

speaks of "...Nhat Hanh is my brother... I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cut across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program" (Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh, *Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization*, Robert H. King Continuum Books New York 2001, p.19).

In our present situation, these words of Merton need some alteration but they are just as relevant now as then. William Apel's book is an excellent introduction to Merton's prophetic and visionary view of interfaith dialogue.

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Merton's Palace of Nowhere

James Finley
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The late Dom Aelred Graham, a monk of Downside Abbey back in the middle of the twentieth century wrote that in the future people will leave the church, not because they have forsaken

spirituality but for the sake of spirituality. There seems to be much evidence today of the accuracy of this prophecy. For instance the number of Roman Catholics regularly attending Mass has dropped significantly, whereas the interest in books on spirituality and prayer has burgeoned. Similarly there is a great concern over issues of social justice, human dignity, the environment and authentic community. With this as a background then it is interesting that a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* should have recently been published.

Just a few years ago, James Finley was one of the keynote speakers at a General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. Several hundred attended his talk and there was standing room only in the auditorium. Dozens of those attending, including many influential writers, theologians and spiritual teachers gave eloquent testimony to the influence that this book has had on their life. For many of them it marked their initiation into the work of one of the twentieth century's greatest writers: Thomas Merton. For others it was the catalyst that began a life of committed contemplative prayer. All maintained that this was a book that, over the years, they continued to return to for help and encouragement. When asked to write this review I looked once again at my original edition and found that virtually every page had passages underlined.

If I had any criticism it would be that Finley could have spoken more from his own experience rather than simply giving a constant succession of Merton quotes. At the beginning of this anniversary edition Finley points out that the book is a result of five years of reflection on his

experience of spending five and a half years as a monk at Gethsemani with Thomas Merton as his spiritual director. Finley begins the book with an introduction, "Upon Learning to See". Contemplative prayer as taught by Merton is a practice that enables the practitioner to see clearly the true nature of things. In the introduction, Finley shows how Merton clears away any grand and esoteric ideas about contemplative prayer, making the point that it is firmly located in the ordinariness of everyday life. Brother Patrick Hart, Merton's secretary at the monastery, makes the same vital point in his foreword to this edition, pointing out that this is highlighted in the episode when, during one of the spiritual direction meetings,

Finley once asked Merton questions concerning the more advanced stages of mystical prayer. Father Louis [as Merton was known in the monastery], changed gears quickly and asked Brother Finbar [James Finley] to tell him about his work with the calves and how he found his job looking after their needs. Wise man. We reveal our true selves – as well as our growth in the spiritual life – as we go about ordinary daily chores and above all in our relationships with our brothers and sisters.

The introduction also asserts that the underlying thesis of the book clearly rests on the fact that:

Merton's whole spirituality, in one way or another, pivots on the question of ultimate human identity. Merton's message is that we are one

with God. What Merton repeatedly draws us to is the realization that our own deepest self is not so much our own self as it is the self one with the "Risen and Deathless Christ in Whom all are fulfilled in One."

The book then deals with "The Foundation of the False Self" that obscures our awareness of our true identity. With this established, the reader has the journey to the "Realization of the True Self" outlined. In this, Finley well captures Merton's profound and often humorous teaching. This is nowhere more apparent than in the incisive quote that Finley gives from Merton on the danger of a spirituality driven by the false self:

The idea that you can choose yourself, approve yourself, and then offer yourself (fully 'chosen' and 'approved') to God implies the assertion of yourself over against God. From this root of error comes all the sour leafage and fruitage of a life of self-examination, interminable problems and unending decisions always making right choices, walking on the razor edge of an impossibly subtle ethic... all this implies the frenzied conviction that one can be his own light and his own justification, and that God is there for a purpose: to issue a stamp of confirmation upon my own rightness. In such a religion the Cross becomes meaningless except as the (blasphemous) certification that because you suffer, because you are misunderstood, you are justified twice over – you are a martyr. Martyr means witness. You are then a witness. To what? To your own

infallible light and your own justice, which you have chosen. This is the exact opposite of everything Jesus ever did or taught.

Through careful use of quotations from a variety of Merton's books on spirituality, Finley leads his readers to Merton's awakening not only to his own true nature but that of everyone. Finley quotes from Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* where out of his own personal epiphany experience, Merton pinpoints an awareness that becomes utterly life-changing.

At the centre 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...

As I re-read this book I clearly saw the reason why so many people over the past twenty five years have found the book so helpful. Finley's exposition of Merton's teaching demonstrates well how Merton's academic study of the early monastic and contemplative practice in both the Christian and Zen traditions was integrated into his own lived experience. The book shows how Merton is then able to convey this to his readers in a contemporary language which is readily accessible to those drawn to contemplative prayer. In an age when much traditional religious language has become no more than soporific

sound-bites, the language of Merton still speaks in a lively way to today's spiritual seeker.

Following those who, for the last twenty-five years, have been challenged and enriched by *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, I am sure that the publication of this anniversary edition will prompt a whole new crop of readers to take its wise guidance on their life's journey. That many will buy the book, read it, live it and follow it up with many more of Merton's books is my fervent hope.

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Living with Wisdom – A Life of Thomas Merton

Jim Forest

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£8.99

This book came to me a few days before Christmas – a season when we get back in touch with old friends. In many ways, that may be your experience if you were to read this book. You may well have seen or owned it before, but maybe lost or loaned it, or you may have never quite got round to buying it; but as you read it, it will probably feel familiar. This book is written by someone who was inspired by Merton, and later became a friend. It gives an overview of Merton's life, from his itinerant early years, to his search for satisfaction, to his conversion and commitment to the Cistercians, to his