

Non finis quaerendi: My Journey with Thomas Merton

Donald Grayston

It's the spring of 1954. I'm in Grade 10 at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver. I've heard that a new library is opening on Dunbar Street. I check it out, browse a little, and then notice a book with an unusual binding, a kind of burlap. It is *Seeds of Contemplation*, by someone named Thomas Merton. I read the first two or three pages, and remember thinking, 'This is deep, and I don't understand it—but someday, I will'.

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It's the summer of 1958. I have a job in the lab at the MacMillan Bloedel pulp mill in Port Alberni, on Vancouver Island. I am downtown in a drugstore, looking among the paperbacks for something to read, when I notice a book with a lurid cover. It depicts a number of small figures in various painful or suggestive poses; and there in the foreground, a larger figure, a man in a

monastic cowl, with the hood pulled over his head. The title of the book: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, by the man who wrote that book with the curious binding, Thomas Merton. I smile now at the come-ons on the cover: 'A Widely Acclaimed Bestseller'; 'The Revealing Experience of a Man Who Withdrew From the World.' Couldn't resist, had to buy it.

A week or two later, I was reading it on the graveyard shift. Among the students who staffed the lab, it was understood that that was a good time for reading. The work of eight hours could be done in four hours, leaving lots of time for reading; and since the supervisors never came around on the graveyard shift, why not? It turned out, however, that 'never' was something of an overstatement. A supervisor came in about 3.00 am, frowned at me, scribbled something in the log, frowned at me again, and departed. I went over to the log and read what he had written, which was this: 'If I catch you reading on the job again, your time with MacMillan Bloedel is over.' OK, got it. Work at half-speed, fill the eight hours. But the incident fixed in my mind the exact time that I was reading Merton's youthful autobiography. I still have that well-read edition, now held together by an elastic band.

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It's the spring of 1972. I'm work-

ing in Rossland, BC, just a few miles north of the US border. Our closest big city is Spokane, Washington, and I am down there for a short break. I go into a Catholic bookstore, and notice a book bearing that name again, Thomas Merton. It is by Ed Rice and is called *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*. Ah, Thomas Merton! Whatever became of him?

I read the book, and the rest is history. I had just been accepted to do graduate work in Toronto, and had a vague idea of doing it on the reconfiguration of Christian spirituality for our swiftly changing culture. Merton (even in Ed Rice's somewhat idiosyncratic characterization) immediately commended himself to me as my guide in that endeavour. I didn't then know the term 'public intellectual', but I can see now that it was that dimension of Merton's life and work that first attracted me.

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Now it's the fall of the same year. I have moved to Toronto, and need to choose my courses. Would there be a course offered on Thomas Merton? Ah, very good, yes: at St Michael's, one of the colleges in the Toronto School of Theology. The instructor was Joanne McWilliam Dewart, former wife of one of Merton's correspondents, Leslie Dewart. Two memories stand out: a dramatic reading of 'The Tower of

Babel' at her home, and a visit to the class by a young grad student doing his PhD in the English Department at York University, a certain Michael Higgins. That was the beginning of a wonderful friendship, one of non-stop stimulation and hilarity, to which anyone who knows Michael will attest.

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My first degree in Toronto was a Th.M., and a thesis was required; on Merton, naturally—but from what angle? I reacquainted myself with *Seeds of Contemplation*, and then with its successor volume, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Perhaps a comparison of the changes from the first to the second versions? Then I discovered that between these two, Merton had published a revised version of *Seeds* in December 1949 (the first version had been published in March). The structure of the thesis presented itself to me on the spot. I am happy these many years later to acknowledge here its masterly supervision (and later, of my dissertation) by Professor Herbert W. Richardson. And so, twenty years later, my intuition that day in 1954 in the Dunbar Library came full circle.

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I then started on my PhD, and in so doing felt that the time had come for me to visit the holy city of Louisville, and the Merton Center. I re-

ceived a warm welcome from longtime director Bob Daggy, and, when I went to Gethsemani, from Brother Patrick Hart. My signal discovery on that visit was that there existed two typescripts related to my thesis, one a typescript of *Seeds* which pre-existed the first published version, the other a typescript containing the changes to the first two versions which appeared in *New Seeds*. These, I learned, were in the collection of Sr Thérèse Lentfoehr, of Racine, Wisconsin, who had served as extern secretary to Merton, particularly during the time when he was prohibited by his order from publishing works that in the order's view were 'unmonastic' (!).

I contacted Sr Thérèse, who invited me to visit her. We made a fine connection, and soon came to the question of the typescripts. I was prepared to photocopy them, with her permission, and take the copies back to Toronto. I suggested this, and then came a memorable moment. She held them out to me, then clutched them back to her chest, repeated these actions, and finally thrust them at me with the happy words, 'Just take them'. I took these precious originals with me back to Toronto, had them copied, and returned them to Sr Thérèse, with my sincere thanks for her trust.

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It's now 1977. I haven't finished my dissertation, but the time has

come to move back to Vancouver and get a job. The following year would be the tenth anniversary of Merton's death and it seemed to Michael Higgins and myself that the time was ripe for a commemoration, which in fact was the first major conference on Merton. It was held at the Vancouver School of Theology in the spring of 1978, with a number of the pioneers of Merton studies present: Bob Daggy, Naomi Burton Stone, Amiya Chakravarty, William Shannon, Sr Thérèse and others, about 120 in all. (Here I gratefully acknowledge the loan of \$1500 from my dear father, without which we would not have been able to pull this off.) The conference was immediately followed by The People's Merton Festival. The name, serious then, humorous now, suggests we were still in the penumbra of the sixties, as indeed we were. The CBC did TV specials for both English and French networks and a selection of the conference papers, edited by Michael and myself, was published in 1983.¹

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I had put my dissertation on hold for the sake of this project, and when that was completed, turned my attention to it once again. I am grateful that my parish, All Saints in Burnaby, BC, gave me a three-month leave of absence in the summer of 1979 to move the dissertation towards completion. By the

fall, only the final chapter remained to be written. I wrote this last chapter in an incandescent stretch of four or five hours on January 31, 1980, Merton's 65th birthday. I had the strange feeling that it was my fingers and not my brain doing the writing and as I pulled each page out of the typewriter, I read it as if for the first time, as if it had been infused rather than composed. After pulling the last page out, I shook it in the direction of whatever realm in which Merton is located, and addressed him thus: 'OK, Tom, you have eaten up the last seven years of my life, and given that you are 65 today, I am retiring you.' Anyone who knows Merton, of course, will realize that he cannot be so easily dismissed. I am happy that he did not take me seriously, and continues to challenge, irritate, stretch and inspire me. The dissertation was published in two volumes.²

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In 1989 I went to the inaugural general meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in Louisville. I had proposed a paper on Merton and Polonnaruwa, but a week before the conference hadn't started on the paper. I had to be in Montréal the week before, and took advantage of being there to hole up in the library at McGill. I read *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* three times in rapid succession all the way through and on the third

reading, it fell wide open before me, much as did the ox disassembled by the cleaver of Prince Wen Hui's cook.³ I did my presentation, telling myself that when I got home, I would write up my notes and submit the paper for publication. I finally did that, a mere 23 years later⁴ and presented in abbreviated form as a paper to the 2013 general meeting. I am glad, in fact, to have taken so long to commit my early intuitions about Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa to writing, because it brought me closer than I was in 1989 to the experience of which he spoke in his last talk, at Samut Prakhan. 'The monk,' he says (and as non-monastics, the rest of us can also desire what he describes),

is a man who has attained, or is about to attain, or seeks to attain, full realization. He dwells in the center of society as one who has attained realization ... Not that he has acquired unusual or esoteric information, but he has come to experience the ground of his own being in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow communicate this to others.⁵

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I made my first visit to Prades, Merton's birthplace in France, in 1996. The first 'pilgrimage' to Prades took place the following

year and out of this came the Thomas Merton Society of Canada, under the energetic leadership of Judith Hardcastle. Since then the TMSC has offered perhaps a dozen pilgrimages to places associated with Merton: New York, Alaska, Rome, and of course Gethsemani. It continues to flourish from its Vancouver base.

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In 2000, I was given a sabbatical by Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, where I taught Religious Studies from 1989 to 2004, including a course on Merton. I decided to spend part of it following the path Merton took on his 1968 journey to India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It started as a research trip and ended as a pilgrimage. For the 40th anniversary in 2008 of Merton's death, I wrote an article about it which may be accessed through the link on the Merton page of my website.⁶ In that article you will find the account of my life-changing ten minutes with Chatral Rinpoche on 13 December 2000. For my introduction to him I am indebted to Dr James George, at the time of Merton's trip to India, Canadian High Commissioner (ie ambassador) to India, a debt I gratefully acknowledge.

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In 2007 I was elected president of the ITMS for the 2007-09 term. I

appreciated the honour done me thereby, although I soon discovered that, much like Queen Elizabeth, the president of the ITMS reigns but does not rule. Paul Pearson as resident secretary of the society as well as director of the Center acts, to complete the metaphor, as the highly competent prime minister. The president does offer the presidential address at the general meeting at the end of his/her term and as the first Canadian president, I wanted to offer some Canadian content in whatever I would say about Merton. When a couple of months before the meeting, I read in an article in *The Globe and Mail* that Leonard Cohen was 'monastic in his own way,' the connection was made.⁷ Manifestly Thomas and Leonard are soul-brothers: both born in francophone cultures, both poets, both tricksters, both interested in Zen, both developing into transcultural spiritual teachers; and both, for what it's worth, 5'8". I have continued to develop this connection through a non-credit course for SFU, and through presentations and workshops on their relationship.

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As we know, 2015 marks the centenary of Merton's birth. The occasion will generate books, papers, exhibitions, and so on, and those who work in the Merton industry will toil away on some aspect of the great man's significance for the edi-

fication of others. Their experience, I trust, will parallel my own, which is that in keeping company with Thomas Merton and his friends, we indeed find ourselves members of a community of hope, faith and insight.

For myself, I acknowledge that at some point in this journey, Merton shifted from being simply the object of academic study, and became my spiritual director *in absentia*. I realized that I had taken his major concerns—contemplation, war and peace, and the engagement with the world's great religious traditions—as together comprising a paradigm both for my walk as a Christian, for my pastoral and academic work and for my understanding of our world in the time of 'the great turning' (Joanna Macy's term). My sense of him is that when he died in 1968, he was operating from about 2050. We still have a long way to go to catch up with him.

I give the second last word here to Ed Rice: 'Merton was part of the great Catholic tradition and yet seemed not to be confined by it. ... Thomas Merton never left us. The journey goes on.'⁸ And the last word to Merton himself, the phrase he put at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: *sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi*: 'the book is finished, the seeking goes on'—for him and for all of us.

Notes

1. *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983).

2. Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1985); *Thomas Merton's Rewritings: The Five Versions of Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation as a Key to the Development of His Thought* (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1989).
3. Thomas Merton, 'Cutting up an ox', in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions Books, 1969), pp.45–7.
4. Donald Grayston, Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination, in Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart, eds, *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* (Thomas Merton Society of Canada: North Vancouver, BC, 2012) pp.135–54.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Patrick Hart, James Laugh-

- lin, Naomi Burton Stone (New York: New Direction Books, 1975), p.333.
6. donaldgrayston.ca/projects/thomas-merton/.
7. The address is available at leonardcohenfiles.com/grayston.pdf.
8. James Harford, *Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006).

Donald Grayston is a past president of the Thomas Merton Society of Canada and of the International Thomas Merton Society. This personal reflection is slated to appear in *Messengers of Hope: Reflections in Honor of Thomas Merton*, eds Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo (Fons Vitae), forthcoming in 2015.

Can you help?

In 1989 there was an initial attempt to start a Thomas Merton Society in Great Britain. That first society didn't last but, during its lifetime, it published a little journal (just a few photocopied sheets) called *New Seeds*.

The Merton Center archives at Bellarmine University in Kentucky has Volume One, issues 2 (1989), 4 and 5 (1990) and is looking for issues 1 and 3, or for any published after Volume 1, Issue 5.

If any readers of the Merton Journal are able to assist, please contact: Dr Paul M Pearson. Director and Archivist, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, 2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, KY. 40205. Email: pmpearson@bellarmine.edu