

Any Tool Shed Will Do

Reflections on Merton's
experience of Prayer.

Ian Stackhouse

Finally, after so many years fantasising about the possibility, in the late summer of 2017 I made a week-long retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani, set in the hills of Kentucky. Founded back in the mid-nineteenth century, it is perhaps the most famous of the Trappist monasteries in America (not to mention the first), because of its celebrated monk, Thomas Merton.¹ It was my great delight on this first visit to the monastery to visit Merton's hermitage in the woods, about a mile from the Abbey. It is this hermitage, in particular what it represents in Merton's search for solitude, that forms the heart of my reflections here.

Readers of Merton will know that the offer of a hermitage in the woods came after a long battle with his Abbot, Dom James Fox, concerning his vocation as a monk.² Here was Merton living a monastic life but craving silence and solitude; and his Abbot was reluctant to concede to what appeared to be a strange request. Ironically, Fox would end up pursuing a hermitic life himself, but his resistance to Merton's request is well documented. He even regarded Merton's craving for solitude as bordering on the neurotic, and employed a psychologist to test this out. Finally, however, Merton was granted permission, and for the last three years of his life he lived in seclusion. He was the first American monk in his order to be set apart as a hermit.

To say I visited a hermitage, however, is not to say that I visited a cave cut into the hillside with a pulley system to keep Merton supplied with food and water. Not at all. Rather, what we are talking about is a modest size breeze-block construction, with a kitchen, a bedroom and a front living room overlooking a very pleasant view of a small clearing in the woods. Indeed, those coming with romantic notions of what it means to be a hermit may be disappointed. Not only does the hermitage look more

like a chalet, but Merton would still come up to the Abbey from time to time, and was not infrequently entertaining guests. Furthermore, there is the matter of his relationship with Margie, a nurse from Lexington, with whom he started a relationship whilst convalescing after an operation during this period.³ Aside from these matters, what intrigues me most about Merton's search for solitude is that the hermitage was by no means his first experience of prayerful isolation, but in many ways a culmination of his search. Prior to the hermitage one can identify two other places that served a similar purpose in his life: a disused trailer in the woods, near St Edmond's lake, and a tool shed in the woods at the back of the monastery farm. Here in the tool shed, long before the idea of an actual hermitage had been conceived, Merton described a kind of homecoming, a sense of relief at finally finding a place, however inauspicious, where he could be alone in prayer. Here's how he described it:

I am now almost completely convinced that I am only really a monk when I am alone in the old toolshed Reverend Father gave me. (It is back in the woods beyond the horse pasture when Bro. Aelred hauled it with the traxcavator the day before Trinity Sunday.) True, I have the will of a monk in the community. But I have the prayer of a monk in the silence of the woods and the toolshed. To begin with: the place is simple, and really poor with the bare poverty I need worse than any other medicine and which I never seem to get. And silent. And inactive – materially. Therefore the Spirit is busy here.⁴

I am intrigued by Merton's sanctification of the tool shed as a place of prayer (including his seemingly humorous naming of it as St Anne's), not simply because it is an important part of Merton's biography, but because it strikes me that Merton's discovery of solitude in an abandoned tool shed in the woods has a mark of spiritual authenticity about it. Like a child at Christmas who discards the expensive toy for the cardboard packaging, we may find what we are looking for not in the purpose-built retreat centre overlooking a lake but perhaps in a beaten-up old sofa in the basement, which our spouse was considering throwing away. Or a writer who takes a week out to seek inspiration in a mountainside hotel, may find that the spark of genius finally ignites when sitting in a grotty old train carriage on the way home from work. The reason may be that solitude and silence rely not simply on aesthetics (although beauty

helps), but also on familiarity – homeliness even. As I look back on my own attempts at finding space and silence, I have to admit that more often than not it has been the serendipity of an old armchair, or even, in the days when I was an undergraduate in Durham, a coal shed in the back of our terraced house, that provided me with the solitude I was craving.

As I reflect on this years later, I wonder whether some of it has to do with what Merton describes as poverty. In short, maybe a tool shed, or an old sofa, is an intimation of the sheer scandal of the incarnation, and thus we feel comfortable sitting there, in ways that grand architecture just does not allow. Not that grand architecture cannot appeal (I defy anyone to come away unmoved from a place like Notre-Dame in Paris, or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul); but when it comes to prayer, lofty grandeur may be less important than the need for simplicity. Like the breeze-block hermitage to which Merton eventually graduated, there is nothing distracting about an abandoned tool shed. Its main appeal, set in the middle of a wood, is that it protects solitude. Indeed, maybe the reason Jesus commended a store-room as a place of prayer is not only because it is familiar, but because it is the place in the house that can guarantee privacy. I know this myself. If I know that I am not going to be interrupted – better still, if I know that no one knows where I am – then somehow the soul settles into a deeper repose, a repose born of relief as much as anything else, but also that ability to forget oneself and enter instead into contemplation.

My friend Dave Hansen, who accompanied me on my visit to Gethsemani, makes a similar point in his remarkable and beautifully original book, *Long Wandering Prayer*. In much the same way as I have been describing, he makes a distinction between fine beauty and familiar beauty:

We need familiar splendour – places we know better than our heartaches. We need holy ground on common ground. We need radiance we know well enough to perceive small changes that make all things new. Familiar beauty is subtle, intricate and mysterious compared to the glamorous thud of a first encounter.⁵

As a matter of fact, in the week or so that I stayed with Dave, before we both headed off to Kentucky, I experienced something of this first-hand. In the basement, where I have stayed many times in a makeshift bedroom, Dave has placed an armchair that used to be in the main living

room. Surrounded by books, beneath an old Victorian-style light shade, it is what he calls his 'cubby hole' - what the Welsh call a cwytych. Is it an attractive space? Not particularly. It's the corner of a basement. But the truth is, for all the effort of getting to Kentucky and staying in a purpose-built guest house, I confess that I was as much at home in that chair each morning than ever I was in the glorious abbey.

Whilst ruminating on this fact, I came across *The Poetics of Space* by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.⁶ A classic text that has been republished for a new generation, Bachelard, in his own unique way, reflects on the attraction we all have for intimate spaces such as I have been describing here. Indeed, I found it most intriguing, not to say affirming, that he also makes a distinction between the monastery and the hermit's hut. Not just in a religious sense but in a universal sense, he observes, that what we crave for deep down is a place where we can repose. It doesn't have to be grand; in fact, it must not be grand. But what it will be, he argues, is a memory of home: an archaic, almost primitive quest for refuge. A sanctuary, if you will, in the midst of a dark forest.

To be sure, some of Bachelard's concepts are hard to follow. In typically esoteric fashion, he names his new science topoanalysis, the study of intimate spaces. But the *Poetics of Space* does repay careful study, for the love of intimate space that Bachelard uncovers is both primordial (the memory of the house we were born in) and eschatological (the image of a room of one's own with which Jesus comforts his disciples). We may not be able to articulate the matter like a French philosopher does, but my guess is that Bachelard would concur with the central thesis of this paper: that in the end what we are longing for is a space that bears intimations of welcome, rest and intimacy. It may well be that a visit to a religious building will do that for us. But I suspect that what draws the attention of most of us, as happened to me once when I was walking in Durham along the River Wear in the half-light of the early morning, is not so much the grandeur of a great Norman cathedral, but a distant light coming from a farmhouse on the horizon. As I recall it now, it beckons me to come inside from the cold, sit at the table and enter the fellowship of the Spirit.

Notes

1. For a useful overview of Merton's importance in our Christian tradition see John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Continuum, 2014).
2. See Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter*

of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2015).

3. See Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011).
4. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 3 1952-1960*, Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 3 Sept. 1952, p. 14.
5. David Hansen, *Long Wandering Prayer: An Invitation to Walk with God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 75.
6. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The classic look at how we experience intimate spaces* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

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New Patrons of the Society

On behalf of the committee I am delighted to announce that **Reverend Mother Mary Luke CHC** and **Reverend Canon Lucy Winkett** have accepted the invitation to become patrons of the Society.

Mother Mary Luke is the Superior of the Anglican Benedictine Community of the Holy Cross in Loughborough. She first became acquainted with Thomas Merton through reading 'Elected Silence' while training as a nurse at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington. Several years later in 1975, following her heeding of the call to the religious life, she entered the Community of the Holy Cross, and was elected Reverend Mother in November 1991.

Lucy Winkett is an Anglican priest, who since 2010 has been the Rector of St James's Church, Piccadilly. Ordained in 1995, two years later she joined the clergy of St Paul's Cathedral in London, the first female priest to do so. From 2003 until moving to St James's, she was the Canon Precentor at the Cathedral. She has published several books, and is a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*. She hosted the Society's 2015 Merton centenary celebration at St James's.

Stephen Dunhill — Chair TMS GB&I