

CHOIRS OF MILLIONS: THOMAS MERTON & GOD'S CREATURES

Presidential Address at the
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by **Robert E. Daggy**

Good evening and welcome! Welcome to the Second General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society*! When I wrote my remarks for the preliminary program some months ago, I concluded by saying: "Y'all come!" This spring — on two separate occasions: once in central Kentucky and once right in Louisville — I heard an expansion of that phrase. It goes: "Y'all come, if you can!" As I look around this banquet room tonight, I am delighted that so many of y'all found that you could come — that you could join in this Second General Meeting, "A Huge Chorus of Living Beings: The Voice of a New World." I like this word "y'all" because I will be speaking tonight about *all* — *all* God's creation and *all* God's creatures.

The theme-title for this Meeting is taken from the Epilogue to Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952." The passage goes:

The whole valley is flooded with moonlight and I can count the southern hills beyond the watertank, and almost number the trees of the forest to the north. Now **the huge chorus of living beings** rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, **choirs of millions** and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky opens upon the frozen distance of the stars.¹

It is my hope that this meeting will be a celebration of Merton's affirmation of God's creation and that we, as members of the Society, will dedicate ourselves to participation in a "new world" where we all take our appropriate places in the huge chorus of *all* living beings. Merton's affirmation encompasses all of God's creation and I will touch on that, but the thrust of my remarks tonight will deal with God's creatures — those choirs of millions who share and cohabit the earth with us humans, those creatures who, because of our hubris, our ignorance, our indifference, our misconceptions, have been mistreated, endangered, and, in far too many cases, already extinguished.

As with so many other issues and problems which we confront as we move toward a less androcentric and less Eurocentric world, Merton becomes a guide and mentor for us. He came to awareness of the threat to our environment, our planet, and our very survival fairly early

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 360. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

— certainly before this threat became a clear issue to others. Were he alive today I can imagine that he would be most engaged in the struggle. I can imagine his writing with passion about the burning oil wells in Kuwait with their potential global pollution and their interruption of birds' normal migration patterns. I can imagine his writing with facile irony about the semantic game in which judges are allowed to interpret the Constitution and to define the transportation and dumping of garbage as "interstate commerce." In 1966 he wrote: "We are a species that has been given the choice of survival or non-survival."² With that choice comes the choice of whether other species, indeed the earth, will survive. A year before he had written about humans multiplying on the earth. He said: "As the end approaches, there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth."³ The same year, in his special preface written for Japanese readers of *Thoughts in Solitude*, he states: "The world is shrinking . . . [We must be] wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one."⁴ He had a sense of "ecology" and applied it to himself — as he so often did with issues: "I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well . . . I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of 'place' a new configuration."⁵ But perhaps the most revealing example of his early awareness occurred in a letter he wrote in January, 1964, to a high school sophomore from Waterloo, Iowa:

Last evening I was trying to count all the deer that were up at the other end of the field from where I was . . . I counted at least five of them. It is wonderful to have wild animals for neighbors, and it is a shame that people can't think of anything better than to go and shoot them.

The lesson of that is that we Americans ought to love our land, our forests, our plains, and we ought to do everything we can to preserve it in its richness and beauty, by respect for our natural resources, for water, for land, for wild life. We need men and women [notice that Merton says men and women] of the rising generation to dedicate themselves to this.⁶

Merton's writings about creation literally shimmer. His respect, his love for God's creation resonate through his writings from the early 1940s on — in his poetry, in his prose, and in his taped lectures. There is, of course, the beautiful passage from *The Sign of Jonas* from which our theme-title is taken. In fact, *Jonas* is filled with what he was later to call "natural contemplation, which beholds the divine in and through nature."⁷ Take, for example, this shimmering passage, written in 1949:

By the reading of scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills, and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I find fire and music in the earth under my feet. (SJ, pp. 215-216)

When Thomas Merton rejected the world and entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, he was not rejecting the world which God had made. We glimpse God through his creation and, for Merton, that glimpsing is the essence of Christian teaching. We find this theology of creation

2. Thomas Merton, "Is Man a Gorilla with a Gun?" In *Faith & Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 100.

3. Thomas Merton, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room." In *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 70.

4. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 112.

5. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 33. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Day*.

6. Thomas Merton to Jim Frost, January 7, 1964. In *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 330. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Road*.

7. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," *Cistercian Studies* 18:4 (1983), p. 298.

enunciated throughout his writings, but particularly in *Seeds of Contemplation* and in its revision, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. He said: "As we go about the world everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven."⁸ He expands this thought a bit further on: "A tree gives glory to God first of all by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be, it is imitating an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree" (*Seeds*, p. 24). It has, in fact, been suggested that in his developing view of the material world, Merton may be considered an early advocate of what has come to be called "creation spirituality."⁹

Merton's view also contains, even in these early writings, clear echoes (if you will) of Eastern spirituality. I would suggest that it is highly possible that his view of creation predisposed him to interest in Eastern teachings and thought. One reviewer of *Thomas Merton in Alaska* observed: "His [Merton's] comments on a mountain named *Redoubt* ('which surely has another name, a secret & true neame') reveal a sensitivity to the presence of spirit in rocks."¹⁰ But we need not wait until the last year of Merton's life, when *The Alaskan Journal* was written, to find in his writings an anthropomorphism similar to that in Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, and Zen Buddhism. In *Seeds* he ascribes the human idea of sanctity, of sainthood, to "the pale flowers of the dogwood," "the little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of the road," to leaves, "to bass and trout hiding in the deep pools of the river." He concludes this section with: "But the great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like it. It is alone in its own character; nothing in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. And that is its sanctity" (*Seeds*, pp. 25-26).

In his famous poem, "Grace's House," one can sense awareness in the creatures and objects as he describes little Grace Sisson's drawing. His encounter with Eastern thought, in which he found so much that was similar and compatible, undoubtedly reinforced his view. Remember, for instance, his anthropopathic rendering of Chuang Tzu's story, "The Joy of Fishes":

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu
Were crossing Hao River
By the dam.

Chuang said:
"See how free
The fishes leap and dart:
That is their happiness."

Hui replied:
"Since you are not a fish
How do you know
What makes fishes happy?"

Chuang said:

"Since you are not I
How can you possibly know
That I do not know
What makes fishes happy?"

Hui argued:
"If I, not being you,
Cannot know what you know
It follows that you
Not being a fish
Cannot know what they know."

Chuang said:
"Wait a minute!

Let us get back
To the original question.
What you asked me was
'How do you know
What makes fishes happy?'
From the terms of your question
You evidently know I know
What makes fishes happy.
"I know the joy of fishes
In the river
Through my own joy,
as I go walking
Along the same river."¹¹

The fish feels joy in just being a fish, in just being what God means a fish to be. When we turn to look at Merton's view of the "choirs of millions" of God's creatures, that is his message to

8. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 22. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Seeds*.

9. See Patrick F. O'Connell, "Thomas Merton's Spiritual Teaching: Tradition and Innovation," *Spiritual Life* 36:4 (Winter 1990), p. 210.

10. Bernard K. Bangle, "[Review of] *Thomas Merton in Alaska*." *En Christo* 5:2 (July 1990).

11. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 97-98.

us humans. As he said: “[Life] is what it is and it says what it says. It cannot be forced to bear a different witness than that which it knows.”¹² Merton felt that humans have a distinct and special relationship with God’s creatures and his writings are filled with images of animals, birds, and fish. I would not want, however, to suggest that Merton was an “animal activist” in our sense. I have found only one letter in which he even discussed directly the question of cruelty to animals. Written in March, 1967, it responded to an inquiry from a young woman who asked why God permits “unjust and needless cruelty” to animals. Merton replied:

Any question about unjust and useless suffering is difficult to answer, and I must admit that I do not have ready answers to such questions at hand. In the end, I believe the trouble comes from some imperfect way in which we imagine God “willing” or “permitting” these things, as if He were somehow a human being and outside of everything. Who knows? If human suffering has value, it is only from the fact that Christ, God Himself, suffers it in us and with us. Who is to say that He does not in some way Himself suffer in the animals what they suffer? That is a possible answer. God cannot simply look on “objectively” while His creatures suffer. To imagine Him doing so is to imagine something quite other than God. (*Road*, p. 347)

Merton’s reply follows a traditional line — we don’t after all *know* what animals suffer — but it does not really contradict or compromise his idealized view of creatures as expressed elsewhere in his writings. We stand in special relationship with creatures precisely because God willed it so. It is a relationship not unlike the one we find in Confucian thought: humans are a cosmic pivot between Heaven (God) and earth (creatures). Humans are like both and responsible to both. Merton’s thinking combines both accounts of the creation which we find in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.

One the one hand, humans exercise dominion over the creatures, as in Genesis 1: “Let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth.” On the other hand, we humans hold dominion, as in Genesis 2, because God made “all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven” as helpmates for Adam. And then, Adam *named* all the creatures and, in naming them, took responsibility for them. Merton’s fullest explication of creation is in a manuscript fragment called “The Cloud and the Fire.”

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

The Spirit of God moved over the abyss. There was light. He divided the light from the darkness, day from night. He separated the waters. He called the firmament heaven, called the stars and they answered Him, and they said: “We are here!” The morning stars sang together before Him. He made the seas. He made the dry land. Seeds and grass and trees and flowers sprang up out of the earth. In the sea there were dolphins, there were great whales. Rare birds flew up out of the marshes and the cries and clear songs that filled all forests, praised Him.

Wild horses ran like the wind across their high pastures. The glades were marvelous with deer. He blessed a thousand antelopes and they raced along the bank of a stream, with all their beauty playing in the silent water.

The beauty, the strength, the grace, the suppleness, the life of all things came from Him. They praised Him.

He looked at them, not because they praised Him: but they praised Him because He looked at them. It was not because they existed that He knew them: but because He knew them, they existed. It was not because they were good that He loved them: but because He loved them, they were good. And he said: “Adam!” and Adam stood before Him, made in His image and likeness . . .

[If] among the beings that have bodies, man was the most exalted, it was in order that he might contemplate God and love Him and praise Him as the high priest of the universe. Placed at the exact ontological center of creation . . . with the brute beasts ready to obey him, Adam was the anointed mediator between God and His world . . . In the sounding solitude of Adam’s understanding, all

12. Albion Leixos [a.k.a. Thomas Merton], “[Review of] *Rain and the Feast of the Stars*, by Reijo Hatsumi.” *Jubilee* 7:1 (May 1959), p. 45.

things adored their tremendous Creator, and in the flaming silence of Adam's wisdom, everything loved God and praised Him.¹³

But then we humans lost paradise and we have wandered away — away, not only from paradise, but from the ground of our being. It is hard for us to get back, hard for us at times even to remember. Merton cautions that we need to remember, as in the last stanza of his poem, “Dry Places.”

... we cannot forget the legend of the world's childhood
Or the track to the dogwood valley
And Adam our father's old grass farm
Wherein they gave the animals names and knew
Christ was promised first without scars
When all God's larks called out to Him
In their wild orchard.¹⁴

God's creatures do not have our problems: they are what they are. Merton's message, in large part, is for us to let them be what they are, what God intended them to be, and for us humans to take a lesson from their very fidelity to their being. In 1959 he wrote to D. T. Suzuki, proponent of Zen Buddhism:

At the moment I occasionally meet my own kind of Zen master, in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on a fence post suddenly took off after a wasp, dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the same position on the fence post as if nothing had ever happened. A brief, split second lesson in Zen . . . [T]he birds never stop to say “I missed” because, in fact, whether they catch the wasp or not they never miss.¹⁵

The creatures don't need us to define them, to classify them, to make them over in our image. They particularly don't need, as Merton was quick to agree with his Japanese friends, all the words that humans expend on everything. They don't worry about being the creatures they are. In 1965 Merton wrote in his landmark essay, *Day of a Stranger*: “Sermon to the birds: ‘Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: *be birds*. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!’ ”

And Merton, typically, has the birds reply: “Even this is one sermon too many!” (*Day*, p. 51). In one of his more amusing commentaries on creatures, Merton addressed the fact that humans often forget or fail to see God in His creation because we fret ourselves up, we worry, we become concerned over things that have no real meaning, or, as Merton puts it: *we care*. We care about all the wrong things and we forget to be ourselves and we forget to see God. He chose as an example the then current “problem” at Gethsemani of rabbits — rabbits who were eating monastic vegetables and wreaking havoc in monastic gardens and causing monastic frets and sweats and care. Merton's answer: “You have to leave the rabbits what they are, rabbits; and if you just see that they are rabbits you suddenly see that they are transparent, and that the *rabbitness* of God is shining through in all these darn rabbits. And that people are transparent, and that the humanity of God is transparent in people.”¹⁶

Merton's message, as with other things, is a simple one: humans should stop trying to remold everything according to their ideas of what is necessary, what is useful, what is utilitarian.

13. Thomas Merton, “The Cloud and the Fire,” manuscript fragment (Thomas Merton Studies Center), pp. 1-3.

14. Thomas Merton, *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 26.

15. *Encounter: Thomas Merton & D. T. Suzuki*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (Monterey, Kentucky: Larkspur Press, 1988), p. 18.

16. Thomas Merton, “A Life Free from Care,” *Cistercian Studies* 3:4 (1970), p. 223.

Humans should be humans; rabbits should be rabbits. He also remarked in 1965, the same year as the sermon to the birds and the rabbit narrative: “The quails begin their sweet whistling in the wet bushes. Their noise is absolutely useless, and so is the delight I take in it. There is nothing I would rather hear, not because it is a better noise than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival.”¹⁷ It is interesting, I think, that Merton so often uses words of celebration to talk about creation: the festival, the dance, the chorus, the choir: “the beasts *sing* to God.” He says in a little known essay titled “Jacob’s War”: “Why should I throw away the beauty of God’s morning by trying to grasp it in my human hands?”¹⁸

But that is what humans *have* done. We’ve tried to grasp the whole earth in our human hands, squeezing and despoiling it, endangering creation by our very grasping. And we have destroyed whole species of creatures and brought others to the brink of extinction. Rather than cherishing and protecting these creatures, rather than taking “responsibility” for them, we have destroyed their habitats, driven them from their natural places, removed those who are part of our food chain from all contact with nature and with the ground of their being.

To Merton, we’ve moved a long way from paradise. We’ve taken, in fact, what he called a pagan view of creation. In a 1963 lecture, he said: “The smallest creature is important in the sight of God.” His anthropomorphism comes through again as he defines “creature” in this case as “the smallest blade of grass.” He goes on: “God’s attitude toward his creation is supposed to give us a whole view that is totally different. Our view of creation tends to be a pagan view. Use whatever is there — use it. Do what you want with it. It’s there. You have power over it. You can do anything you like with it.” But this is *not*, for Merton the Christian view. He emphasizes: “Nothing that is important to Him [God] can be treated by us without the greatest respect.”¹⁹ But we take the pagan view. We forget “Adam’s old grass farm” and we keep on forgetting.

I would like to recast a story Merton told in “Rahner’s Diaspora” when he, Merton, saw the church in world crisis. The story is pertinent and works as well in a different way today when I see the *world* and its existence in crisis. Merton’s story goes:

The life of St. Fronto, apostle of an obscure corner of southwestern France, relates (without a shadow of historical foundation) that the Emperor who had exiled Fronto to that forsaken spot with numerous companions, was moved to pity and sent seventy camels there laden with provisions for them. Once when this story was being narrated in a catechism class in St. Fronto’s town, Perigueux, one of the children asked why there were no camels to be seen in the neighborhood today. “My child,” replied the Abbe, “we no longer deserve them.”²⁰

My version is similar. Those who saw Kevin Costner’s epic film, *Dances with Wolves*, will immediately recall the stunning and moving scene in which Costner and his native American friends hunt buffalo. Before they encounter the living herd, they come across an unbelievable scene of carnage left by white hunters. The white men had killed the buffalo, not to live and to survive, but for part of the hide and for the tongue (then considered a delicacy in Eastern restaurants). The rest of the carcass was left to bleed and to rot on the plain. What we might call tonight the “paganism” of the white man’s wanton butchery and inexplicable waste is contrasted vividly with the more “Christian” view of the non-Christian native Americans: the native Americans are native Americans and the buffalo are buffalo. Lest my point be missed, let me say

17. Thomas Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” In *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 23.

18. Thomas Merton, “Jacob’s War;” manuscript (Thomas Merton Studies Center), p. 4.

19. Thomas Merton, “Lecture: St. Thomas: The Importance of Creation in God’s View/ April 3, 1963” (Thomas Merton Studies Center), tape 95A.

20. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 185.

that most of us live where the great buffalo once roamed, but we don't now. We didn't deserve them. Thank God, we realized in the case of the buffalo — and in time — that to deserve them, we must preserve them before they vanished from the earth forever. I hope that our children and our grandchildren may never have to ask why there are *no* buffalo anywhere!

Why do we do all this? Why do we take, in Merton's terms, a pagan view of God's creation and His creatures? In another taped lecture, Merton explains in a way that meshes and resounds with the theme of this Second General Meeting. He said:

All creatures are like syllables in a song which God is singing. Everything that is, is just a little syllable in this song which God is continually singing. When you sing a song you can't just stay on one note all the time. He is continually passing on from one syllable to the next and our happiness consists in following Him and listening to His singing and following the song as it goes along.

But Merton further explains:

What happens is that we don't do that. We latch onto a syllable and we want the whole song to stop because we like that note. [We say]: "This is a nice note. Let's have nothing but this note from now on . . ."

We cling to one of the syllables of the great song and therefore we are disturbed when the most wise Cantor proceeds further with the song.

Merton concludes: "We have to move with the song!"²¹

Let us tonight, with Merton, resolve to move with the song.

Let us exercise our dominion over God's creatures as it was meant to be when Adam named them.

Let us, as Merton's narrator does in his poem "Birdcage Walk," open the palace aviaries and give the winged creatures liberty.

Let us observe the sanctity of the mountain.

Let us feel the joy of fishes.

Let us *not* sermonize to the birds.

Let us see the rabbitness of God in His rabbits.

Let us hear the quails whistling.

Let us strive to save the world and all its creatures.

**Let us join the huge chorus of living beings
and let us, God willing,**

SING THE NOTES OF THE GREAT SONG!

21. Thomas Merton, "Commentary on the Meditations of Guigo the Carthusian," *The Merton Tapes* (Chappaqua, New York: Electronic Paperbacks, 1972), tape 7, "Life & Truth."