

Kernels of Truth

Review of

*Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton:
Reflections on Identity, Community and Transformative Action*

By Charles R. Ringma

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Reviewed by **Mary L. Stewart**

My first impression of this book was somewhat disturbing. I flipped through the pages, as one frequently does with a new treasure, and saw there were five pages in the Table of Contents for a book of 229 pages. Did this indicate a bumpy read ahead? As I explored further, however, I gradually sensed a metaphor emerging in my mind – a jigsaw puzzle – each piece unique, separate and labeled but, when joined together (read) a certain way, forming a unified whole – a picture. This insight helped considerably as I did my assigned reading.

Carrying on with this metaphor, each of the five theme sections of the book – “Being” (1-36), “Being and Transcendence” (37-78), “Being With” (79-110), “Being Against” (111-44), “Being For” (145-82), “Being and Hope” (183-213) – could be considered a color or perhaps a portion of a landscape. Each section is individually titled and subtitled, most of which could be easily worked into daily affirmations. Indeed the best way for this book to be absorbed is to use it as a daily base for quiet times. Each of the 139 selections is worthy of pondering and savoring through the hours of the day, as “read bites” instead of the too familiar “sound bites” that bombard us from the media. With the overall focus on “Being” I worried there might be some duplication and overlapping of insights, experiences, descriptions, but this was minimal. It was more like holding in your hand and turning slowly a multi-faceted fragile art object and seeing it reflect and refract light just a little bit differently from each new angle or perspective. Particularly in the opening “Being” section I sensed in some portions more closeness and lack of separation, while in “Being Against” I felt a different tone, one of being called to action, provoking reflection and challenging me to do something. “Being For” seemed more forceful so, for me, each section heading also conveyed a message.

The title, *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton*, could just as well have been *Seed the Silences with Thomas Merton*, as each entry has a very brief quotation – a kernel of truth, so to speak – from our favorite Trappist. The author then wraps each kernel (seed for contemplation) with his own experiences and insights, with some of the wraps being fleshier than others. As I moved through the reflections I found myself watching that the author’s flesh and skin didn’t obscure and overpower Merton’s kernel. At times readers might carefully remove the author’s flesh and add their own which, I believe, is the author’s intent. He shares much of himself as he illustrates his journey with familiar everyday experiences with which readers can identify, in many ways aiding us in unlocking circumstances that taught – and continue to teach – us, about life. Ringma acknowledges that he is

an “uneasy Protestant” (163) which, in itself, can prompt some reflection on how one struggles with what denominational path one follows and for how long.

Charles Ringma brings a varied worldly background to his insights and writings, having served as lecturer at Asian Theological Seminary in the Philippines and as part of Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor. Born in Holland, his roots were in the Dutch Reformed faith, the traditions of which eventually moved him to wonder about the effect of cultural contexts on one’s faith. Becoming a pilgrim to and of other places as well as of the inner world, he explored different areas, discovering what we all have in common, and how each experience shapes and informs our personal worlds. He is an Australian citizen and has worked in urban mission, community development and with the poor. The author of several books, he broadcasts regularly on radio and television, and is Professor of Mission and Evangelism at Regent College in Vancouver, BC.

I read most of this book while I was “cat-sitting” at a friend’s home in the country. As an introvert and lay contemplative, I value silence, slowness and solitude, like Ringma gaining thoughts from simple pleasures that breed profound insights, especially when receiving Nature’s gift of renewal (12-13). My companions, in addition to three four-legged ones, were the brisk March wind blowing over the still ice-covered lake, the birds at the feeders and the crackle of the fire’s voice calling for more food. I had skimmed the book on its arrival and had a sense of its contents, but now I was gifting myself with the quiet read. To have the disciplined opportunity of reading this book over four days in the arms of nature was a two-fold gift in a way. I had the luxury of time and space to discover its contents quickly and somewhat objectively and then, later on in my own time, to make use of it with a more personal subjective focus. As in many books of this type, there are frequent reminders of what we think we already know in part, and often need to re-know at each new step and vantage point on our journey. The familiar paradoxes present themselves both from Merton’s kernels and the author’s fleshing out of those seeds for silent reflection.

Each of the 139 kernels is referenced to its original text, a listing of which appears at the back of the book – between “Thomas Merton: A brief chronology” (215-19) and a two-page “Bibliography: Works by Thomas Merton.” There is also a Secondary Bibliography of nine books about Merton. I was curious about the different sources the author had quoted from and discovered that there were 33 in total. Of these *Seeds of Contemplation* yielded the highest number – 19, while *The Sign of Jonas* was next with 16; *No Man Is an Island* gave 10; *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, nine; *The Waters of Siloe* and *Disputed Questions* offered six each; *Life and Holiness*, *Contemplative Prayer*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* contributed five each. The balance was spread over familiar and not so familiar works.

I frequently wondered how Ringma chose the quotes around which he wrapped his thoughts. Did he have a book of his reflections in mind from the beginning? Did he collect these passages over the years? Why was he drawn to these particular ones? Perhaps this is yet another case of the chicken-and-egg quandary. Many times the author was putting his words around my experiences, bringing new light into and on to them, especially with contemplation (190-91), which was so much a part of Merton, and indeed the draw we experience to follow his path, particularly as it leads to hope.

In a strange twist of “less is more,” this volume could yield additional harvest each time its tiny morsels are savoured. If it were considered a prescription, the label would read “Suggested dosage: one kernel per day while supply lasts; or as directed by your (Great) physician. May be repeated as often as required.”