded farming helped Merton regain his equilibrium; the power of nature was unleashed to enhance his experience of God.

For example, in a July 2, 1948 journal entry, Merton recounts the beauty of the previous evening's vigil of the feast of the Visitation with its long hours of silence. He recalls the "deep peace" he experienced watching the "low-slanting rays" of the sun as they "picked out the foliage of the trees and high-lighted a new wheatfield against the dark curtain of woods on the knobs that were in shadow." This might sound like a Brooke Hill moment, but then comes his recognition of new spiritual insight. "I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation...anyway, I have no scruples about loving it."[15]

This admission is very important. It validates Merton's love of nature from his infant days when baby Tom, conscious of everything around him, often waved his little arms, crying: "Oh Sun! Oh joli!"[16]; when as a toddler he followed his father Owen on painting excursions; when as a pre-teen he loved exploring the French medieval town of Saint-Antonin; and when, during subsequent summers boarding with the Privat family, he freely roamed the hills of Murat. This admission validates his developing life of grace that was being nourished by the multiple faces of God revealed uniquely in each creature. And it validates the decision of Abbot Dom James Fox a year later to grant Merton permission to go beyond the confines of the enclosure to pray in the monastery woods. As Jonathan Montaldo notes in Volume II of the Journals, June 27, 1949 marks an important turning point in Merton's vocation when he "breaks out beyond a past mental and physical confinement."[17] I would add that Merton's spiritual awakening also makes a quantum leap after he is permitted time and space in God's wilderness to seek the solitude he craves. One could say that Merton's *longing* for a place to call home, his longing for a deeper relationship with the Divine is transformed into a sense of *belonging*. Indeed, in the woods, in nature, Merton experiences more frequent and deeper moments of spiritual awakening, two examples being New Year's Day 1950 and February 10th of that same year.

New Year's Day 1950.

In the midst of a raw winter downpour, Merton took one of the two communal raincoats and set off into the woods. Although it was not his intention, he found himself climbing one of the steepest knobs. Reaching

the top, he writes, "I found there was something terrible about the landscape. But it was marvelous. The completely unfamiliar aspect of the forest beyond our rampart unnerved me. It was as though I were in another country."[18] Some inner voice spoke to him: "Now you are indeed alone. Be prepared to fight the devil." If you sense here a resonance with William Wordsworth and his quest for an experience of the "sublime" when crossing the Simplon Pass or climbing Mount Snowdon, you are not mistaken. Merton is definitely on a quest. But, as the prophet Ezekiel experienced, God does not always speak in the mighty wind and rain, but in the silence of the quiet breeze. So, too, for Merton. Disappointed, and believing he has been on a fruitless quest, that he has not been privileged to engage in some existential battle with the forces of good and evil, Merton descends the hill. And, like Wordsworth, he experiences the "gentle shock of mild surprise"(*The Prelude*, Book V, l 382). Merton writes:

> Half way down, and in a place of comparative shelter, just before the pine trees begin, I found a bower God had prepared for me like Jonas' ivy. It had been designed especially for this moment. There was a tree stump, in an even place. It was dry and a small cedar arched over it, like a green tent, forming an alcove. There I sat in silence and loved the wind in the forest and listened for a good while to God.[19]

Wow! A bower designed for him by God. What intimacy! What an experience of the sublime in nature! What a moment of spiritual awakening! Merton concludes this journal entry with the telling words: "The peace of the woods steals over me when I am at prayer."[20] Nature has provided not the backdrop, but the vehicle of contemplation for Merton. In such intense moments of communion, matter and spirit reveal to Merton their essential unity. Inner and outer landscapes merge.

February 10, 1950

Two months later, Merton has another significant spiritual awakening. While praying one evening in the garden house attic that served as a quasi-hermitage for Merton in those early days, he became aware of excitement among the myriad starlings roosting and singing in the nearby trees. An eagle soaring overhead suddenly attacked a tree full of starlings, but, Merton writes, "before he was near them, the whole cloud

of them left the tree and avoided him and he came nowhere near them."[21] When peace had returned and the starlings were moving about the ground, once more singing, like lightning, it happened..."from behind the house and from over my roof, a hawk came down like a bullet, and shot straight into the middle of the starlings just as they were getting off the ground. They rose into the air and there was a slight scuffle on the ground as the hawk got his talons into the one bird he had nailed. It was a terrible and yet beautiful thing, that lightning flight, straight as an arrow, that killed the slowest starling."[22]

Merton tries to resume his prayer, but the hawk enjoying his supper in the adjacent meadow made his thoughts turn to medieval falconry, Arabian princes, and the way some people love war. "But in the end," writes Merton—and this is what is important about this scene—"I think that hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does his."[23]

Here is a somewhat common event illustrating the food chain of our planet, yet Merton is discovering significant spiritual insight from it. Practice. Practice. Practice. That hawk had honed his hunting skill over weeks, months, years (perhaps) and Merton's awe at the bird's focus is a poignant reminder to hone his own skills of solitude and contemplation. I think it is useful to listen to Merton's interpretive concluding paragraph to this event. In it, he addresses the hawk as a fellow artist, reveling in his craft; moreover, his comments are rich with allusions to Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "The Windhover," which celebrates another raptor who symbolizes Christ.

> I wonder if my admiration for you [the hawk] gives me an affinity for you, artist! I wonder if there will ever be something connatural between us, between your flight and my heart, stirred in hiding to serve Christ, as you, soldier, serve your nature. And God's love a thousand times more terrible! I am going back to the attic and the shovels and the broken window and the trains in the valley and the prayer of Jesus.[24]

Practice. Practice. Practice.

These two illustrations of Merton's spiritual awakening in nature are indicative, I believe, of the power of nature to evoke prayer and lasting significance in Merton's understanding of his vocation. Moreover, they provide clues for understanding Merton's fascination with nature and

the spiritual lessons contained therein. And this brings me more specifically to the passage noted in the title of my talk: "The birds ask if it is time to be?"

Le point vierge—Merton's Journal

The scene is ten years later, June 5, 1960, the feast of Pentecost. Merton's desire for more silence and solitude has been satisfied—at least temporarily. The Abbot has granted Merton permission to pray in an abandoned tool shed he names St. Ann's—spelled sometimes with an "e" and sometimes without. Merton has been ordained a priest for eleven years. Recent books such as *Seeds of Contemplation, The Sign of Jonas, No Man is an Island, Selected Poems,* and *Thoughts in Solitude* have been published, the latter drafted in summer afternoons within the quiet walls of St. Ann's. Merton is currently proofreading the galleys for *Disputed Questions,* and plans are being made to build a simple structure on the clearing known as Mount Olivet which, before the year is out, will become the hermitage Merton is allowed to use for daily periods of solitude and then in August 1965 permanently. But for now Merton has often prayed alone in the novitiate or outside in the woods. His childhood talent for noticing everything is in full sway. On this great feast of the birth of the church, Merton not only delights in his solitude but also recounts at length in his journal his exuberant and joyful experience of discovering what he calls the "full meaning of Lauds" during the pre-dawn moments of the previous Thursday.

Recited against a "background of waking birds and sunrise," Merton details the process of dawn: "At 2:30—no sounds except sometimes a bullfrog. Some mornings he says Om—some days he is silent. The sounds are not every day the same. The whippoorwill who begins his mysterious whoop about 3 o'clock is not always near. Sometimes, like today, he is very far away in Linton's woods or beyond. Sometimes he is close, on Mount Olivet. Yesterday there were two, but both in the distance."[25]

Such keen observation. Such a level of awareness, developed from life-long habits of noticing details of his surroundings. Merton continues:

> The first chirps of the waking birds—*le point vierge* [the virgin point] of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering

> if it is time to 'be'? And He tells them. 'Yes.' Then they one by one wake and begin to sing. First the catbirds and cardinals and some others I do not recognize. Later, song sparrows, wrens, etc. Last of all doves, crows....[26]

Notice the awe and innocence of this description. The birds ask if it is time to be. Not just: can I wake up and move around, but can I come into being? What clarity and what profundity! Merton has skillfully articulated the genesis of day, that moment of creation repeated daily all over our planet, indeed, at every moment as the Creator lovingly keeps each of us in being.

Yes, Merton is a good writer. We might be tempted to dismiss this account as mere poetic whimsy or the rhapsodic gesture of a pen gone wild, but Merton is not finished. His next paragraph, which does not occur in the more detached, even objective, version published later in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* identifies the intimacy of this spiritual awakening, the more intense dawn—and dawning—that is taking place in his inner landscape. Listen to his journal response to this awesome moment of awakening:

> With my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise, and I behold this secret, this wide open secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention....Not even monks, shut up under fluorescent lights and face to face with the big books and the black notes and with one another, perhaps no longer seeing or hearing anything in the course of festive Lauds.[27]

In 47 words, all but three of them having monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon roots, Merton has captured the essence of "going beyond the shadow and the disguise." He has sketched for us the first glimmer of morning and allowed that physical light to pierce the darkness of his soul. This dawn—and every dawn for Merton—becomes a true experience of contemplation. The external, awesome awakening of morning echoes the equally awesome, internal awakening of his spirit. With his hair standing on end, Merton is fully alive, enjoying an unforgettable and deeply focused experience of contemplation.

Merton returns to this insight two years later in *New Seeds of Contemplation* in his definition of contemplative prayer. Contemplation, he writes, is the "response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice,

and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being...It is awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life...Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive."[28]

We are privileged, in Volume IV of Merton's journals, to be privy to this awareness, this intense engagement with creation. Yet, we must not overlook a tone of lament in his interpretive comment. Although this genesis event is repeated daily and open to everyone, only those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can enter into the depths and richness of the moment. For the time being, however, Merton is alone with this awesome communion and with a spiritual lesson that allows him perspective on his periodic desire to transfer to a more austere community with more pervasive solitude. He writes: "Oh paradise of simplicity, self-awareness—and self-forgetfulness—liberty, peace...In this I have realized how silly and unreal are my rebellions, and yet how unavoidable is the pressure and artificiality of certain situations which 'have to be' because they are officially sacrosanct. Yet there is no need to rebel, only to ask *mercy*. And to trust in mercy. Which is what I have not done."[29]

Merton's dawn is a powerful spiritual lesson about the necessity of awareness, focus, and the value of "practice, practice, practice" that uncovers the greatest grace of all: God's mercy. How often Merton returns to this theme of mercy. It appears at the end of the famous Firewatch passage in *The Sign of Jonas* on July 4, 1952, when, in awe looking at the expanse of sky, he hears the Voice of God in Paradise: "What is vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile...What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel...Mercy with mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin."[30]

A few years later coming down to the monastery from the hermitage on a frosty winter morning under the "multitude of stars," Merton—triggered by the soul-stirring presence of nature—again has a spiritual awakening to this gift of mercy. He is "suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the immense mercy of God was upon me, that the Lord in infinite kindness had looked down on me and given me this vocation out of love, and that he had always

intended this, and how foolish and trivial had been all my fears and twistings and desperation."[31]

Mercy—a wonderful spiritual awakening to an immense gift.

Le point vierge—Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander

But let's return for a second look at our dawn birds and their request to be. When Merton revises this passage for inclusion in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he places it as the opening vignette in Part Three entitled "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air," a reference to Mencius, the 4th century Chinese mystic, and his insistence on the critical importance of rest, and regeneration. In this revised for publication version of *le point vierge*, the intimacy of the moment—the stark honesty of Merton's hair standing on end—is omitted.[32] According to the book's Preface, Merton, in *Conjectures*, is *constructing* his "personal vision of the world in the 1960s" by fitting passages together "in a spontaneous, informal philosophic scheme in such a way that they react upon each other."[33] That can be both good and bad. Such construction, you can be sure, will have the reader in mind as the primary target of his remarks—not Merton's own intimate and spiritual reaction to an event.

Indeed, in this reconstruction of the June 5, 1960 journal passage, more detail is given to the slow procession of dawn and the awakening of the birds—possibly so that the reader can transport him/herself into the scene. The bullfrog in the ponds gets another sentence of description; the whippoorwill's call is now "mysterious and uninterrupted." Similarly, Merton's original lament that others do not see this amazing event now extends beyond the monks, blinded by their fluorescent lights and large choir books, to indict all of us. We, the readers of *Conjectures*, are now his audience, the ones missing the awesome and central, yet delicate and tender, action of God. We are the blind, Merton chides, with "Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static...Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand...It is wide open...'Wisdom,' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend."[34] You and I stand exposed, duly chastised.

One consistent phrase, however, that appears in both the journal version and in the published *Conjectures* is worth mining for its original significance and Merton's intent in retaining it, namely *le point vierge.*

This French phrase can be traced ultimately to the Sufi mystics, by way of Merton's correspondence with Louis Massignon, yet cannot be satisfactorily translated. English speakers usually take it to mean the virgin point, the cusp, or break of dawn, that awesome moment of transition between dark and light, night and day. I like to describe it as the moment of poise when anything is possible. In the world of Shakespeare, for example, mid-summer's eve is such a virgin point, a moment of poise, when fairy magic can alter the usual and expected rhythm of the world; similarly, in athletics, *le point vierge* for the competitive platform diver is the moment of poise when, balanced on her toes and envisioning the triple somersault with a half twist about to be performed, the diver and indeed the entire crowd hold its breath for what will transpire; for the basketball star standing at the free throw line, it is that timeless pause just before his fingers release the ball. When Merton uses the phrase *le point vierge*, he is investing the phrase not only with this meaning of "virgin point," but also with what scripture scholars would refer to as levels of meaning—what we might call "surplus meaning."

Certainly, in the dawn passage in his journal and its revision in *Conjectures*, Merton is intending to lyrically pinpoint the mystery of transformation, the magic of each day's creation. To have birds daily asking the Father permission "to be" and to have them waking up one by one paints a stunning picture of creation and recreation—*le point vierge*—the pregnant moment of poise and God's mercy that is all around us. But Merton intends more resonance, more layers of meaning, to this phrase than mere lyricism—surplus meaning that becomes clearer in *Conjectures* and in the miniature vignette of his days in the hermitage, written that same year, entitled *Day of a Stranger*.

In *Conjectures*, a mere twenty-five pages after the dramatic, opening scene of the birds waking, yet still in the section devoted to "the night spirit and the dawn air," Merton inserts an account of his spiritual awakening at Fourth and Walnut. This published version has the added imagery, not found in the original journal entry, of the people "all walking around shining like the sun." As he expands the journal account of this epiphanic moment to reflect further on its spiritual meaning and the discovery of his unity with each of them, Merton returns to the phrase *le point vierge*, pertaining now to the inner spark in each of us that

is God. *Le point vierge* is still the virgin point, the moment of poise, but it takes on surplus meaning of major significance. Merton writes:

> Again, that expression, *le point vierge* (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely...I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.[35]

Yes, indeed another lyrical passage, but now the beauty and sharp imagery of *le point vierge*, the virginal point, is not just out there in nature; it is within each human being. Yes, it is the moment of creation, that daily creation of the world and the second-by-second recreation of our being, but it is also the living presence of God within us. *Le point vierge* is both an event and an indwelling. It is a point of time and a point of being.

Le point vierge for the birds is their innocent awakening in response to the Father's ongoing love; *le point vierge* is also the sustaining spark of Divinity within that allows us to recognize our unity with each other and with God's Self. If we saw ourselves as we really are, "shining like the sun," we would rejoice in that absolute poverty within because there—in that inner point of nothingness—we discover God. We discover our True Self in God. Merton, the *bystander*, sees the beauty, the innocence, and the free gift of the dawn, expressed intimately by the birds asking the Father if it is time to be. Then they awaken one by one. Merton, the *guilty* bystander, committed to solitude and contemplation, experiences a related awakening, namely that our inner, absolute poverty is to be recognized, celebrated, and cherished. Our *point vierge* is where we truly exist in God. This inner nothingness, "untouched by sin and by illusion" is, because of God's mercy, the hidden ground of Love.

This inner nothingness, this *point vierge*, is our paradise and its gate is everywhere—if only we are aware.

How does Merton do it? How does Merton grasp such weighty theological insights and offer them to us in simple, yet challenging pictures? Surely, he can do it because he is a writer. Surely, he can do it because he works at responding to grace through silence, solitude, and contemplation. But just as surely, nature plays a part in the revelation of Divine secrets. In the silence of the dawn, watching for the first sign of light, Merton sees not only the genesis of the day, but also his own inner genesis that is always innocent and pure. When the birds say "yes" to the Father, they wake up; when Merton acknowledges the pure glory of God within, he says "yes" to a fuller and deeper level of prayer and spiritual consciousness. Awakening to the presence of God within is responding to the generative power of the Creator "to be" in a new way. I need to repeat Merton's startling journal exclamation to his experience of *le point vierge*: "With my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise."[36]

This spiritual awakening with its gift of mercy is such a deep and pervading theme in Merton's prayer and experience that it functions also as focal point in his 1965 description of his life in the hermitage. Published as *Day of a Stranger*—note again the use of the word "stranger,"—Merton lives in the woods, he says, "of necessity," in a kind of "ecological balance."[37] Each day is immersed in nature, increased awareness of mercy, and attention to the call "to be." Daily, he writes:

> I am out of bed at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent...I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark, looking for a light, not totally reconciled to being out of bed...A light appears and in the light an ikon. There is now in the large darkness a small room of radiance with psalms in it. The psalms grow up silently by themselves without effort like plants in this light which is favorable to them. The plants hold themselves up on stems which have a single consistency, that of mercy, or rather great mercy. *Magna misericordia.* In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy...The birds begin to wake. It will soon be dawn.[38]

A few pages later, he writes: "It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at

the resurrection of Day, in the blank silence when the sun appears. In this completely neutral instant I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'DAY', which is never the same. It is never spoken in any known language."[39]

What to make of yet another exuberant description of the breaking dawn, *le point vierge*? First, I think we must acknowledge Merton's love of and immersion in nature. Then, in the light of his use of the term twice in *Conjectures* and his obvious reference to it in *Day of a Stranger*, we must recognize and acknowledge the power of nature to inform his spiritual life. Merton's journals and published writing confirm that nature is a primary vehicle for experiencing the inner secrets of the Divine—for experiencing them deeply, profoundly, and with lasting impact. Dawn, *le point vierge*, and its accompanying gift of mercy, signal not just another genesis moment at twenty-four hour intervals, but the continuous revelation of the Divine in the unfolding of the universe. Merton's love of colour, landscape, creatures, rain, stars, dawn nourish his contemplation of this unfolding; all aspects of nature enable him frequently and deeply to go "beyond the shadow and the disguise." Indeed, as Merton's awareness of external landscape intensifies, his awareness and exploration of his internal landscape also intensifies. And in that inner landscape there is room to embrace issues of social justice, non-violence, dialogue between East and West, Buddhism and Islam.

Nature invites Communion with the Divine

Finding God in creatures was not as Merton first believed merely a stepping stone to God, but rather a bursting forth, an ongoing encounter with the Divine. Once he discovered how "landscape is important for contemplation," once he was permitted to wander in the woods, lakes, and knobs beyond the confines of the enclosure, Merton's capacity for contemplation expanded. Each foray into nature with its accompanying spiritual insight was an invitation to discover how God "plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation," and how we are invited to "follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance."[40] As he declared in an August 12, 1965 journal entry, "Our very creation itself is a beginning of revelation. Making us in His image, God reveals Himself to us, we are already His words to ourselves! Our very creation itself is a vocation to union with Him and our life, and in the world around us, if we persist in

honesty and simplicity, cannot help speaking of Him and of our calling."[41] Merton could not be more clear: our creation is itself a vocation to union with God.

No doubt Polonnaruwa was an important moment of clarity for Merton, but it was not the first or only significant experience in his spiritual awakening. His journals and his public writing disprove that assertion. Much of Merton's life was spent in what the Church liturgy calls "ordinary time." Sometimes we mistakenly think of important God-moments occurring only at Christmas or Easter or Pentecost; Advent and Lent are meant to sharpen our focus for these great liturgical celebrations. But we need to be aware—and Merton's life offers witness to this lesson—that God's action is not restricted to holidays, holy days, and *kairos* events of momentous import. The magnificence of sunrise, yet its dailyness—its inevitability, its cyclic rhythm—is stunning. The birds never tire of coming to be. They wake up and become birds—not a miracle of transforming themselves into another species, nor a mutation into some master flock—just ordinary birds waking to an ordinary day. Indeed, the message in ordinariness is how truly extraordinary it is.

Merton knew in the depths of his whole being how God's action, God's presence is also known in the natural rhythm of the day—ordinary time, daily moments like the awakening of birds, like sunrise, like silent rain, like the hint of spring in the greening woods. It is ordinary moments like these when, if we, too, are keenly aware, God reveals God's Self.

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