

Two roads converge: Rachel Carson & Thomas Merton

Clare Bryden

Walking in today's world

Listen! I am going nowhere in particular. Just walking and listening, notebook in hand. Listening for everything—sounds that we hear, and sounds that we tune out. Later I will transcribe my notes of everything I hear, turn it into a script, and make some sound art. But for now I scribble: boots on the pavement, distant mew of gull and keen of buzzard, school sports, humming telecommunications boxes, chirrup, caw, vroom of acceleration, squeal of brakes, women talking, chuntering baby, building work, falling acorn, cars, buses, traffic traffic traffic. The noise of modern suburban life.

Today's is a world of near-constant artificial sound. Nowhere in nature is totally free from noise pollution. Noise-free intervals are no longer measured in hours, but minutes. There are few places that experience an interval of 15 minutes during daylight hours.¹

Today's is a world of climate breakdown. Global insured natural catastrophe losses are growing by 5–7% annually.² Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, and storms cost the world more than \$120 billion in 2025.³ But how do you put a price on the three billion animals injured or killed during the Australian bushfire season of 2019/20?⁴

Today's is a world of poisoned air, poisoned water and poisoned land. A sixth of the world's agricultural land, home to 1.4 billion people, is contaminated by toxic metals, seriously threatening food security, public health, and ecosystems.⁵

And today's continues to be a world of species loss—a sixth mass extinction caused by human activity. Nearly one in six species are threatened with extinction in the UK, and once-common species are thinning. Bees and other pollinators have declined by a fifth over the last 50 years, and predators of crop pests by more than a third.⁶

Silent Spring: attention and interconnection

I took my walk on 27th September 2012, the 50th anniversary of one of the most influential books ever published, the book that is recognised as launching the environmental movement—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

In chapters on water, soil, plants, insects, birds, human cell function and genetics, *Silent Spring* carefully documented the impact of DDT and other pesticides and herbicides on ecosystems, the food chain, and human health.

Carson packed it full of information. Stories of human tragedies caused by direct contact with pesticides; bird-watchers' observations on bird mortality and breeding;⁷ research into chemicals' direct and indirect impacts on plants and animals—Carson collected them all into what was effectively a tightly-argued legal brief, and had it peer-reviewed to preempt attempts by chemical companies to discredit her or her work. There were implications that individuals, policy-makers, and companies could not fail to grasp.

Equally importantly, Carson did not over-claim, and she noted areas where there were gaps in knowledge, and where we might have missed the gaps themselves: 'Perhaps quite unknown to us... plants that we ruthlessly eradicate may be performing a function that is necessary to the health of the soil.'⁸ And she questioned our faith in technological progress.

At the beginning of *Silent Spring*, Carson spirited the reader to a town that was once idyllic, but where now the people had extinguished all life through use of pesticides and herbicides. At the end, she presented a choice between two roads. The first road was to work against nature, a 'deceptively easy ... super-smooth highway' at whose end lies that ghost town. The second road was Robert Frost's road 'less traveled by'—to work with nature.

She set many such explicit or implicit choices before the reader: life or death; long- or short-term; working with or waging war; natural or artificial; cyclical or linear; complex or simplistic; balanced solution or technical fix; stewardship or control; humility or hubris. She touched on how marvellously we are made, and how the love of money is the root of all evil. But above all, the threads running throughout the book are attentiveness and interconnection.

The nature of science is specialisation. The very word 'science' is derived from the Greek *schizein* (σχίζειν), to divide. Specialisation has its

place, but too few scientists take a more holistic view. Carson was one of them.

Shortly before *Silent Spring*, she wrote:

To understand biology is to understand that all life is linked to the earth from which it came; it is to understand that the stream of life, flowing out of the dim past into the uncertain future, is in reality a unified force, though composed of an infinite number and variety of separate lives.⁹

In *Silent Spring*, Carson devoted separate chapters to different aspects of the natural world, but in each chapter she emphasised the connections within the wider web of life: 'The earth's vegetation is part of a web of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth, between plants and other plants, between plants and animals.'¹⁰ This web of life of course includes human beings: 'Man is more dependent on ... wild pollinators than he realises.'¹¹

One of her most eloquent passages addressed our lack of attentiveness: 'We are seldom aware of the protection afforded by natural enemies [of pests] until it fails. Most of us walk unseeing through the world, unaware alike of its beauties, its wonders...'¹² And yet the book is also full of stories of the attention paid by ordinary people, enthusiasts and professionals, from concerned citizens seeing dead birds and squirrels and calling local Audubon societies, to vets reporting a sharp upturn in suddenly sickening cats and dogs, to scientists conducting a long-term study of spawning salmon.¹³ It was no surprise, then that the book itself received so much attention.

When I first *Silent Spring*, I got lost in Carson's arguments, thinking 'This is really important. I hope someone takes note.' Of course they did—the book led to the banning of many pesticides. Its most important legacy, however, was the new public awareness of the vulnerability of nature to technological so-called progress, and widespread acceptance that industry needed to be regulated, which eventually led to the establishment of the US Environmental Protection Agency in 1970.

Merton reads *Silent Spring*

But let's wind the clock back again to Gethsemani Abbey in late 1962. Thomas Merton became aware of *Silent Spring* not long after its publication and quickly obtained a copy through his publisher. On 12th

January 1963, before the book had really started to impact public consciousness, he was moved by his reading to write to Carson.¹⁴

He started his letter complimenting Carson on her 'fine, exact and persuasive book' treating of a 'detailed aspect of our technological civilization'. He concluded by confessing, 'I regret my own follies with DDT, which I have now totally renounced.' But the main body of the letter is devoted to his reflections on man's collective ills and original sin; misuse of power; and the vocation which he is denying.¹⁵

Merton read in Carson's work a revelation of the cost of technological triumph and spiritual disorder. In the 'consistent pattern running through everything that we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life', he detected the 'mental processes' of civilization, close to a 'mental illness', in which gaining and using power and technical know-how are paramount. This Merton named as man's 'hatred of life', leading him on to ponder on original sin and one possible meaning: '[man's] built in ... tendency to destroy and negate himself when everything is at its best.'

It is a terrible irony. The self-defeating 'thought processes of materialistic affluence' lead man to 'despair in the midst of "plenty" and "happiness" and the awful fruit of this despair is indiscriminate, irresponsible destructiveness, hatred of life, carried on in the name of life itself. In order to "survive" we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends.'

Connecting Carson's subject matter with nuclear war, Merton attributed to them 'the same kind of "logic"'. In *Silent Spring*, Carson described a failed programme to eradicate the Japanese beetle. Possibly mindful of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Merton adopted the beetle to extend his argument: 'we will exterminate the beetle even if it means danger to our children and to our very selves. To make this seem "reasonable" we go to some lengths to produce arguments that our steps are really "harmless".' Chillingly, also mindful of the Vietnam War, we had in the first place listened to a salesman scapegoating the beetle as a dire threat and let ourselves be convinced: 'It then becomes obvious that the thing to do is exterminate [it].'

So Merton emphasised that diagnosis of our sickness was the most vitally important task facing us. 'Otherwise, our efforts will be directed at purely superficial symptoms only, and perhaps not even at things related directly to the illness. On the contrary, it seems that our remedies are

instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself.'

For Merton, man's vocation in creation was to be 'the eye in the body'. But, he continues, 'man has lost his "sight" and is blundering around aimlessly ... It is in thinking that he sees, in gaining power and technical know how, that he has lost his wisdom and his cosmic perspective.'

How different from the attentiveness that Carson and her nature enthusiasts and researchers displayed! They might have been illustrating the secular pursuit of this vocation, as they diagnosed man's 'mental illness' as it related to the use of chemicals. And so we circle back to interconnection—a community of interconnected individuals paying attention to and studying an interconnected world.

To Merton, the world appeared 'a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a "paradise" of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them.' But '[t]he awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.'

At the very end of *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote of life as

a fabric on the one hand delicate and destructible, on the other miraculously tough and resilient. These extraordinary capacities of life have been ignored by the practitioners of chemical control who have brought to their task no "high-minded orientation", no humility before the vast forces with which they tamper. The "control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance.¹⁶

We have taken to ourselves power that belongs solely to God.

Merton does not just see the 'most wonderful interrelationship' between God's creatures. He emphasises the necessity that man 'understand his position, ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible ... Creator ... the source and exemplar of all being.' In terms of power, to recognise that power belongs to God. In terms of relationship, to dwell in that relationship.

In this way, Merton writes in his letter that man will be able to balance his dual calling: 'Man is at once a part of nature, and he transcends it;' to take for the first time a 'cosmic perspective', that is a holistic view of time and space; and to 'unite [technics and wisdom] in a

supreme humility which will result in a totally self forgetful creativity and service.'

Not irresponsibility, not despair and hatred, not power and arrogance, but humility. From the Latin root *humus*, the soil, from where we also get 'human'. It is all bound together—we cherish the soil, we live in humility, we become truly ourselves.

Prepared for the message

By 1962, Merton had been living the Trappist life, under the Rule of St Benedict, for over 20 years. He had not yet moved to his hermitage in the Gethsemani woods, but he was already primed to receive the message of *Silent Spring*.

An entry in his journal prior to reading points to his thinking:

I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Carson, on what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons ... We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together.¹⁷

What made him so receptive? What led him to recognise a *kairos* time and to write to Carson: '[*Silent Spring*] is perhaps much more timely even than you or I realize?'

Monica Weis suggests that 'Merton's life experiences—his early childhood in France, the events recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the insights expressed and explored in his many poems and journals, his long-time fascination with Gandhi, as well as his own commitment to contemplation—predisposed him to this particular moment of seeing differently.'¹⁸

For Merton, contemplation was 'spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being ... a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source.'¹⁹ The rest of his life was a fruit of this prayer. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Merton's 'turning toward the world' made him 'increasingly aware of how closely social justice was linked to his monastic vocation of silence and solitude.'²⁰

His turning had two facets. His famous experience of 18th March 1958 at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, was of 'realization that I loved all

those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.’²¹ But he had also been reflecting and writing on the rights of indigenous people, the dangers of technology, atomic energy and nuclear war, the Christian responsibility for peacemaking, and the urgent need for the practice of non-violence as a means toward peace.²² In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he names the hatred of others, of ourselves and of the ‘other in ourself’ that leads us to evade our own responsibility and to create ‘a scapegoat in whom we have invested all the evil in the world.’²³

For a period from 1951, Merton had been a forester at Gethsemani, and his work restoring woodlands made him a competent naturalist.²⁴ His journal note prior to reading *Silent Spring* and his letter to Carson show that he already had the conviction that we are part of nature. His other writings at the time body forth his vision of all things in God and God in all things. ‘The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God.’²⁵ A colt, the pale flowers of dogwood, a leaf, lakes, a mountain—all bear the imprint of God’s wisdom and reality.

Given that he told Carson ‘I love your books’, he may well have read her earlier best-selling trilogy exploring the life of the oceans.²⁶ But reading *Silent Spring* was the catalyst that brought these two strands of his thought together, prompting Merton to apply social justice beyond the human sphere to the rest of nature. If justice meant realising right relationships among people, it also meant developing an ecological conscience and realising right relationships within the whole of creation. Weis describes it as ‘a graced moment in Merton’s life’, opening his eyes to ecojustice related to human justice.²⁷

A meeting of worlds

There is no further evidence of correspondence between Merton and Carson. He kept a copy of this letter, possibly to use in his collection, *Cold War Letters*, but in the end it was not included.²⁸ Nor is there a record that Carson read it, and it is unlikely that she replied. For she was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer while writing *Silent Spring*, and after publication she was in the last stages of her illness. Her focus was on publicising the book, defending her work against the chemical companies, and pressuring the Government to take action.

Shortly before her death in 1964, she remarked on a CBS documentary about *Silent Spring*:

Man’s attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself? [We are] challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves.²⁹

It might have been Merton speaking.

For a brief moment, two roads converged in a yellow wood and there was a meeting of worlds—data and contemplation, scientist and monk. Both were able to see beneath the surface: to recognise that a single detailed piece of work fits into an interconnected whole; that knowledge generated by scientific research, and gaps in knowledge bridged by wisdom, should penetrate into decision-making at all levels; that it was the time for prophets to raise their voices.

Back to the future

And today? What would Carson and Merton see in 2026?

In the last 60 years, we have vastly increased our knowledge of how nature benefits health, of natural processes and how our activities are affecting the Earth and its creatures. Ecosystems are gradually being given rights. Ecocide is a crime during wartime in international law, and codified as a crime in peacetime in ten countries.³⁰

Yet it doesn’t seem as though we have gained much in understanding, or progressed at all in uniting technology and wisdom. There are wars and rumours of wars. We scapegoat immigrants and asylum seekers. Ecosystems are viewed instrumentally, providing ‘ecosystem services’ instead of having intrinsic value. Rich countries export their pollution and problems to poorer countries.³¹ Governments put economy above ecology, forgetting that the former wouldn’t exist without the latter.³² The US has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement and hollowed out the EPA.³³ The litany of destruction grows ever longer.

Eye-witnesses and experts report what they have seen and discovered. Prophets prophesy. Indigenous peoples have louder voices than historically. But who is listening?

There have always been denialists. Carson expected to encounter

them.³⁴ But she did not have to contend with social media. The explosion in deliberate misinformation is drowning out testimony and truth; experts are disregarded and frequently undermined and bullied; and most people live in echo-chambers, unaware of confirmation biases. I would like to think that Carson would be heard today, but I doubt it. It requires ever more work to sift the wheat from the chaff, the still small voice from the earthquake, wind and fire.

Two roads

It seems that we have still to diagnose our sickness, and to even recognise that we need to do the work. Merton's letter to Carson, in the context of their wider thought, is a lens through which to view today's global issues, and the diverging roads we face. Would we choose life or hatred of life? Could we accept our vocation as an eye in the body?

At the end of my awareness walk, I turned left into a country park, lay down on a bench near the trees where jays gather at dusk, and listened. Could we, obedient to the first word of the Rule of St Benedict, simply listen?

Notes

1. Gordon Hempton: Silence and the Presence of Everything, On Being with Krista Tippett, 30 December 2021: <https://onbeing.org/programs/gordon-hempton-silence-and-the-presence-of-everything/>
2. Hurricanes and earthquakes could lead to global insured losses of USD 300 billion in a peak year, Swiss Re, 29 April 2025: <https://www.swissre.com/press-release/Hurricanes-and-earthquakes-could-lead-to-global-insured-losses-of-USD-300-billion-in-a-peak-year-finds-Swiss-Re-Institute/02ebff3e-7b57-41c7-b26b-32e4c1553fce/> Swiss Re projected \$145 billion in 2025.
3. Counting the Cost 2025: A year of climate breakdown, OCHA Services / ReliefWeb, 27 December 2025: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/counting-cost-2025-year-climate-breakdown/>
4. Almost 3 billion animals affected by Australian bushfires, The Guardian, 28 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/28/almost-3-billion-animals-affected-by-australian-megafires-report-shows-aoe/>
5. A fifth of Global Farmland Contaminated by Toxic Metals, Rothamsted Research, 16 April 2025: <https://www.rothamsted.ac.uk/news/fifth-global-farmland-contaminated-toxic-metals-study-reveals/>
6. The most comprehensive report on the UK's current biodiversity, State of Nature Partnership, 28 September 2023: <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>

7. It was the drastic impact on bird life that gave the book its title.
8. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.82.
9. Rachel Carson, *Preface to Humane Biology Projects* (Animal Welfare Institute, 1961), via Wikiquote, accessed 30 January 2026, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rachel_Carson/
10. *Silent Spring*, p.69.
11. *Silent Spring*, p.77.
12. *Silent Spring*, p.217.
13. *Silent Spring*, pp.91,124. The National Audubon Society is the US equivalent of the RSPB.
14. All quotes from Thomas Merton's letter to Rachel Carson are taken from Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom - Letters in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1994), pp. 70-72. The letter may also be found in Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2011). pp. 14-15. The latter is a reproduction of the original typed letter.
15. Where it is of their time, I am following Carson and Merton in using 'man'.
16. *Silent Spring*, p.257.
17. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World, Journals*, Vol. 4 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), journal entry for 11 Dec 1962, p.274, quoted in *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.12.
18. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.19.
19. Thomas Merton, 'What is Contemplation?' in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), p.1.
20. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.10.
21. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp.140-142.
22. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p.16.
23. Thomas Merton, 'The Root of War is Fear' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.114.
24. Paul R. Dekar, *Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011), p.116.
25. Thomas Merton, 'Things in Their Identity' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.30.
26. Rachel Carson, *Under the Sea Wind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1941). Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955).
27. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* pp.18-19.
28. Paul R. Dekar, *Thomas Merton and the New World* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2021), p.10.
29. The Story of Silent Spring, NRDC, 13 August 2015: <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/story-silent-spring/> Rights of nature, Wikipedia, accessed 30 January

- 2026: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rights_of_nature/
30. Ecocide, Wikipedia, accessed 30 January 2026: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecocide/>
 31. Known as carbon, waste or extinction colonialism. For example: Richest countries 'exporting extinction', World Economic Forum, 18 February 2025: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/02/richest-countries-exporting-extinction-nature-climate-this-week/>
 32. As a prime example, George Osborne's Autumn statement slams 'costly' green policies, The Guardian, 29 November 2011: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/nov/29/autumn-statement-george-osborne-green-policies/>
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 34. *Silent Spring*, p.87.

Clare Bryden is a writer and web developer based in Exeter, UK. Her interests are wide-ranging, but primarily the place of humanity within the natural world of which we are part, and the related theology and psychology of connectedness. Poems by Clare Bryden can be found on pages 22, 23 & 53.

New Publication:

Happy as Larry by Dr Larry Culliford

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Having published numerous books and articles on happiness, psychology and spirituality. Dr Culliford was a co-founder in 1999 of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Spirituality and Psychiatry special interest group. He is a former Chair of the Thomas Merton Society and is a member of the International Thomas Merton Society.

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The book skilfully blends narrative and reflection into a remarkable tapestry, telling of the journey towards wisdom and spiritual maturity of a man determined, not only to cure his own ills, but also to unravel the mysteries of emotional healing that lead others dependably to personal growth, joy, contentment and love.