

# Merton in Motion

Review of

*Dancing in the Water of Life: Finding Peace in the Hermitage  
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five 1963-1965*

Edited by Robert E. Daggy

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“A rolling stone gathers no moss, but it takes on a lot of polish.”

(Wise saying, often quoted by Bro. Owen Carmody, monk of Gethsemani.)

The intriguing title of this volume, imaging Merton as dancing in the water of life, reminded me of his frequent transatlantic crossings as recounted in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I realized too, that although he would take a “vow of stability,” he nevertheless would be a person of inner and outer movement, all his days. In the pages of his journals, he frequently imagines moving to another place in the world: another continent, country, or community. Even at Gethsemani, he was constantly in motion, going to and returning from the woods, exploring wild and woolly sites for a monastic extension of cells, making trips to Louisville and Lexington, and to local mother houses. Even the “trips” to and from the hermitage in those years bore the characteristics of a journey: the mental planning, timetable, luggage and baggage, the actual first step in the right direction, and the inevitable plan for return. In the pages of this fifth journal volume, he often reflects on what all this motion might mean. Why the restlessness, the continued search, the gnawing dissatisfaction?

What I should do now is either quote at length from Robert Daggy’s brilliant Introduction, or at least refer the reader to it, and then bring this little nose-gay to a close. At least a condensed look at his insightful essay and its central premise seems in order here.

When I met Father Louis for the first time, he was forty-nine years old. Despite a boyish bounce to his gait, a delightful chuckle when he laughed, and a twinkle in his eye, I would have guessed him easily in his mid-sixties. In those far off halcyon days, we lived close and common lives, and most of us were aware of Father Louis’ — what we will politely term — “health problems.” I recall one time discreetly inquiring about some of these with the then under master of novices Frater Timothy Kelly. His even more discreet response was: “these geniuses tend to burn-out early.” Little would either of us have guessed how prophetic these words would become.

In the time frame covered by the journal entries in this volume, Merton moved into his middle years, and the physical aspects of his life came into consciousness and concern. This feature is perceptively presented and analyzed by Daggy. On p. xvi Daggy quotes Merton’s list of physical woes, and it reads like a hospital chart. As he came more and more to accept his humanity and his concrete physical being with its demands, his spirituality and view of the world began to change. Often in physical pain and discomfort, feeling old and tired, he sought to come to terms with his mortality and death. A good and necessary task for anyone at his particular stage of life’s process.

Additionally, as Daggy explains, the “absurdity” of it all overwhelmed him. Was there any ultimate meaning? Was it worth the bother? “The revelation of futility and interminable self-contradiction,” Merton wrote (p.xiii). Yet despair was not an option. He turned toward the world and its issues, and this initiated engagement and brought perspective.

**Richard (a.k.a. Colombo) Weber** lived at Gethsemani for 28 years. He had Merton for a novice master. Since 1993 he has served in the Generalate kitchen in Rome. He returns annually to Gethsemani, and makes a retreat at the Merton hermitage.

Merton served from the 40th to his 50th year as novice master at Gethsemani. This service allowed him an outlet for his paternal instincts, creativity, and curiosity. Being "master" was something he liked and needed, and he used the job not only to form others but also to continue his own formation, and try out new ideas and schemes as well. A constant spiritual temperature taker himself, he came to discover through his work with the young monks, deep respect for the place and space of others. These journal entries reflect his care and concern, his admiration. Nevertheless, he was not to be fooled, and could bring those in his charge up against the realities of everyday life. Some of us found ourselves kneeling at the door of the church as an attentive community passed by.

It is often admitted that many of the good things modern monasticism now enjoys results from the fruit of Merton's spiritual and intellectual efforts. Early on, he broadened the notions of enclosure, education, leisure, contemplative prayer, serious study, solitude, and meaningful work, to mention a few. His cosmopolitan and cultured background gave him insights and connections that one would naturally find missing in the woods of Kentucky. He worked to upgrade the spirituality of the house in which he lived, and the Order to which he belonged. When discouraged and exasperated, he aimed for charity, knowing only that would allow movement to a new level of awareness. He struggled against attitudes of spiritual and psychological violence which groups giving themselves over to a life of perfection, are sometimes subject.

Merton deliberately tried to cultivate a more wholesome mentality and spirituality. As mentioned above, his physical problems gave him a new perspective on what it meant to be human and mortal. From this, his compassion grew. As he moved away from a liturgical, symbolic, and ritual form of life, he began to develop a respect and reverence for creation, the world of nature and beauty which he loved. These journal entries are full of beautiful and sparkling clear descriptions of events in nature that surround him. Maybe its the poet in him, maybe the mystic, but what joy he expresses in "a festival of rain!" Not to mention the splendor of sun and moon, animals and plants, all things created. To have one's own place in the world, to be responsible in a way that mattered, to have a part to play in the scheme of things, all this was life-giving for him. Above all, he came to see life and creation as gifts, and to view the human person as the embodiment of these mysteries.

From his contact with nature came a heightened consciousness of the problems of evil, and the brutality and futility of war. The eternal human dilemma entered into the forefront of his concerns. How to make the world a better place, how to achieve justice and equality and dignity for all? How to transcend selfish interest and replace it with a meaningful concern? As Daggy rightly points out, the years covered in this journal result is some of Merton's finest thinking and writing.

Amid the suffering and anguish, amid the simple joys and pleasures of existence, Merton kept his sense of humor. Perhaps it was his saving feature. He could ultimately laugh at himself and others, not in anger or resentment, but in utter astonishment at the "absurdity" built into most human endeavors. This joy and spontaneity come through in many places, and is of course enjoyed and known by all who listen to his tape recorded conferences.

When I was asked to provide a few comments on this volume, I accepted with some anxiety and anticipation. For one thing, these journal entries cover the early years of my time at Gethsemani, and I was curious as to what I might find! Reading these pages brought back vivid memories of events and people, now over thirty years in the past.

This journal ends with the year 1965. As we know, Merton had three more years to live. In those final years he would be dancing, and moving, literally flying. In those last years, he moved more swiftly, as by an intuition. And we know too, sadly, it would end in that final dance with the deadly fan, moving him to his ultimate destination.