

Learning to Live and Go On Living

Erlinda G. Paguio

I read Thomas Merton's autobiography when I was a sophomore high school student in Manila, Philippines. Back then I did not know where Louisville and the Abbey of Gethsemani were located in Kentucky. It is God's Providence that led me to emigrate to the United States, first to settle in Chicago and then to Louisville. I remember the first time I went to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1974. My father had difficulty finding the place and it seemed it took forever to get there. Today it is a familiar drive and Gethsemani is always on our itinerary for visiting friends. We would do some distillery tours on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail and then go to Gethsemani for a taste of the real Spirit.

As we commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Merton's death I want to reflect on some of the quotations from Merton's writings that taught me how to live and how to keep on going.

'Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptively in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because

men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.'¹

My understanding of these seeds of life was most limited when I was young. I recall attending daily Mass throughout high school and college, joining some religious organizations such as the Sodality of Mary and the Legion of Mary, and doing some apostolic work in our parish church. I had no idea what contemplation meant. I know now that prayer and my many ordinary, sometimes painful, sometimes joyful experiences in life have helped me discern the deep meaning of Merton's teaching that God's inscrutable love seeks us in every situation, seeks our good, and seeks our awakening.²

He has helped me understand that contemplation is actually simple openness to God at every moment, a real experience of His nearness and closeness to us and deep peace.

Merton believed very strongly about the possibility of having an uninterrupted dialogue with God if we are attentive to the reality that changes everyday in our life. In several of his writings he constantly refers to the need to be awake, to listen, to be in tune to the present moment, and to be mindful of what goes on

within and outside us. Merton found comfort in the way nature spoke to him of God's presence. He wrote in 1957:

"Watching those birds was as food for meditation or as mystical reading. Perhaps better. ... I found a bird in the woods yesterday on the feast of St. Francis. Those things say so much more than words...."

He then added:

"No name and no word to identify the beauty and reality of those birds today, is the gift of God to me in letting me see them."³

In Merton's essay, 'Love and Living', he discussed what life consists of and what education means in a person's life. He notes that education aims at helping a person to discover who he is and how he can relate authentically and spontaneously to the world. He said: "Life consists in learning to live on one's own spontaneous freewheeling; to do this one must recognize what is one's own—be familiar and at home with oneself."⁴

During my first two years in Chicago I felt very uncomfortable whenever my officemates or classmates remarked that I had a foreign accent whenever I spoke. My English was not bad at all, but I felt self-conscious when the people I talked to noticed my accent. I tried my best to speak like an American, but I felt fake and self-conscious doing so. I resolved that I would not do that anymore. After all, English is not my first language and it should not matter to me or to anyone if I spoke with an accent. Eventually my ac-

cent disappeared when I stopped trying hard to remove it.

Merton also wrote that it is important to learn who we are and what we can offer as a valid contribution to the world we live in. We have learned to be ourselves, he said, when we have learned to die in the trials of each day so that we may live. "When you are no longer pretending or disguising yourself, you become truly free—free not to kill, not to exploit, not to destroy, not to compete, because you are no longer afraid of death or the devil or poverty or failure."⁵ This quotation reminds me of a good friend

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who lives on a small boat on the Ohio River. He stopped holding an office job several years ago to devote his life to prayer and to do volunteer work at a local center for homeless people. He also drives the elderly to where they need to go. Although I worry about him when it is icy cold in the winter and sizzling hot during the summer, I know that he is who he is and he is available to anyone who needs his help.

Learning for some people stops after they leave school. Merton says that the least of the work of learning is done in the classroom. There are many incidents,

remarks, encounters and happenings in our life that can enlighten us. From his own experience Merton recalled Mark Van Doren's remark to him while crossing a street in New York. Mark said: "Well, if you have a vocation to the monastic life, it will not be possible for you to decide not to enter [the monastery]." Merton said that he immediately grasped the existential reality of that statement.⁶

Learning to live also includes learning to listen to our body. The Zen Buddhists say: when you are hungry, you eat; when you are cold, you freeze; when it is hot, you perspire. There is no point in complaining about it. You live through the reality of what is in front of and around you. Merton points out that every act however small can teach us everything, provided we see who it is that is acting. In one of his conferences to contemplative nuns in 1967, he stressed the need to experience life directly.⁷

I remember trimming bushes in our yard on a hot and humid morning a few summers ago. By noon I had finished trimming eleven bushes and had one more to do. My body told me that it was time to stop, but my mind said, "Go on, Erlinda. One more bush and you will be done." I continued to trim and did not realize until it was too late that I had disturbed a beehive hidden inside the bush. The bees buzzed around and stung me. I ran away frantically and went inside the house. After taking my allergy pill, I realized why one bee got into my ear. The message in its buzzing seemed to say: Listen...listen...listen."

Merton has helped me become aware of what I do and how I should do my work. In his conference with contemplative nuns in 1968, Merton said: "The work of

the householder, the work of a tradesman, the work of a basketmaker, the work of a farmer, whatever the duties of your state of life, they can become a way to being unified...But everything depends on *how* you do it. You have to learn to do your work in such a way that it leads you to complete enlightenment. Nothing else is necessary."⁸

Citing from his own experience, Merton related to the nuns the most satisfying experience of sorting paper for the little magazine *Monk's Pond*, which he published. At first it seemed so routine and ordinary, but once he did it, he enjoyed the process of sorting papers before taking them to the printer.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote that, "the requirements of a work to be done can be understood as the will of God. If I am supposed to hoe a garden or make a table, then I will be obeying God if I am true to the task I am performing. To do the work carefully and well, with love and respect for the nature of my task and with due attention to its purpose, is to unite myself to God's will in my work. In this way I become His instrument. He works through me."⁹

In 1968, while Merton and Dr. Amiya Chakravarty were in India, Dr. Chakravarty took Merton to the studio and home of Jamini Roy, one of the most revered painters of modern India. Jamini Roy said: "Tell the American saint that this is my vocation and my life work; I live here with my family and myself, prepare the colors, the paper and the brushes; my life is one." Merton replied: "As a Trappist monk, my life is one piece, in the way that you have put it. If I make cheese it has to be right, if I work on the land I draw a straight furrow, if I sing the

Gregorian chant it has to be authentic."¹⁰

Learning to live includes of course learning to pray. David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk and a master at teaching the spirituality of gratitude, recalled his last conversation with Merton about prayer. Merton said: "If we really want prayer, we'll have to give it time. We must slow down to a human tempo and we'll begin to have time to listen. And as soon as we listen to what's going on, things will begin to take shape by themselves. But for this we have to experience time in a new way."¹¹

Merton shared his experience of being attentive to the times of the day when he went to his hermitage: when the birds began to sing and the deer came out of the morning fog, and the sun came up. He said: "The reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. Today time is a commodity, and for each of us time is mortgaged... We are threatened by a chain reaction: overwork, overstimulation, overreaction, overcompensation, overstimulation, overkill."¹² Merton teaches that we must approach the whole idea of time in a new way... Every moment is God's own good time, his *kairos*. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.¹³

In learning to live we need to look at and pay attention to the other persons in our life whether they are close to us or not. In Merton's essay, 'The Good Samaritan', he repeats Christ's message that we must be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. His mercy falls on both the

good and the bad. We must love the helpless and receive love from them as we realize our own helplessness.¹⁴ Merton clearly states that Christ Himself is in the person of the wounded person in the wayside, and Christ who comes by in the person of the Samaritan. "And Christ is the bond, the compassion and the understanding between them... When there is on the one hand a helpless one, beaten and half dead, and on the other an outcast with no moral standing, and one leans down in pity to help the other, then there takes place a divine epiphany and an awakening. The Presence of God is made manifest on earth whenever there is a movement of compassion."¹⁵

The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it

The image of a drug addict in Chicago came to my mind as I remembered this quotation. I was waiting for the Northwest train one windy and frigid afternoon in 1970 when I noticed a young man who had no hat, no gloves and no socks. His sweater was very thin and he kept on moving about because he was trembling and very cold. I was warmly dressed and could not help but feel compassion for him. The train was delayed so I timidly approached him and gave him my woolen muffler. "This will keep you warm until the train comes," I said. He thanked

me profusely for it. When the train came, we sat on the same seat. He told me that he was a drug addict and that the teenagers in his street were mocking him. Some even stoned him. I asked him what he intended to do with his life. He said that he was going to seek help. After a few minutes, the train slowed down and I stood up. As I left he quickly removed my scarf from his neck and tried to return it to me. I said to him, "You can keep it. Don't fail to seek help tonight." He nodded and thanked me again. I have sometimes wondered whether that nameless drug addict really sought help that evening. I will never know. I just have to believe that he did.

In Merton's 1966 Christmas morning circular letter to his friends, he assured them of his prayer for all their needs.

"Be sure that I keep all these needs you have mentioned in my prayers and think often of all these problems: God knows, you are by no means alone. Most of you, even with all that you suffer, are much better off than you realize. Yet the heart of man can be full of so much pain, even when things are exteriorly 'all right'. It becomes all the more difficult because today we are used to thinking that there are explanations for everything. But there is no explanation for what goes on in our own hearts, and we cannot account for it all."¹⁶

Merton believed that things will be resolved if we learn how to have a deep inner patience and believe that God would help us. "...Just learn to wait, and

do what you can and help other people. Often in helping someone else we find the best way to bear with our own trouble."¹⁷

I want to conclude my reflections with Merton's message to the world in 1967, which he sent through Dom Francis Decroix, Abbot of the Cistercian Monastery of Frattochie near Rome. It sums up Merton's own experience of God that he wants to share with each of us.

"...it is my joy to tell you to hope though you think that for you of all men hope is impossible. Hope not because you think you can be good, but because God loves us irrespective of our merits and whatever is good in us comes from His love, not from our own doing. Hope because Jesus is with those who are poor and outcasts and perhaps despised... The message of hope the contemplative life offers you... is... that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons."¹⁸

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (NY: New Directions Books, 1972; subsequently referenced as NSOC), p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, edited by Laurence Cunningham (NY: Harper/San Francisco, 1996), p. 124.

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4. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (NY: First Harvest/HBJ Edition, 1985).
 5. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
 6. Ibid., p. 14.
 7. Thomas Merton, *Springs of Contemplation*, edited by Jane Marie Richardson (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1992), p. 143.
 8. Ibid., p. 155.
 9. NSOC, p. 19.
 10. *Pilgrim in Progress*, edited by Michael Higgins and Donald Grayston (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983), p. 171.
 11. *Thomas Merton, Monk. A Monastic Tribute*, compiled by Brother Patrick Hart (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1974), p. 82.
 12. Ibid., p. 83.
 13. Idem.
 14. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, edited by Thomas P. McConnell (NY: Image Books, 1974), p. 354.
 15. Ibid., p. 355.
 16. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Old and New Friends*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) pp. 92-95.
 17. Ibid.
 18. *The Hidden Ground of Love, The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William Shannon (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 156-157.
- Erlinda G. Paguio** is Director of Development Research at the University of Louisville. She is an active member of the ITMS, having served as Treasurer, Vice President, and President.