

# A PERSONAL COLLAGE OF THOMAS MERTON

Review of  
 Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift  
*Meditations with Merton*  
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Reviewed by **Bill Koch**

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This slim volume, written by the Director of the Rediscover the Sabbath Sabbatical Program in Massachusetts, consists of 30 two page meditations divided into ten sections. The cover describes it as “A collage of Scripture quotes, original prayers, and Merton’s own words on issues of relevance to today’s readers.” The majority of short quotations from Merton texts come from *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

In the preface, the author states that she has applied Merton’s insights to everyday living, “integrating some of Merton’s statements in a broader context than they may have originally been written.” She encourages the reader to enter into dialogue with her, to question her interpretations.

Vandergrift correctly identifies the primary concern in all of Merton’s writings” His central concern was the transformation of the human person in intimate relationship with God”; and what for Merton was the key to a human life: “At the core of his thought, this [spiritual] hunger revealed itself in a fundamental movement from the false self to the true self.”

The overarching theme of these reflections is this process of the emergence of the true self and its relationship with the world. The first five sections treat aspects of ones’ interior religious experience. The author has embraced Merton’s life — and his world-affirming faith. She invites readers to identify their unique holiness and to value one’s physical and emotional constitution as vehicles of God’s presence. The meditations on the union of science and wisdom, and on the nature of the world are good extrapolations of Merton’s thought.

Sections VI-X examine aspects of a Christian’s relationship with the world. Labor is defined as a participation in God’s creative work and an essential part of our humanness. I thought Vandergrift’s reflections on “God’s Will” were especially helpful. She shows the defect in believing God’s will is a preconceived plan meant to keep one “safe.” But, drawing from Merton, she describes the will of God as “charity that offers itself spontaneously . . . God’s will demands that I love the person in front of me NOW.”

Since the author encourages dialogue, I would like to take the liberty to address two points. On page 32, she states, “As a human being, I have a soul. It is what makes me distinct from other living creatures on the planet.” I found myself uncomfortable with this distinction, valid as it may be. It seems to connote a casual disregard for other living things, although I doubt Vandergrift meant to suggest this. I don’t recall anything from Merton on the souls of animals, but in *No Man is an Island*, he actively expects all creation (“the beast and trees”) to share in the general Resurrection (pp. 18, 184). In other chapters, Vandergrift also makes dis-

inctions between human beings and animals that are more judicious. In this context, I think the contrast could be dropped without hurting the message of the chapter. Moreover, couldn't we say that the "marriage" of body and soul that humans must struggle for occurs instinctively in "lower" forms of conscious life?

In the section on Labor, Vandergrift rightly calls for us to become more sensitive to how we handle the world and to "grow in courtesy." She then says, "Our divine, courteous God has given us all we need." And in her original prayer, she writes, "Reverent Creator . . . you courteously invite me to intimacy with you . . ." While I agree we humans (especially Westerners) could use lessons in courtesy, assigning this quality to God seems awkward. I am reminded of Merton's description of an agnostic's experience of God, or the numinous: "God does not present Himself to him on a clear and comforting concept, but as a completely disconcerting and inexplicable reality, making a demand for total commitment and trust" (*Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 189). When you think about it, if God were "courteous," wouldn't we know with much more certainty that God exists? Perhaps the term "reverence" (which she uses in this chapter) provides a better sense of what should replace a thoughtless attitude towards things.

I found myself of two minds about this work. There were times I found the text too wordy, and some phrases seemed to be labored attempts to sound relevant ("an egoic filling up"???). On the other hand, some of her original prayers are quite eloquent and I found the Scripture passages well-chosen and vivid. While Vandergrift breaks no new ground, she does provide the basics of a Merton spirituality. These meditations could be helpful for someone new to Merton. They could also provide fruitful reflections on days of recollection.