

Three ideas to put in your pocket

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for Michael W. Higgins – scholar and friend

Thomas Merton's mind teemed with ideas. Like an over-boiled pot, he spilt across boundaries, leaking into forgotten and neglected places, near and distant places. This overflow of energy and insight occurred across his literary platforms, whether in journals or in poetry. Of his many ideas about many things, I'd like to consider three: his discussion of utopia devolving into dystopia, his emphasis on human interdependence, and his theology of encounter.

I Utopia Devolves into Dystopia

In that tossed salad of a book, *Conjectures of a Guilty-Bystander*, in which politics, theology, a meditation on technology and personal events all intermingle, Merton references the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev: 'In the old days we used to read of utopias and lament the fact that they could not be actualized. Now we have awakened to the far greater problems: how to prevent utopias from being actualized.'¹ Merton then elaborates:

The terrible thing about our time is precisely the ease with which theories can be put into practice. The more perfect, the more idealistic the theories, the more dreadful is their realization.... Liberty is bound up with imperfection, and that limitations, imperfections, errors are not only unavoidable but also salutary.

The best is not the ideal. Where what is theoretically best is imposed on everyone as the *norm*, then there is no longer any room even to be good. The best, imposed as a norm, becomes evil.²

There are books contained in Merton's lines, a small library. Merton in a few sentences deflates the right-wing utopia of 'the pure race' (fascism) and the left-wing utopia of 'the classless society' (communism). In both

ends of the idealistic spectrum, utopia morphs into dystopia. The drive to impose perfection results in death and destruction. People not considered 'pure' are murdered, as are people who stand in the way of 'the classless society'.

II No One is Born Alone/No one births himself

In one of his eighteen poems to M entitled 'Untitled Poem', Merton concludes with these words:

No one ever got born
All by himself: It takes more than one.
Every birthday
Has its own theology.³

How shatteringly insightful these words are. Birth only comes about through a mother's sacrifice, through her pain, and generally through the assistance of medical helpers. We don't give birth to ourselves; we are totally dependent on others, particularly on mothers, for making birth possible. And Merton is right: there is a theology behind every birthday. It's the theology of dependence; we rely on others for our birth and wellbeing.

Likewise, no one loves alone. At the very least, we need someone to love and someone who loves us. Love is always more than one.

Shakespeare, through the obliquity of drama, comes to the same theology in *Coriolanus* that we are all tethered together by bonds of blood and friendship, responsibility and interdependence. No man, contrary to *Coriolanus*, is 'author of himself'.

... I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin. (5.3.34-37)

Coriolanus tries to free himself of all bonds – whether social or of kin. His goal, like that of fellow narcissists Iago in *Othello*, Edmund in *King Lear*, and Richard III ('...I am myself alone.'), seems to be to live without connection and intimacy—not to feel, not to be an interdependent human being. Tragedy results in such self-delusion.

Merton was a student of Mark Van Doren at Columbia University and took his famous Shakespeare course as did the poets John Berryman and Allen Ginsberg along with Jack Kerouac. It's quite conceivable to me that in their discussion of *Coriolanus* Van Doren may have planted a seed that eventually germinated in the concluding lines of Merton's poem. Writers after all do not write alone. They write in company with living and dead authors, fellow scribes and scribblers, who patiently put words on paper or screen and struggle with form and meaning.

III The Theology of Encounter

On July 9, 1965, Merton makes this entry in his journal: 'The theology of "encounter" is not just a phrase. What else is the Acts of the Apostles? The whole of the Christian is "The Acts of the Apostles".'⁴ The theology of 'encounter' isn't a phrase he drops into a journal; it's his way of approaching people; he builds relationships and makes friends.

Before making his comment on the theology of encounter, Merton unravels an experience with visitors from France. In the bookstore at the University of Louisville, he hears French being spoken and turns around to see three students from Montpellier. 'We went and had some coffee and talked. It was very enjoyable, interesting, intelligent talk, people from home!! I invited them out to the Abbey, and perhaps they will come.'⁵

That's the bare bones of their contact. But Merton quickly deepens his narrative with these words: 'It was a revelation of Christ to *me* – just because they were human, open, frank, sincere, interested in ideas and in a situation where they were fully exposed to risk and possibility. A meeting of possibilities resulting in new ideas, new directions for all of us (in a small way at least).'⁶ The theology of encounter engenders the talk that leads to intimacy, to one person caring about another.

In other examples of Merton's theology of encounter, his encounters seem less reliant on mouth and ear — conversation — and more reliant on physical contact. Robert Lax remembered meeting Merton in a dining room at Columbia University:

Merton looked up and shook hands, and it was really an amazing meeting right away. It was the friendliest look, the friendliest handshake I'd ever remembered. You know, there was no question in my mind that we were friends from that moment on.⁷

All the seeds were there early on according to Lax—the political and social concerns, the mysticism, the love of literature and art — they just needed time to grow. Merton, in the solitude of a monastery, needed time to become himself.

Three additionally important encounters in Merton's life occur in the mid-to-late sixties when he meets in succession three wise men from the East: Daisetz Suzuki, an authority on Zen Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese poet-monk and peace activist, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Merton listens, he shares, he connects; he develops relationships, and even friendships, with the three men. He meets them physically, personally, not as spirit but as body. In the words of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Other human beings are never pure spirit for me: I only know them through their glances, their gestures, their speech — in other words, through their bodies.'⁸

Daisetz Suzuki (1870 - 1966)

Merton's extended conversation with Daisetz Suzuki takes places over two days in New York City, June 15 and 16 in 1964, in one of Merton's rare excursions beyond Gethsemani. Suzuki is 94 at the time; he is frail and hard of hearing. Merton is 49, energetic, and very happy to be back in the city of his college years.

Merton recounts of his meeting with Suzuki:

I saw Dr. Suzuki only in two brief visits and I did not feel I ought to waste time exploring abstract, doctrinal explanations of his tradition... One cannot understand Buddhism until one meets it in this existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive.⁹

The last sentence needs to be repeated and reflected upon.

When Merton practises the theology of encounter, he encounters ideas or a particular system of thought existentially, 'in a person in whom it is alive'. In the intimacy of such encounters, doctrine and abstract differences fall away. What matters is personal connection. Merton and Suzuki have tea together and talk about Zen and Christianity.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2024)

Merton's meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh takes places in Gethsemani on

May 28, 1966. Thich Nhat Hanh is 40 at the time, Merton 52. The young man-older man dynamic is reversed this time.

Nhat Hanh begins his memory of their encounter by remembering the warmth of Merton's face. The physical takes precedence over the spiritual; flesh speaks more loudly than ideas:

It is hard to describe his face ... there was a lot of human warmth — *chaleur humaine* — in him. And conversation with him was so easy. When we talked, I told him a few things, and he understood the things I didn't tell him. ... He was open to everything... He did not talk so much about himself. He was constantly asking questions. And then he would listen.¹⁰

The Dalai Lama (1935—)

Merton has three meetings with the third wise man from the East, the Dalai Lama, in Dharmasala, India. The meetings take place in November, 1968. The Dalai Lama is 33 at the time, Merton 53. He is in the role of the older man once again. From the three meetings, they develop a friendship, the monk from the west with the monk from the east — the monk from the tradition of Sakyamuni and the monk from the tradition of St. Benedict and the Desert Fathers.

Like Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama remarks first on Merton's face. He makes a physical connection.

I looked into his face. I could see a good human being. I don't know how to explain but...you can tell people who have some deep experience...Honest. Truthful. He was very open-minded.¹¹

Merton describes the encounter with the Dalai Lama in *The Asian Journal* by recounting the succession of meetings. After the November 4th meeting, he records these words:

The Dalai Lama is most impressive as a person. He is strong and alert, bigger than I expected (for some reason I thought he would be small). A very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person.¹²

Again the physical is emphasized, the body, the warmth of the person. Merton and the Dalai Lama get to know each other through bodily glances, gestures, and speech.¹³

Conclusion

The above outlines three ideas that I've put in my pocket. You, the reader, no doubt have other pockets and other ideas from the poet-monk of Gethsemani with which to fill them. The thread running through my three-idea selection of Utopia, Interdependence and Encounter has to do with the nature of encountering.

According to Merton, when one encounters abstract ideas such as visions of perfection, the mathematical symmetry may be appealing, but the flesh-and-blood realization of the vision may fall well short of something that is humanly desirable let alone achievable.

The power of 'the theology of encounter' lies in its bedrock principle that the other is as humanly important as the self. Indeed, that there is no self without the other, with the others who have helped build the self and the others with whom one shares one's life. The line in W.H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939' — 'We must love one another or die' — may not be hyperbole at all.

Thomas Merton's way to love is through relationship and friendship. You see it at work in his connection to Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes his well known tract 'Nhat Hanh is My Brother' after his meeting with Hanh at Gethsemani, knowing that he would return to Vietnam's civil war and he, as a peace activist, would be in danger. Merton writes:

I have said that Nhat Hanh is my brother, and it is true. ... Do what you can for him. If I mean something to you, then let me put it this way: do for Nhat Hanh whatever you would do for me if I were in his position.¹⁴

There is no divide between the self and the other here. The self is the other. Merton's encounter with Nhat Hanh, in his meeting and in his follow-up article, was an act of love. With Merton, his theology of encounter is a theology of love.

NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 86.
2. *Conjectures*, p. 96.
3. *The Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, edited by Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), p. 194.

4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Five 1963-1965, edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 267.
5. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.266.
6. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 267.
7. Robert Lax, as quoted in Paul Wilkes, *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1984), p.65.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 62.
9. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 62.
10. Thich Nhat Hanh as quoted in Paul Wilkes, *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 151.
11. The Dalai Lama as quoted in Wilkes, p. 145.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 100-101.
13. My treatment of Merton and the three wise men from the East relies heavily on Susan McCaslin & J.S. Porter's *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* (Kelowna, BC, Woodlake, 2018), pp. 70-77.
14. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace - The Social Essays*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 261-2.

J.S. Porter with Susan McCaslin, co-authored *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* in 2018. He has also contributed to past issues of the *Merton Journal*: "Robert Lax on Thomas Merton" in 2011; "Notes on Robert Lax" in 2009; "Thomas Merton on Adolf Eichmann" in 2007, and "Opening Thomas Merton's Bible" in 2025.