

## Dreaming Together with Wisdom

Presidential Address – ITMS Thirteenth General Meeting  
Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT  
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By **Kathleen Deignan, CND**

It gives me joy to welcome you to Sacred Heart University, for this Thirteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. Sacred Heart is my Alma Mater, and it was here during my transforming undergraduate studies in the early pioneering days of this institution that my apprenticeship in the wisdom of Thomas Merton began in earnest, though he had been my spiritual father for several years thanks to my teachers in the Congregation of Notre Dame. But it was during my first semester here, in December 1968, that I heard of the death of Thomas Merton. Many of us can still remember that day as some kind of marker in our spiritual lives – as if we had let go of an honored teacher, a master, a spiritual father, a soul friend.

That stunning news was broken to us here by our chaplain, Father John Giuliani, and its impact was so powerful that he and a small cadre of students would in its wake become life-friends and companions, who pledged to keep Merton's voice and vision alive in a host of ways – Tom Murphy, Ev Avoglia, Jaculyn Hanrahan, Gina Sader, Stephen Rivers, to name a few. Together we founded The Thomas Merton House of Hospitality to serve the hungry poor of Bridgeport – still going strong some forty years later. Soon after, an expanded cohort opened similar hospitality houses in the four corners of the Bridgeport Diocese: Dorothy Day House in Danbury; New Covenant House in Stamford; Good Shepherd House in South Norwalk.

Two years after graduation I returned here to Sacred Heart, partnering with Father Giuliani in campus ministry, and out of our devotion to our teacher's memory, initiated the "Merton Memorial Series" which gathered here many of his friends or friends-in-spirit like Dan Walsh, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Michael Harrington, David O'Brien, Jim Forest, Jose Hobday, Eileen Egan, Brother David Steindl-Rast, Dorothy Day, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, Lanza del Vasto, Ed Rice, Daniel Berrigan, Joe Fahey and Dom Jean Leclercq. We hosted Catholic Peace Fellowship conferences in his honor, and the SHU Chorale offered one of the first concerts of Merton's Freedom Songs. Even Henri Nouwen was a frequent communicant here at our Sacred Heart liturgies that inspired and fortified us for the challenges Merton set before us: the Vietnam moratorium actions, farmworker solidarity witness where Stephen Rivers brought us together with Cesar Chavez. There were dialogues with our General Electric

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neighbors about their weapons production, the first Earth Day celebration, and other moments too many to mention, where we made space for Merton to live on with us and in us.

Merton's inspiration was so empowering that – nurturing a seed planted in Gethsemani while hearing Merton proclaim the Gospel – Father Giuliani founded the Benedictine Grange in 1976 just a few miles from here, a lay monastic community of worship and mission where Merton's spirit still thrives. And now, one of the pioneers of minding-the-Merton-legacy is the Vice President of Mission here, Dr. Michael Higgins. It all has come full – full circle. So as you move through the halls of Sacred Heart University these days of our assembly, know that they are rich with memories of that special season of Merton's early passing and his faithful abiding. And to where and to what did he pass? And where does he abide? In minds and hearts incalculable no doubt, but most intentionally and incarnately he passed into this assembly, into us, his abiding body of wisdom: what we have become as the International Thomas Merton Society.

All disciples of Thomas Merton know how important seeds are and their potency. So let us recall that the seed of our Society was sown originally in Canada in 1978 by Michael Higgins and Don Grayston, and then formally and internationally in 1987 by Father Bill Shannon of beloved memory who passed away last year. Through him and Bob Daggy, Brother Patrick Hart and our dear friends Christine Bochen, Bonnie Thurston, Patrick O'Connell and several other originals, our Society was born. Because of their vision and intention we are still convening and conjuring Merton's spirit to live together with us, instructing and inspiring us in the wisdom he labored to spell for the world. So let us offer a salute to those original founders of ITMS present and let us thank them for conceiving, midwifing and nurturing this unique Society for these many decades. And let's salute the founders and members of the Mertonvrienden of the Low Countries; of the Merton Society of Canada; of Great Britain and Ireland; of Poland; of Germany; of Spain; of Italy; of Australia; of New Zealand; of France – and salute those sowing ITMS seeds in China, Korea, Argentina, Africa and Brazil. Though your labors Merton has grown world-size!

In that spirit, let's offer our sincere thanks to Past President and 2013 Program Chair Bob Grip; and again to Dr. Michael Higgins, one of the early adopters of the Merton's legacy, who is our host for the rich program so generously prepared for us by Ami Neville and all the members of the Program Committee. Thank you for designing what will surely be illuminating, joyous, challenging and delicious days where we can live together with Wisdom for this while.

Well, I never dreamed as a student novice at Sacred Heart in 1968 that in 2013 I would preside here in service to our international network, our virtual wisdom community that lives to keep Merton alive in the world. And as we stand on the threshold of the centenary of Merton's birth in 2015, I have been dreaming about us and wondering what is this International Thomas Merton Society – what is our real potential and mission as we move on together through the twenty-first century? What would Merton's dream be for and with us? And what might we dream toward his centenary as a worthy birthday salute for his century of continuing life on this earth? My presidency has been this pondering which I now invite you to share for the sake of our visioning, in a simple and brief contemplative exercise. What shall we dream together ITMS to be – to become?

So let us all entertain in silence, with pen and card in hand, these two questions: in six words first write what the ITMS is to me. Now in ten words what might I – what might Merton be dreaming us to be, as we prepare to mark a century of his incarnation? In this we begin a common practice

of contemplatively “dreaming together with Wisdom,” which we hope to continue all through these days and especially at the Town Hall Meeting of all members new and old.

### **Dreaming Together with Wisdom**

As many of you know there is a bench on Merton’s hermitage porch bearing a sign that reads: “The Bench of Dreams.” It sits empty now but the dreaming dreamt there goes on perpetually every time someone enters into deep *lectio* – deep reading or prayer with Merton’s illuminating texts, which is what we will be doing together these four days. It was from this bench of dreams that Merton attended “the dawn deacon”<sup>71</sup> summoning him to lauds each daybreak, so he might attend the whispering of Wisdom and become himself her dream-catcher. She revealed to him there the mysteries of day and night, rain and stars, and the ways of teeming natural families. And by her wisdom Merton came home to himself, home to the world, home to the earth. From this “Bench of Dreams” he became the mature scribe and poet of Sophia, spelling out his sapiential canticles *ex cathedra*.

### **Sacred Dreaming**

Dreaming of course has been felt as a magical activity among our species from the dawn of human consciousness. It was sensed to be a medium of transmission, illumination, revelation beyond our conscious day-world reasoning, offering insight and energy for our life – even for our evolution. The gods inspired dreams: the ancient Greeks honored the shape-shifting god Morpheus as lord of the dream realm; for the Celts, it was Angus Mac Og. Hindus still practice dream yoga with Maya – the goddess of dream and illusion – to distinguish between these alternating noetic constructions and thereby evolve the mind. Tibetan Buddhists liken dreams to the incubating bardo state through which the dead pass en route to a new existence. Always indigenous peoples, where their cultures may still be viable, remain dream-seekers: no one ever became a shaman or medicine person who had not been given a commissioning dream from the spirit world.

We of the Western traditions continue the communal interpretation of numinous dreams that have shaped our sacred religious and cultural heritage. We still explore Adam’s dream of Eve, Jacob’s somnambulant joust with a wounding angel, Joseph’s technicolor fluency in dream-speak, Ezekiel’s bony reverie of socio-political restoration. We still rehearse the many meanings of Mother Mary’s messianic dream, of Joseph’s sleep-talking angel, of the rerouting reverie of the Magi, and of Jesus’ ravaging vision quest in the desert which awakened his divinity and some believe ours as well. And then, there is the great dream Christ confides to his disciples – a dream of the realm of God in our midst, one of the visionary seeds planted deep in the world-soul, so that our species could keep alive an Edenic memory of a garden, and awaken in it as a new humankind – a kinder human, dreaming into history a new kind of world.

Some ancient civilizations proposed that divinity itself is a dream process imagining cosmos into being, or singing a universe into its magical unfolding. Geologist Thomas Berry’s incantation says it this way: “In the beginning was the dream. Through the dream all things were made, and without the dream nothing was made that has been made.”<sup>72</sup> Cosmologists are coming surprisingly close to that intuition as well, albeit from their own starting points and in their own language: “M-theory” they call it, their stringy, dreamy theory of everything – “M” for membrane, magic, mother, monster,

multiverse, matrix, mystery. In it all, we hear the echo of Merton's dream universe out-spiraling in an entrancing cosmic dance,<sup>3</sup> with divinity the entangling perichoresis patterning it all. The magic of the world – its grandeur, its ineffable quality lives not just around us but within us, and this hidden wholeness is the ground and inspiration of all our inspired dreaming. Thomas Berry would say even more: it is “the cosmic order itself” that dances “in the dreamworld that unfolds within us in our sleep, or in those visionary moments that seize upon us in our waking hours” (Berry 201). One thing we know for sure – we are a dreaming species and the dream vision is the critical feature of the cultural and spiritual development of humankind.

To comprehend the power of dreams everyone turns to Carl Jung, who helps us understand that dream-life is not simply for our well-being and sanity, but for soul-life – dreams fund the work of psychic evolution. His school of deep psychology admonished that dreaming is a sacred task because, consciously or not, we are all caught up in some form of corporate dreaming. He instructed us to take up the work of conscious dreaming with care because worlds are born in dreams – movements, revelations, revolutions, utopias, hell realms. Just ask Martin Luther King or Adolf Hitler about the power of a personal dream when summoned from our collective psychic depths and made incarnate, made communal. As dream master Jung reminds us in words that might have been penned by Merton himself:

The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness extends. For all ego-consciousness is isolated; because it separates and discriminates, it knows only particulars, and it sees only those that can be related to the ego. Its essence is limitation, even though it reach to the farthest nebulae among the stars. All consciousness separates; but in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There [we] are still the whole, and the whole is in [us], indistinguishable from nature and bare of all egohood. It is from these all-uniting depths that the dream arises, be it never so childish, grotesque, and immoral.<sup>4</sup>

Dreams, of course, mattered to Merton too. He was meticulous in recording them and minding them. His own list of memorables counts one of his deceased father visiting him while a lost and lonely son on Roman holiday;<sup>5</sup> another was a bewildering dream of a dark, secret little girl from his past, Ann Winser<sup>6</sup> – a Beatrician kind of figure who seemed to carry some important soul quality for him. His most transformative dream was of another little girl, his imaginal soul-friend, Proverb – a Jewish kid who was madly in love with him and would prove to be his faithful psychic transformer.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of her nocturnal visitation, some weeks later Merton had his great epiphany on Fourth and Walnut (see *SS* 181-82 [3/19/1958]; *CGB* 140-42), where he felt a dramatic breakthrough from a debilitating, isolating home-sickness to a profound home-coming to his family, the human family.

Sweet Proverb's resonance in him was further evoked by Victor Hammer's icon of a woman bestowing a victory wreath on the head of her son<sup>8</sup> which inspired Merton's mysterious and celebrated poem *Hagia Sophia*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, that poem in which Merton dreams of a nurse awakening him to Eden again, reads like a premonition of her later incarnate arrival into his life and dreams: his beloved

nurse, M. In time other female specters would wander through his reveries –the Lady Latinist (see *DWL* 89 [3/10/1964]), the little Chinese Princess (see *DWL* 167-68 [11/19/1964]), the Black Mother who gathered him in her arms and danced with him (see *DWL* 202 [2/4/1965]) – and all were the shape-shifting forms and faces of the one Sophia in her myriad disguises, healing his illusion of that afflicting separateness that haunted him.

It was Sophia who was always inviting him into the embracive communion of a hidden wholeness. As she was his muse, he was her illuminator inscribing her wisdom in countless words from his “bench of dreams.” One might say that Merton’s life was a parable of what it means to dream with wisdom and allow her unitive, compassionate and creative vision to become one’s own psychic domain in order to collaborate with her in the ongoing creation of the world.

Which brings us to the great question Merton was ever asking in all the days and nights of his lucid dreaming: what is the state of our world-dream at the moment? We can hear his unequivocal prophecy: “nightmare.” These remarks do not allow time nor space to deconstruct the assemblage of this nightmare, but we all know its specters; we all have heard the hooves of those Four Horsemen in their apocalyptic raids which are becoming more and more unspeakable. This is not hyperbole – even Merton in his most lacerating critique could not exaggerate the disruption caused to our living biome, ironically, by the dream of a hoped-for enlightenment. Just ask the thousands of beings going to extinction annually because of our wonder-world dream gone mad. Just ask the great fish whose herds have been hunted and devoured and even wasted to near extinction; just ask the bees, the trees, the rivers, the seas of their dreams; the polar caps, coral reefs, the topsoil, the jungles. Just ask the ancient ranges of decapitated mountains.

Since our kind has been around for about the last 200,000 years of Earth-time, it is our quite recent ancestors – say from the seventeenth century on – who have dreamt us into this secular, rational, industrial society, with its amazing scientific insight and technological skills. With our help they have established the first radically anthropocentric world order – what Earth historians now name The Anthropocene – the ubiquitous presence and power of our human tribe, all seven billion of us. An astonishing achievement, a coup for our once vulnerable nervous species, one could propose! But not Merton. For him it’s the inescapable slide across of the rim of chaos: “The primordial blessing, ‘increase and multiply,’ has become a hemorrhage of terror.”<sup>10</sup>

And why so? Because the last few centuries of human dreamers either didn’t know or simply broke the primary law of the universe: thou shalt honor – thou shalt not violate – the hidden wholeness of creation (see Berry 202). We dreamers keep forgetting our genetic code of star-dust signing us in communion with all other forms of fiery breath – we keep forgetting our true name. So Merton keeps whispering to us from the bench of dreams:

Take thought . . . tonight. Take thought . . . tonight when it is dark, when it is raining. Take thought of the game you have forgotten. You are the child of a great and peaceful race . . . of an unutterable fable. You were discovered on a mild mountain. You have come up out of the godlike ocean. You are holy, disarmed, signed with a chaste emblem. You are also marked with forgetfulness. Deep inside your breast you wear the number of loss. Take thought . . . tonight. Do this. Do this. Recover your original name.<sup>11</sup>

Our original name? Self-proclaimed: *homo sapiens*, the wise species, the people of wisdom. So how shall we intentionally take up this dreaming together toward wisdom, toward our true nature so that we and the Earth may once more thrive? For that I ask the dreamer of Earth, Thomas Berry, Merton's contemporary and likewise visionary, who for decades exhorted us in these terms. Let's tell a new story, a true story discovered in contemplative dreaming circles, yes – but a dream also unfolding in the sacred circles of scientific inquiry and experiment – a dream story on which poet and physicist can agree. If we do not have such a shared vision of the way things really are, we will never make it through this arduous moment of planetary history. We will need a powerful dream to entice us from our narcosis in the sleep of the machine, the technological trance of our current humanoid group which has sacrificed even the conditions for life itself to serve a dream of rapacious pleasure and progress – what both Merton and Berry call the “millennial dream.” We will need a dream strong and noble enough to woo us from our addiction to the world in its present form, to detoxify and inoculate us from this dystopic world fantasy. The civilizational collapse now unfolding may not be survivable for future generations or for present generations without such a powerful alternative dream to guide our action, to hold us in the coming disorientation, to quicken the energy of hope, for as Aristotle reminds us “Hope is a waking dream.”<sup>12</sup> Yet this dreaming toward hope is waking all around the globe, ironically, just as we are on the way to destroying the world. Ours, then, is the time for lucid dreaming together with Wisdom toward our sapiential destiny, our true vocation to become what Merton saw us to be – a new creature cultivating a new creation.

So as I researched Merton's dreams for a revelatory reverie for our time, I rediscovered what seemed to me his waking dream for this moment in a prose poem from *Raids on the Unspeakable*, his own avowed favorite collection. The shamanic dream familiar to many of us is called “Atlas and the Fat Man” (RU 91-107). I read it as a sapiential summons to reinvent our species from the inside – which, of course, is Merton's understanding of the work of contemplation. I have been sitting with Merton's dream of Atlas and the Fatman, because it reads to me like one of those lucid visions that has the poetic power to evoke something of sophianic consciousness in me, in us.

Everybody knows who the Fatman is; he is Merton's shade that holds humanity's shadow – greed, violence, arrogant ignorance, just plain spite. The Fatman suffers the disease of consumption; he is mean and clueless; he is not wise; he has forgotten paradise. “Sad is the city of the Fatman, for all his industry. . . . Rain cannot wash clean the city of the mercenary, which is always gray with his own despair. . . . The Fatman with his inventions is propping up a fallen heaven” (RU 101). You can see why Atlas is a timely wisdom teacher, because Merton says it's his mission to hold up the sky and save the world.

And since this is the mission of our human generations for at least the next few centuries, I'm turning over his poetic mind in mine as a way of awakening Sophia. Here is what instruction in lucid dreaming sounds like at the feet of the guru Atlas. He tells me to keep my heart safe with his at the bottom of the green ocean, to train my spirit to stand awake with his at the center of the world, and learn how to hold everything in massive silence. He is trying to teach me how to decode the rumors of the woods and rivers and respond again like a mother. This is supposed to keep the continents from drifting apart. Atlas, the shaman, is trying to teach me how to touch the mystery and leave it alone; to learn like him how to let the hollows of my mind fill with dreams as with water. This is supposed to recover me to sanity. He is teaching me his wisdom of dreaming through this dark

night of Earth right down to the roots of the nightmare where the world is on fire with flames that can only be extinguished by wisdom, by vision, by someone willing to ride that apocalyptic pale horse toward a new horizon, a new dawn. He wants me up on the horse. Entrain your pulse to the heartbeat of Earth, he says. Return to child's play because that's where new dreaming begins. He wants me to join in the dance that begins in secrecy in genteel houses, under the kitchen oil cloth, the dance that then leaps to the top of public monuments. This is how the movement begins. He wants me to learn when the time of the sea is the time of the sun; how the leaves of the trees are made of earthtime turning to light. He wants me to let the depth and strength of contemplative practice help me feel the violation of the sentient mountains when they talk about clean coal. "Throw away your clock," he says. None of this is marked by hours. The gods of the seas tell not time; they are too busy with their own music. Listen for the music of clouds and centuries, he says; forget the clock and cannon. Don't be like the Fatman – the "faithless mad son of clocks and buzzers." Who knows what apparatus was his sire, that "bastard of two machines, born with another million." His mother "is not the ocean," but yours is. His father "has not the sun in his heart." Fatman does not know the smell of the earth, because his blood is not his own: it was taken from armies. He fights the elements and the elements will never be the same again (*RU* 101). And even though the sky really is falling under the weight of 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide, Atlas would have us learn to rest at peace under its awning because he says he's ever with us with light and bell wakening us from this nightmare, calling us to prayer, where the seeds of his clear seeing might inseminate drowsy minds with the germ of a better dream.

Atlas is watching over us. Atlas – that is to say Sophia in poetic disguise. Our teacher Merton reminds us that this Sophia is undying because she is the creative dreaming of God. She is the ever fertile and self-renewing psyche of divinity's cosmic creativity. Even if the whole world were to fall to pieces, says Jung, "the unity of the psyche would never be shattered. And the wider and more numerous the fissures on the surface, the more this unity is strengthened in the depths" (Jung 305).

So let us weave that paschal assurance into our common dreaming. Because somewhere in this cosmos Sophia will find souls in which to dream, in which to keep imagining the universe into being, keep healing the innocent nations of which she is regent. This is the work of contemplative dreaming, of natural contemplation, the kind of prayer that supports the activity of seasons: Atlas calls it "looking." It is this contemplative gazing that activates the growth of a biophilic brain, a Gaian consciousness and conscience. Merton says such contemplative dreaming is a lonely work, but it is the lonely work of our century, which is why we have to dream together with wisdom, stand with each other on the shores of our dying oceans, with our heart at the depths of acidified seas. Without such friendship as we share in this contemplative society we may grow weary as Atlas is tempted to, weary thinking of *homo sapiens* and their troubles, not be willing to bare it. Yet we already have the wisdom on which our survival depends because we are that wisdom: *homo sapiens sapiens, imago sapientiae*. This is God's dream of and for us.

To divine the source of this well of grace is why we have gathered here these days, to dream "Together with Wisdom" a dream of the world that is to come in time and space: the garden planet of the Milky Way again. So let's let Atlas give his benediction to all of us: "Come out of the smoke, the world is tossing in its sleep, the sun is up, the land is bursting in the silence of dawn. The gentle earth relaxes and spreads out to embrace the strong sun. . . . With his great gentle hands Atlas opens

the clouds and birds spill back onto the land out of Paradise” (*RU* 107). Come, “Dance in this sun, you tepid idiot. Wake up and dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction” (*RU* 107). Yes alive and with joy, we sing to you Sophia!

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 118; subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 197; subsequent references will be cited as “Berry” parenthetically in the text.
3. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 290-97.
4. Carl Jung, “The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man,” *The Collected Works of Carl Jung*, Bollingen Series 10: Civilization in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 304; subsequent references will be cited as “Jung” parenthetically in the text.
5. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 111-12.
6. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Dagg (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 259 [6/26/1965]; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text.
7. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 178 [2/28/1958; 3/4/1958]; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
8. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 4-6 [5/14/1959 letter to Victor Hammer].
9. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363-71.
10. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 70; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, “The Early Legend” (*RU* 125-26).
12. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.