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Thomas Merton, Rooted in God

By ANNA BROWN

Jonathan Montaldo, editor of *Entering the Silence*, the second of Thomas Merton's recently published journals, describes Thomas Merton (1915-1968) as "a monk, a gifted teacher, facile in many languages, above all a poet and an artist whose best medium was the written word." In speaking of this hermit of the Kentucky hills at Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery, Jonathan Montaldo further contends that he "believed God's salt infused the sea [he] needed to swim in moment to moment." In this article, prompted by the recognition of the thirtieth anniversary of his December 10, 1968 death, I reflect upon the particular way that Thomas Merton chose to "swim in the sea of life." I emphasize three points of navigation—a receptivity to God, a devotion to the contemplative life and a commitment to social engagement—that may serve as a guide to understanding how he, despite moments of awkwardness and clumsiness, was able to plunge so gracefully and beautifully into the often choppy waters of life itself.

Receptivity to God

The first point of navigation is Thomas Merton's receptivity to God. The quality of his receptivity may be described in two words: "utter openness." He imparts to his reader the level of openness that must be assumed in relatedness to God when, in the first line of his early poem, "The Ointment," he writes, "This day, throw open all your houses, and forever." He wrote that line when he was a twenty-six-year-old novice at Gethsemani. What is of interest to me is the way in which he was able to deepen this quality of openness to God throughout the next twenty-seven years of his life. It is this steadfast quality that enabled him to be at home with the multiple and often contradictory dimensions of his own life. Though Thomas Merton waged a mighty struggle in the process of discerning how to live his life (e.g., as a monk, writer, poet, hermit, activist, etc.), he never veered from what was central to him—rootedness in God.

I contend that it was his devotion to and practice of contemplation, whether in the form of early morning walks through the wooded knobs of Kentucky, of mid-afternoon silent meditation in the confines of his hermitage or of late-night prayer with his fellow monks, that grounded and deepened the quality of receptivity within him. The hallmark of contemplation is direct and intuitive experience. The contemplative finds that words, images and ideas about life and about God are more superfluous than necessary, and can act as a shield against the reality of life itself. In contemplation, there is only the sea—life preservers are not part of the deal.

Though Thomas Merton devoted almost thirty years to the practice of contemplation, what he built upon was an insight that was apparent to him at a relatively young age, when he was thirty-two. The basic insight that he realized early on was that "God gives Himself to us," and that ours is the task of awakening to this reality. This is, more often than not, a task that requires a lifetime of attentive effort. Much of our time, however, is spent either immersed in illusion or running away from this reality. This time spent running, in particular, was not lost on Thomas



William Hart M. Nichols

Merton, as is evident in one of his *Entering the Silence* journal entries. In March of 1947, he writes:

"Yesterday I read a couple of chapters of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Every time I pick up anything like that—including especially John of the Cross, I feel like the three wise men when they came out of Jerusalem and once more saw the star.... [They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy (Matthew 2:10)] They were once more delivered from questions and uncertainty and could see their road straight ahead. In this case it is not even a question of seeing a road—it is simpler than that: it is seeing that, whenever you want to stop traveling, your journey will already be done."

Vocation in Solitude

To examine further how he developed and deepened the quality of receptiveness to God, I turn, now, to his vocation as a monk in solitude and the way in which receptivity informed his unique approach to monastic life. Further, I wish to highlight some of the "questions and uncertainties" that did arise when he attempted to clarify the way in which he would live his monastic life. In short, I hope to illumine the process of discernment that enabled him to say, in *Turning Toward the World*, the fifth volume of his journals, that he felt it necessary to remove himself from the "abstract and formal image of Cistercian life willed by the publicists and managers of the Order" and to be attentive to "the real Order, i.e., the men who are in it, with their desires, their aspirations and their sorrows."

For Thomas Merton, the act of removal from the "formal and abstract" must be met by a complementary act of loving engagement with the reality of life at hand. One of the salient characteristics of his approach to his vocation as a monk is precisely this quality of "loving engagement." Loving engagement does not translate into adopting the rather insipid sentiment of fuzzy warm-heartedness. Quite the contrary, the stance of loving engagement points, most essentially, to an open heart that is receptive to all—to God, the world, those living in the world and, perhaps most importantly, to the "dreaded reality of being oneself." Love of the "dreaded reality of being oneself" (what may be at the base of the "too much activity!" admonition that he often pens to himself in his journals) is a recurrent theme in his own struggle to discern and define his monastic vocation. The

readers of his works, and, in particular, his journals, may be surprised at the circuitous route that he often took in order to make his way upon "the road straight ahead." There is, for example, the reality of Thomas Merton in community at Gethsemani and Thomas Merton absorbed in silent meditation, having resolved, once again, to be done with words; Thomas Merton immersed in the texts and traditions of the Western Christian world and Thomas Merton flying off to meet with the spiritual heirs of the Eastern Buddhist world.

When we appreciate what he was getting at when he spoke of love of the "dreaded reality of being oneself," then we are better able to sense the contradictory realities of his own life. First, however, to clarify what a love of self does not imply: It does not imply self-absorption, nor does it imply a stance toward the world that is solipsistic in nature. It points, rather, to two things: that a hatred of oneself is often the "greatest obstacle to freedom" and that a love of oneself means that we see clearly the essential and inherent relatedness of all things—who are we but the homeless mother trying to feed her children, but the glittering stars aloft in the indigo sky, but the loving God Who dwells within?

Thomas Merton's clarity about the essential and inherent relatedness of all things, another salient characteristic of his approach toward monastic life, speaks to the "at oneness" he found in his vocation of a monk in solitude. It is the spirit that infuses and, subsequently, helps to make sense of his journal entry, dated March 19, 1965: "The moonlight is wonderful in the tall pines. Absolute silence of moonlit valleys. It is the twenty-first anniversary of my simple vows." Such lucidity, however, does "not always prevent anguish," he writes in *Learning to Love*, the sixth of his recently published journals. The anguish of which he speaks is the reality of a God Who "reveals Himself in the middle of conflict and contradiction, [however] we want to find Him outside all contradiction."

That Thomas Merton was willing to live through what, for most, becomes the justification for flight and evasion is another important aspect of his approach to monastic life. A willingness to live through "conflict and contradiction" is what gave him the freedom, for example, both to kneel in the tradition of the Church Fathers and to sit in the tradition of the Zen

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Lessons from Lucasville

By STAUGHTON LYND

"Sacco and Vanzetti," "Scottsboro," "the Rosenbergs," "Mumia Abu-Jamal." Each of these names or phrases signifies the convergence of two things: an obscenely unfair judicial proceeding and the death penalty.

"Lucasville" should be added to the list. A prison rebellion began at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, east of Cincinnati, on Easter Sunday, 1993. The prisoners were reacting to oppressive conditions and a history of abuses. The uprising continued for eleven days, April 11-21. It appears to have been the longest such disturbance in the history of the United States. Nine prisoners and one guard were killed by the rebelling prisoners.

At the beginning of the insurrection, L block had 429 black and 327 white prisoners. About ten guards (all but one white) were seized at the outset of the action and held as hostages. After the prisoners surrendered, three black men (Abdullah Siddique Hasan, formerly known as Carlos Sanders, Keith Lamar, and James Were) and two white men (Jason Robb and George Skatzes) were found guilty of aggravated murder and sentenced to death. All five are now being held at the new "supermax" prison in Youngstown, Ohio.

Lucasville was the third major prisoner rebellion during the last thirty years. From September 9-13, 1971, prisoners rebelled at Attica, in upstate New York. They put forward a list of demands beginning with a minimum wage for prison labor and ending with the right to be released to a non-imperialist nation. The prison was retaken by force, and more than three dozen prisoners and hostages were killed, all by the attacking troops.

At Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1980, prisoners rioted for thirty-six hours. Almost as many persons were killed as at Attica, but all were prisoners, and all were murdered by fellow inmates. A recent book by a participant (Mike Rolland, *Descent Into Madness*) suggests that the prisoner violence came about because the prison administration systematically encouraged prisoner informants. The result was distrust and paranoia among prisoners.

Lucasville falls somewhere between Attica and Santa Fe. Most of the deaths there occurred in the first few hours of the disturbance. Those killed were persons suspected of being "snitches." Thereafter, valiant efforts were made by a number of blacks and whites—notably Abdullah Hasan, Jason Robb, and George Skatzes—to put forward prisoner demands, protect the hostage guards, and negotiate a settlement with the authorities. Precisely because they came forward as spokesmen, these men were singled out for prosecution. A prisoner severely wounded in the disturbance was interviewed by the Ohio State Highway Patrol in the prison infirmary soon after the surrender. According to his sworn affidavit:

"They made it clear that they wanted the leaders. They wanted to prosecute Hasan, George Skatzes, Lavelle, Jason Robb, and another Muslim whose name I don't remember. They had not yet begun their investigation but they knew they wanted these leaders. I joked with them and said, 'You basically don't care what I say as long as it's against these guys.' They said, 'Yeah, that's it.'"

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Thomas Merton

Kerry Dugan

Thomas Merton, Rooted in God

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Masters; to write both in praise of the Desert Fathers and in protest of the fathers of war; and both to sink into the deeper silence of a hermit's life and to search actively for the causes of political, economic and social oppression. Though an embrace of the contradictory often entails the acceptance of ambiguity, it is the kind of consent that, in the end, saves us from the "fatal flaw" of "being right at all costs, by dint of hardening one's core around an arbitrary choice of a fixed position."

The cauldron of contradiction, or the place where God dwells, is found within "the nothing in [our] being that must be accepted," he writes in January, 1967. When we own up to such emptiness, we risk the loss of a sure and certain path, of success within a society that deems such aimlessness not "cost-effective," and of security within institutions that guarantee a "thirty percent return on investment, or your money back." What we make room for, however, is an acceptance—in God's love—"[that] becomes pure creativity, insight, etc." Thomas Merton's life, granting even its flaws and limitations, is a beautiful expression of this "pure creativity and insight."

Social Commitment

In *Learning to Love*, he notes that "the solitary must return to the heart of life and oneness, losing himself not in massive illusions but simply in the root of reality." The task of returning to the heart is central to his life and work. His emphasis upon "not losing oneself in massive illusions" is also central, and it points to the third and final navigational point—his social commitment or his "turn toward the world." In much of his writings that deal with the political, the economic and the social, we find a voice that both roots itself in and finds itself at odds with the world at hand. He is at odds with a world that is rooted in massive illusion; a world, in other words, that prefers death to life. Further, a contemplative who understands his or her vocation as one of "complete withdrawal and pure negation" and who is oblivious to the suffering within the world, as he writes in *Seeds of Destruction*, lives not a sanctioned life but an illusory life.

Thomas Merton, in a letter to James Forest, puts flesh on the bones of his "rooted in" but "at-odds-with-the-world" frame of reference. In a fragment from this letter, he first articulates his sense of what the monks in his own community should be doing. To this ideal, he then juxtaposes the reality of what goes on within the confines of the Pentagon, a secular version of "monastic" life—a stance toward the world that advances not life but death. Accordingly, his letter, in part, reads as follows: "the monk is supposed to dig into the earth to find the source of life in hiddenness"

Usury: Smoke & Mirrors

By KATHARINE TEMPLE

According to financial reports in the news these days, the buzz is how money markets have run amok: the collapse of the Russian ruble and printing of mass bills; the decline of the Canadian dollar due to currency trading and bank mergers after deficit reduction; constant crisis in Japan due to bad debts; International Monetary Fund restructuring everywhere; wild stock market swings. All this has led one Wall Street analyst to opine, "Maybe the market isn't all we thought it was," which has to be in the running for the understatement of the year, considering the source. From any other angle, all this is business as usual.

Despite breathless tones, computerized charts and contorted rationales, economics is not nearly as complicated as they would have us believe. In the end, all this speculation springs from one simple principle: "Money makes money," a belief nicely captured by Benjamin Franklin:

"Remember that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again it is seven and thrupence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding sow destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. He that murders a crown murders all it might have purchased, even scores of pounds."

This axiom of capitalism is what used to be known as usury (from the Latin *usura*, the use of money), of which the best example has always been interest on a loan. In contrast to Ben Franklin, *et al.*, Christianity, from the beginning, rejected out of hand any claim that money can be fruitful ("fecund" being my word of choice), as harmful to all parties.

The image of fruitfulness (or lack thereof) in money appealed particularly to the Greek Church Fathers, for the Greek word *tokos* can mean both "childbirth" and "interest." For instance, from St. Gregory of Nyssa:

"Only animate beings have the distinction between male and female. God the Creator said, 'Increase and multiply' [Genesis 1:28] that one generation might give birth to a succeeding one. But, from what kind of marriage does the birth [*tokos*] of gold derive? What sort of conception brings it to fruition? I am aware of the pains in such a birth from the psalmist's words, 'Behold, he labors with iniquity, conceives mischief and brings forth falsehood.' [Psalms 7:14] Such is the birth which avarice yields, trouble begets and hate delivers. When urgently pressed, the person who always conceals abundance and swears to have nothing, is pregnant with purse and begets usury [*tokos*] out of desire for gain. He assumes the misfortune of a money-lender who devotes himself to material gain in the

same way a person extinguishes a flame with oil. The calamity of a loan has no remedy; instead it becomes worse."

It is no surprise that Peter Maurin, schooled in the Church Fathers and keen observer of the American scene, considered money-lending at interest crucial to his own understanding and analysis. He directed the most traditional view on usury to the most advanced forms of the practice:

Because the State has legalized money-lending at interest, home-owners have mortgaged their homes.
Because the State has legalized money-lending at interest, farmers have mortgaged their farms.
Because the State has legalized money-lending at interest, institutions have mortgaged their buildings.
Because the State has legalized money-lending at interest, congregations have mortgaged their churches.
Because the State has legalized money-lending at interest, cities, counties and states and the federal government have mortgaged their budgets.
So people find themselves in all kinds of financial difficulties because the State has legalized money-lending at interest.

Since the Church Fathers, since Benjamin Franklin, since Peter's time even, the combinations and permutations of how money tries to make money have been ratcheted up well beyond simple interest. By now, usury is no longer just a piece in the economic puzzle, but the basis for the system itself. Yet, the principle remains the same.

Peter is so often dismissed as eccentric that I have to confess to a surge of satisfaction when I hear about a stock market plunge. He himself, of course, would never be so petty about being right. He would not rejoice in the fall of powerful investors, and he would recognize immediately that it is always poor people who suffer the most in economic calamities. But nowadays (Peter would learn), even low- or average-paid workers can unwittingly get caught up in usurious investments—if only through their pension plans.

Eileen Egan, who is more irenic and temperate than I am, wrote to me recently: "The Russian crisis is bringing down the world financial markets—including our own banks which have lost incredible amounts in their Russian involvement. This doesn't mean anything to you and me personally, but I don't want to think of the many families who will suffer. The poor in Russia are desperate—beginning with pensioners, the lower echelons of bureaucracy, miners and the army.... I may sound depressed, but, rather, I am simply con-

firmed in our CW view of the world. What can be expected of a system in which interest is the very heart of the global economic motor? I am hardly surprised at what is happening, but taken aback by the blindness of President Clinton and his scores of advisers."

The blindness goes well beyond advisers who stand to gain (or think they do), to church involvement (e.g., through its own pension or mutual funds) and, eventually, to our best-intentioned ability to see reality for what it is.

For instance, in preparation for the Year 2000, various Church statements have suggested the cancellation or "forgiveness" of unpayable loans for poor countries, as a Jubilee proclamation. Now, the sentiments may be noble, but they seem to miss a fundamental point. Without the calculation of compound interest (what debt servicing is about), that is, without usury, the principal on most world debts has already been paid several times over. Apart from usury, there is no more debt to cancel. In other words, it is not a Jubilee matter. It is a matter for common sense and a return to basic, everyday teachings.

"When they say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,' should not a people consult their God?" (Isaiah 8:19) This passage, right between two well-loved Advent/Christmas texts ("Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a child and call His name Immanuel" [7:14], and "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light" [9:2]) may give a key to Advent as a season of repentance, of hope, and a guide for what to do while we wait. In the field of economics, if we could remove the blinders of perceived self-interest, if we could avoid the chirping of the media and the muttering of the experts, there might just be practical alternatives.

The way to avoid inflation is to lighten the burden of the money borrowers without robbing the money lenders.
And the way to lighten the burden of money borrowers without robbing the money lenders is to pass two laws, one law making immediately illegal all interest on money lent and another law obliging the money borrowers to pay one percent of their debts every year during a period of a hundred years.

If we cannot extend Peter Maurin's suggestion to other forms of usury, then it is a sure sign of how far we have been sucked into Benjamin Franklin's economics of smoke and mirrors, managed by manipulating figures, over the straightforward realism of St. Gregory's social analysis. ✦

Yet, what has come to pass, he continues, are the "fellows cloistered in the bomb silo, with their communal life, their silence, their austerity, their separation from the world [and who] dig into the earth with the power of death."

Thomas Merton's words bespeak an acute awareness of the social relationships and structures of power. In the same letter to James Forest, he also identifies the darkness and confusion in our own minds (as he puts it, "the nests in our minds, where death hatches all kinds of eggs") as a source of the social strife that afflicts the world. I believe that it is his knowledge of the inner landscape of the human mind (the fruit of his contemplative practice), plus his uncanny ability to describe and analyze the oppressive nature of social structures, that makes Thomas Merton's social voice one that must be considered seriously. Further, his engagement in the social, while seeing the centrality of the contemplative, puts forth a model that activists would do well to consider. In other words, engagement in the world must spring from the "hidden ground of love" deep within.

Though often sharply critical of the political, economic and social realities contempo-

rary to his time, his social analyses and writings are not those of a despairing cynic. The cynic is one who relies upon a limited understanding of self-interest as grist for the mill of life. While he acknowledges the legitimacy of self-interest, there is also room in his conception of the self to allow for the "I that is united in God through Christ." Accordingly, the Christian self is one who responds to the world not with cynicism but with hope. In an essay on nonviolence, Thomas Merton makes concrete this response of hope: The Christian self understands "not that there is not wickedness in the world, but [that] today trust in God cannot be completely divorced from a certain trust in man. The Christian knows that there are radically sound possibilities in every man, and he believes that love and grace always have the power to bring out these possibilities at the most unexpected moments."

To live for the possibility of the unexpected is simply another way of saying "to live in faith." To live in faith, for Thomas Merton, is to consent to "the creative command that raises us from the dead." One of his early contemporaries (and one who also saw the

necessity of social engagement) is the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943). She suggests that one's response to those who are suffering must be a response of "creative attentiveness," an intelligence of the heart "analogous to genius." It allows for the acute perception demonstrated, for example, by the Good Samaritan. Empty of dismissive judgment, it was he alone who recognized the lump on the side of the road as a human being and acted with compassion. Creative attentiveness, I suggest, is nothing other than the incarnation of Thomas Merton's definition of faith. For both Thomas Merton and Simone Weil, the "root reality" is really quite simple—when our hearts are open, when we are attentive and engaged in the world, life overcomes death.

The points of Thomas Merton's life that I have emphasized—receptivity, vocation and social commitment—are but three of the glittering jewels woven into the fabric of his life. They do serve, however, as a guide both to his full embrace of life and how we might go about our own lives. For such grandeur in human form, I can only utter, *Deo Gratias*. ✦