

How Merton's love of solitude influences us today

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In 1957, Thomas Merton penned these words:

Good writing and good art are coming to mean much in the salvation of Russia. It is sad that the cultural contacts that were beginning so suddenly ended. Even mediocre writing and art would have accomplished something once a dialogue was established. After all, it is not so much a selling them a theory, as of reaching some kind of human understanding with people who do, in fact, want nothing but that.¹

Is this a prophet or a contemplative speaking?

Only a man who felt deeply about the world of his day could have written this. How could he have come to this insight, this compassionate understanding, except by profound reflection in the silence of his own soul. He was a monk in a contemplative monastery where the strict silence facilitated that deep reflection. Living without direct access to daily news, Merton plumbed the depths of what little he did glean about the world.

This is what contemplative living is about — having the time, the silence, the solitude to study events, current and past. I was a contemplative nun for thirty years in a Poor Clare cloister. I didn't know, of course, what Merton was journaling in 1957. I entered the Poor Clares in 1959 and his complete journals were not published until nearly thirty years after his death, from 1995 onwards. By 1965 I could identify from personal experience with the daily life, experiences, and frustrations that Merton wrote about in *The Sign of Jonas* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. I know what he meant when he agreed (in part) with the sentiments expressed in a letter from Fr. Bruno James:

I am certain that the Cistercian life is quite dead, has been dead for generations. I believe it died because the contemplative spirit went out of it, the contemplative spirit that gives liberty. Its place was taken by 'observance' and the whole thing took on the rigidity of a corpse.²

Merton half-agrees with this but typically goes to the heart of the proposition: "The important question is not how "contemplative" is the Cistercian Order, but can one practice charity in it? Everything hangs on that."³

As a young nun, inwardly rebelling over all the 'practices' which were taught as requirements of a good religious, such as sitting straight in chapel without leaning against the back of the choir stall, I believed God forgave me when I muttered to myself that I prayed much better when comfortable than when dealing with a backache. On the other hand, I didn't wrinkle my long veil!

Just before the passage quoted above, Merton had written of his longing for 'spiritual liberty' which took him to the heart of the contemplative life and of his struggle to become more authentically himself, whatever that might be. He was, at the time, holding the important position of Novice Master in the monastery. Initiating some radical change in his life would not only affect him but the community to which he was sincerely devoted. His efforts to leave it all in God's hands effectively meant leaving it in the hands of his abbot, whom, he admitted, he didn't trust.

Through his wide-ranging correspondence, Merton became aware of a variety of means, and a host of places, where he might live out his growing call to solitude. As a missionary hermit in Cuernavaca? In Tortula? In New Mexico? He saw a discouraging number of his brother monks give up on the life at Gethsemani and leave. But one possible choice rose more consistently than any of the others — remain at the monastery and 'live in the woods'. His transition from an important position in the busy life of a large institution to full-time eremitical life in a small house on the grounds of the monastery was gradual. And it included a maturing grasp of what the hermit life truly entailed.

One significant step in Merton's evolution was his recognition that he did not like the term 'hermit'. It held too many anachronisms in modern people's minds. His search was for solitude, not an excessively penitential life. He enjoyed most of his relationships in the monastery — it wasn't a

dislike of people that drove him to agitate for a more solitary life for himself but a need of extended periods for prayer and writing without interruption. Normally the monks did not talk to one another except through simple signs. Their silence endured even when they were gathered in the refectory for meals or when working together in the fields or woods.

One might ask, 'what interruptions?' Just following the routine of each day provided 'interruption' sufficient to distress Merton. Each time the bell rang, from 3 am to 8 pm, it meant dropping whatever a monk was doing and moving on to another task or occupation, be it chanting in choir or attending a chapter meeting.

Speaking from personal experience of the regimented lifestyle dictated in cloisters, I seldom had more than an hour at any one occupation. As cook in our monastery, planning for two meals each day was a challenge in timing and keeping food warm while attending to choir duties, often just before a meal was to be served. Individuals differed in their ability to accommodate to a constantly changing focus or to the intrusive sounds such as the sirens emanating from the fire station around the corner.

Merton routinely sought out places where he could be alone to read and pray in silence and solitude. He was sensitive to noise in many forms, occasionally complaining about the tractors that his own writings had enabled the monastery to purchase. He celebrated when, on feast days, the rigid schedule was relaxed and he had more extended periods to spend 'in the woods'.

He didn't live to experience the days when a phone meant we could be interrupted at any moment by 'information' that could be crucial or banal. Nor did he 'enjoy' instantaneous news from across the world, usually the latest tragedy or horror. He knew enough internal distress from what he did learn, including the notification that his only brother was lost in combat flying a bomber in World War II. During his years guiding the novices at Gethsemani, he probably heard enough personal accounts from men who, often suffering from PTSD, were seeking healing and peace within the walls of the cloister.

As he sorted through his own admittedly mixed reasons for seeking solitude as a hermit, Merton learned how to distinguish between the spurious, the extreme, and the genuine call of divine grace. This latter included his own personality and unique needs, which were not only spiritual but artistic as well. In his book, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, which Merton published in 1960, there are observations which are still valid

today:

These monks [the desert fathers] insisted on remaining human and "ordinary." This may seem to be a paradox, but it is very important. If we reflect a moment, we will see that to fly into the desert in order to be extraordinary is only to carry the world with you as an implicit standard of comparison. The result would be nothing but self-contemplation, and self-comparison with the negative standard of the world one had abandoned. Some of the monks of the Desert did this, as a matter of fact: and the only fruit of their trouble was that they went out of their heads. The simple men who lived their lives out to a good old age among the rocks and sand only did so because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their *ordinary* selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves. There can be no other valid reason for seeking solitude or for leaving the world. And thus to leave the world, is, in fact, to help save it in saving oneself. This is the final point, and it is an important one. The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.

This is their paradoxical lesson for our time.⁴

I believe that Thomas Merton would have written this of our times as well. In fact, we might dare to suggest that 'our times' are even more confusing, threatening, and unpredictable than the period when he wrote that reflection. The men and women seeking solitude today must accept the somewhat surprising, possibly humbling, fact that in order to enter fully into eremitical life, we must seek and find our true selves, 'to discover and develop our inalienable spiritual liberty'.⁵

This is not the time or place to speculate on what becoming a hermit or following the solitary life might involve. Most likely, it will, as it did for Merton, entail a constantly evolving condition and form of life. If we are truly living, we are constantly changing. Time alone insures us of this. When I look back on my life from the standpoint of my eighty-first year, I see a few dramatic changes and numerous gradual evolutions within those major events. I moved from my family home at the age of seventeen in 1959 into the Poor Clares; after thirty years of that spiritually challenging life, I left the monastery for a solitary cabin in a West Virginia

holler [small sheltered valley] where I commenced a huge growth period, making up for mature insights and experiences that life in a cloister had not fostered.

During this six year period, I earned part of my living by working one day a week in the rectory office, typing up and printing the parish bulletin and taking care of various other clerical tasks that inevitably piled up. As my acquaintance with the pastor, Rev. Paul Fredette, deepened into a quiet love relationship, I evolved beyond my commitment to the Poor Clares but not for my need for the solitary life. I entered upon another period of discernment, seeking God's will for my future and, in this case, the future of the man I loved.

Gradually, painfully, I realized that I found a personal completion of myself in a type of relationship that I had once ruled out. However, this discernment included that of another person who might, or might not, find that sense of fulfillment in a bond with me! Eventually we agreed that to honestly explore the possibility of commitment, we needed to move to a place where we were unknown and were not concerned about what others might think or feel. We agreed on our mutual love for the mountains and moved to the Great Smoky Mountains in western North Carolina.

Thomas Merton also found a love relationship but his discernment differed from ours albeit for similar reasons. We were seeking God's Will which was most manifest in who each of us uniquely were. For Merton, his recognition of his need for solitude and his devotion to God as a priest and monk eventually led him to renounce following through on his attraction to this particular woman. I suspect his love for her deepened and enriched his monastic life from then on, but he chose his original commitment as the right one for himself.

Paul and I gradually realized that our mutual spiritual attractions were similar enough to allow us to marry and support one another in living out a call to solitude and prayer. We took over a small newsletter for hermits which grew into a readership of over a thousand and which became a defining means for us to guide other hermits and solitaries. I continued to follow my vocation as a writer, while Paul's artistic gifts found new outlets.

Through the far-flung contacts that 'Raven's Bread, Food for Those in Solitude' engendered, we have become aware of how profoundly diverse are the forms of eremitic life in the twenty-first century.⁶ Whenever we are asked how to live as solitaries or hermits, we have learned that the answer is that there are as many ways of being a 'monk in the world' as

there are people living it. Each person's life is predicated on who they are; how they are; where they are; and most importantly, what God is calling them to become. Life for all of us moves on.

In addition, the Church of Thomas Merton's day has gone through major changes, and will continue to do so. And most likely, many people will continue to dislike the changes and long for the good old days, the beauty of the mostly misunderstood ceremonies. Likewise, there will be individuals who will long to replicate the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers in a world that no longer believes that devils attack the faithful soul throughout the night, as it is said of St. Anthony, Father of All Monks. We are now linked to the world far more profoundly than those fourth century solitaries could possibly have imagined.

Merton learned more about the solitary life as he lived it and as he freely accepted all the joys that it offered. In May 1965, he wrote: 'Whole day at the hermitage. I have come to see that only these days in solitude are really full and "whole" for me. The others are partly wasted.'⁷ Three days later, he recorded:

A cool and lovely morning, clear sky, everchanging freshness of woods and valley! One has to be in the same place every day, watch the dawn from the same house, hear the same birds wake each morning to realize how inexhaustibly rich and different is 'sameness.' This is the blessing of stability, and I think it is not evident until you enjoy it alone in a hermitage.... But one must be able to share this fullness, and I am not for a complete and absolute solitude without communication (except temporarily).⁸

Having lived in the same house for twenty-six years, with the same view of the valley and mountains across the way, I am thoroughly in agreement with Merton. To sit on the deck each day in spring and summer and watch the day rise, to note which bird awakens the morning chorus, and yes, to recognize the engine of a passing truck at almost precisely the same time each day, is thoroughly delightful and deeply fulfilling. I feel connected with the whole world, even as I murmur 'Go safely, neighbor' to the nameless driver on the winding road I cannot see.

Solitaries, monks in the world, modern-day hermits, all have learned and are still learning from Thomas Merton's call to live in a hermitage at Gethsemani Abbey. Perhaps the best expression of the solitary life by Merton is to be found in his poem 'The Quickening of John the Baptist':

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry,
Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon.
Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.
We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.⁹

By the first half of the twentieth century the hermit life was considered obsolete. Even men and women in formal religious life didn't consider the solitary life as a viable calling. Around the middle of the last century, however, some few men and women began to consider the eremitical life as a viable vocation. Thomas Merton was in contact with some of them and felt the attraction of the solitary life. As he considered it, wrote about it and finally achieved it, many other women and men became aware of this ancient form of spiritual life and embraced it.

Now that we are living in a period of extreme transition, when not only humans but all forms of life, are under threat, we need these silent 'sentinels upon the world's frontier'.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *A Search For Solitude, Journals Vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 95. Entry for May 29, 1957.
2. *A Search For Solitude*, p. 109. Entry for August 10, 1957.
3. *A Search For Solitude*, p. 110.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 22-23.
5. *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 24.
6. See www.ravensbreadministries.com for details.
7. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, Journals Vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 250. Entry for May 25, 1965.
8. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 251. Entry for May 28, 1965.
9. The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p. 201. The poem was originally published in *The Tears of the Blind Lion* (1949).

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