

THE SIMPLE GIFTS OF THOMAS MERTON

by **Richard Sisto**

I met Thomas Merton (Fr. Louis) in the 1960s at a time when my own spiritual search needed a firm ground on which to stand. I was born and brought up a Roman Catholic, but, like so many other counter-culture people of the time, I had seriously embraced a practice and study of Eastern spiritual traditions. The meetings and correspondence I had with Merton helped me to incorporate the Eastern practice with a renewed awareness of my own Catholic-Christian roots. I returned, as it were, to my childhood faith, enhanced by the vital teachings of Zen and Yoga, with the spirit of Christ rekindled in me with a new clarity. What had seemed to be a complicated path had now become a simple and direct matter of experience. It was and continues to be this simplicity in Merton that encourages and influences my life.

Ostensibly, Merton's writings are anything but simple. In fact, if one studies the numerous books, papers and articles that have been written about him since his death, it can be assumed that his message was a very complex one. What then is this "simplicity" which can allow for such a freedom of spirit? In order to get to it, we have, as Merton did, to find out what has complicated our lives and how we have consequently lost that simple wisdom. It is only by a complete and radical examination and questioning that we are able, eventually, to reap the simple gifts of our true nature. Most of Merton's life was dedicated to this type of personal quest. In his essay "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room," he describes the time in which we live.

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space, the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration."
(Raids on the Unspeakable, p. 70)

Merton proposes a radical departure from this imprisonment of the spirit. The fundamental rudiments of escape from this bondage are clearly stated in "The Inner Experience." He suggests that lay people can sacrifice "seemingly good economic opportunities" and move to the country or a small town where one would have "more time to think." He states further that "the sacrifices could be a real liberation from the pitiless struggle which is the source of most of [our] worries."

□ **Richard Sisto**, then a Zen practitioner, met and talked with Thomas Merton in the mid-1960s. He now lives in New Haven, Kentucky, near the Abbey of Gethsemani and lists his occupations as dairy farmer, writer, and musician.



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Since my own search for freedom has led me down this path, I can answer Merton's question, "But what is wrong with farming?" Farming can provide the environment and time for contemplation or it can be reduced to the same "mad rush" for "size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration." The present farm crisis is nothing more than an extension of the same "mad rush." The farmers who are going under are causing their own demise because they have mortgaged themselves to death seeking the same false American dream of "bigger and better." During the 1970s, when farmland inflated to unrealistic prices, farmers followed the advice of the then Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. His dictum — "get big or get out" — is taking its toll in



RICHARD SISTO & THOMAS MERTON

Photo by Robert Lax

foreclosures and the present crisis. Of course, the deflated prices of farm products is partly the cause, but, in the long run, greed and lack of agrarian husbandry is the root cause.

Ordering one's livelihood so that it nurtures one's spirit as well as one's physical well-being is the key. There is a basic simplicity implied in this process. The common, intuitive sense of what is really true and important is a foundation of experiencing life at its most basic levels. When we nurture the soil and the creatures God has provided, we nurture ourselves. When we deliberately avoid the snares of worldly success, we affirm our true identity and reject the false. Although destiny brought him fame, Merton had as one of his primary goals the avoidance of "success."

If our lives drive us to a useless plunge for convenience, affluence and recreation we lose the sense of sacredness which should pervade it. Merton spoke of the "daily rituals" in the hermitage: cleaning the coffee pot, sweeping the porch, emptying the ashes, etc., etc. So, in farming, the rituals of feeding and milking the cows, planting and harvesting the crops, manuring the land and repairing old but re-usable equipment sustains me and keeps me simple.

The most significant gift one receives from this simplicity is a fresh, clear common sense approach to whatever questions and challenges life offers. This common sense approach is actually a function of a deeper spiritual ground that manifests itself in a soul that has ordered its life to the real priorities. It does not matter whether a person lives in a monastery or on a farm or in an apartment or in a house. Our environment can either encourage us to a greater poverty of spirit or suppress this true poverty by replacing it with more conveniences which are supposed to afford more leisure, but which in the end create more bondage. Purchase and maintenance of these conveniences create further attachment instead of greater freedom.

The alternative lifestyle or "back to the land" movement of the 1960s and early 1970s headed in the right direction, but it made the journey an end instead of a means. Spiritual experience itself was encapsulated in LSD. Merton's perspective on the hallucinogenic drugs was typically lucid and practical. In reference to the use of hallucinogens, Merton says: "This would mean that an easily available spiritual experience would be sought for its own sake. But, this kind of attachment is just as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than any other." The "Illuminism" of the 60s gradually dissolved with most of the "hippies" becoming the affluent "yuppies" and liberals of the 80s. Unfortunately, some of the more negative influences of drug use and "open" sexual mores have filtered down to the youth of the 80s. Amplified by the sick and morally

devious use of mass communication, the minds and spirits of most Americans have been sold out to the advertising and media merchants of deception and fantasy. The web has been spun and it is more insidious and pervasive than we are willing to admit.

The problem has become increasingly complex, manifesting itself in the pitiful state of child pornography, broken families, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage suicides, sexual perversion, street people, etc. Sorting through the psychological maze of broken spirits is an impossible task. Merton questioned this dilemma when he asked:

Is this pessimism? Is this the unforgivable sin of admitting what everybody really feels? Is it pessimism to diagnose cancer as cancer? Or should one simply go on pretending that everything is getting better everyday, because the time of the end is also — for some at any rate — the time of great prosperity. (*Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 72)

As the poor grow poorer and the rich richer, the chasm separating classes becomes more than economic. Because our civilization has opted for the apparent “rewards” of the affluent society, the consequence has been to lose the awareness of our interior or spiritual selves. In fact, modern American culture has created a “supermarket spirituality” where one can purchase the desired product, be it Christian fundamentalism or Tibetan Buddhism. Our materialism has created “products” which purport to benefit health of soul, mind, and body (i.e. aerobics, the PTL Club, health foods, vitamins, T. M., etc.).

True inner peace and balance cannot be purchased because it is by its very nature a simple and free function. Therefore, one may sit in meditation marathons, or practice elaborate health programs, and do nothing more than spend money and inflate ego. What ultimately manifests itself is not the true self but the false self, pumped up, “feeling good about itself,” and generally deceiving others and being deceived into thinking that a state of fulfillment has been achieved. This “state of fulfillment” usually manifests itself in an attitude of self-righteousness. As soon as a person has found the appropriate “fad” or “bandwagon” they are ready to proselytize the so-called benefits to others, be it women’s liberation or the “born again” movement. Instead of gaining the freedom of simplicity they have become harnessed by opinion and conformity. Rather than develop a sense of openness and expansion they are led down a tunnel of delusion.

I believe that the spirit of truth is one that encourages an unprejudiced and non-judgmental point of view. It inspires a sense of compassion and understanding for the poor, the oppressed and the abused. Thomas Merton, although he was a severe social critic, possessed this wonderful sense of being open to others, to God, and ultimately, to himself. It is a vulnerable state of existence, but a necessary one, if we are going to be able to survive as a species. It was this vulnerability that, near the end of his life, drew Merton into the relationship with the nurse as well as into his “enlightenment” experience in Asia.

It is a very difficult thing to develop a compassion that encompasses the world as it is. To be a truly “marginal” person, we, in effect, must have “no-self” and no position to gain or lose. In this act of true poverty and humility of spirit, the God of truth will lead us to his light just as he did with Merton, despite his failings.

Instead of being “massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment,” we can be the free masters of our universe, responding to God’s life in us and perceiving the decisions and solutions necessary to set us apart from the eschatological society. This universal person is the one who possesses the simple gifts.
