

Jonathan Daniels and Thomas Merton: A Meditation

By **Bill Goodson**

Many visitors to the Abbey of Gethsemani will take a walk through the woods to “The Statues.” There, across the road about a quarter-mile from the abbey, they find a two-part memorial. The first piece of this life-size bronze artwork ensemble depicts the three disciples asleep in the Garden of Gethsemani. The other, a few yards away, is of Jesus himself, praying, on his knees, head lifted to heaven, face covered with his hands. The statues at



Gethsemani are the work of sculptor Walker Hancock and were installed on the abbey

grounds in the fall of 1967. In front of the first statue is a stone monument with a bronze plaque. I had never heard of Jonathan Daniels until I saw his name on that inscription. It read: “IN MEMORY OF JONATHAN M. DANIELS, EPISCOPALIAN SEMINARIAN MARTYRED IN ALABAMA, AUGUST 20, 1965.” “Episcopal seminarian – hmmm. Interesting,” I thought. “I’m an Episcopalian and I’m from Alabama. Wonder what the connection is between him and the monastery.” And then I walked on to the top of the hill, to the other statue: Jesus in agony. Engrossed in the beauty and pathos of the moment, my curiosity about Jonathan Daniels faded.

Fifteen years later, after many visits to the abbey and that Kentucky knob, I came to know Jonathan Myrick Daniels. The Episcopal Diocese of Alabama had been conducting annual pilgrimages to Hayneville, Alabama, the site of his martyrdom, and I was a participant in 2004. I learned that on August 20, 1965, the 26-year-old white civil rights worker was shot and killed by Tom Coleman, a citizen of that Alabama Black Belt town. I learned further that the seminarian, a New Hampshire native, had lived for several months in Selma and its environs, responding to a call of the Holy



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Spirit via Martin Luther King. His final days were spent in a filthy jail with other demonstrators, and his final moments involved a selfless, reflexive action that saved the life of a black teenager, Ruby Sales, and cost him his own. He died instantly of a shotgun blast to the abdomen. I was deeply moved by the pilgrimage.

I devoured two books about Jon Daniels, one entitled *Outside Agitator*,¹ and the other, *American Martyr*.² The first is a biography as well as a detailed portrait of the Black Belt of Alabama in those times. The second features a collection of some of the young man's known writings. It was the latter, the words from Daniels' pen, that surprised me. For some reason, I had not expected to find the spiritual maturity and literary flair that were evident in the essays and letters that survived him. As an example of what I mean, here is the beginning of an autobiographical sketch written at age eighteen: "In etching this portrait of myself, I am trying, above all else, perhaps selfishly, to rediscover my self, to perceive clearly my personality and my nature, to find my course in 'this trackless maze of lost stars.' . . . I seek to recognize the influences that have thus far shaped the course of my life, and to meet both the external forces exerting pressure on me and the mysterious forces and fires which move and burn within me" (Schneider 55). And, years later, in a letter to a friend, he is describing the transformation of his soul while living in Selma and confronting bigotry:

My hostility lasted really until last week. I think it was when I got tear-gassed leading a march in Camden, that I began to change. I saw that the men who came at me were themselves not free: it was not that cruelty was so sweet to them (though I'm afraid sometimes it is), but *that they didn't know what else to do*. Even though they were white and hateful and my enemy, they were human beings, too. I found myself feeling a kind of grim affection for them, at least a love that was real and "existential" rather than abstract. . . . I realized that as a Christian, as a "soldier of the Cross," I was totally free – at least free to give my life, if that had to be (Schneider 73).

Foreshadowing? Perhaps. Maybe similar to the ominous-sounding Thomas Merton when he wrote to a friend about nuclear war in 1961: "it is also an obligation on my part to speak out insofar as I am able. . . . A lot of people are not going to like this and it may mean my head."³

Jon's description of that telling moment in his young life struck a chord with me. I realized how much it reminded me of Merton's experience of an epiphany – the one that took place in downtown Louisville on the corner of Fourth and Walnut.⁴ Though the circumstances were vastly different, the personal effect was quite similar. Both men came to terms with the unity of mankind in God's love, recognizing the overwhelming bonds they shared with persons of all walks of life, in Christ's reconciling passion.

So it came to me: *Jonathan was a sixties version of a young Thomas Merton*. I began looking for other similarities, and there are some:

- They lost their fathers at a young age. Jon's father was a highly respected physician in Keene,



New Hampshire, who died when Jon was 20. His father's selfless dedication to his patients left its mark on Jon. Merton's father, who must have engendered an artistic temperament in his son, died when Tom was almost sixteen.

- Each passed through periods of doubt in his religious life. Jon finally experienced a conversion on Easter Sunday, 1962, at the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Boston. Merton's experiences at Corpus Christi Church and in Cuba were pivotal in his conversion to Catholicism.

- Both Merton and Daniels ranked high on the literary scale from early years. Jon was editor of the university newspaper at Virginia Military Institute and went on to graduate English studies at Harvard before turning to the seminary. Merton's early writing and editorial work are well known.

- Finally, they each met untimely deaths while engaged in the passionate pursuit of their calling. One, clearly a martyr; the other, perhaps so.

The word "untimely" surely must be taken with a grain of theological salt. In Merton's case, it is easy to bemoan the loss of his vision for a more peaceful and tolerant world, and at the age of 53, who knows what lay ahead of him? On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a more profound legacy than what has transpired since he died on December 10, 1968. In Daniels' case, it seems even more obvious to me that the hand of God was at work in his death, as is evident in just a few of the consequences of his martyrdom.

First of all, there was the trial of the killer, Tom Coleman. He never spent a day in jail. He was acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury (typical for those times) with a plea of self-defense. There was perjured testimony that Daniels was brandishing a knife. The trial drew much national attention. It set off a wave of indignation and quickly spawned litigation and congressional action. Soon the courts of the South were required to seat juries representative of the population by gender and race. Justice in the form of judicial reform was one legacy of Jon's death. Another has to do with the sixteen-year-old girl whose life he saved. Ruby Sales is now an Episcopal priest in Washington, DC, the first African-American priest to arise from the Black Belt of Alabama. Personal spiritual formation leading to this barrier-breaking development was a legacy of Jon's death. And finally, we see the groundwork of healing taking shape in Lowndes County, Alabama, and its county seat, Hayneville. We are told that prior to Tom Coleman's death in 1996, he had become a good friend of the sheriff, who was a black man. Coleman, Jon's killer, was an Episcopalian himself and a member of an established family of that county. Though he never publicly acknowledged the truth of the killing, one could conclude that his actions in helping to establish the "new order" speak louder.

In a similar vein, an ecumenical movement is now forming to bring healing to the whole community. Most of the white townspeople have stood apart from the Jonathan Daniels episode and from the other notorious events of the civil rights era that took place there. They have resented outsiders coming in to "celebrate" and "memorialize" those events. When there have been gatherings and ceremonies, they typically close their doors and peek from behind curtains. In recent times, though, things have been changing. The Diocese of Alabama recognized the irony in our commemorations that flew in the face of the locals. Surely, the leaders thought, we can be better representatives of Jon Daniels than that. Surely we can find a way to honor these people, to recognize the forces of culture that breed prejudice as being common to us all, to listen with open hearts and be fellow travelers on the road to reconciliation.

Out of this concern grew the Black Belt Roundtable, a monthly ecumenical meeting involving diocesan representatives and local people. They are listening to each other. The diocese is working

on a project to raise funds for a much-needed library in Hayneville. At the 2004 pilgrimage on August 14, the day now celebrated as Jonathan Daniels Day in the calendar of saints of the Episcopal Church, the nearby Episcopal parish participated for the first time. In short, reconciliation is the legacy of Jon Daniels. We are learning the same lesson he acknowledged when he faced the tear-gas throwers – the same lesson Merton struggled to learn as he pondered the meaning of the Holocaust.

With all of these considerations in mind, the question came to me: “Was there any real-life connectedness between these two men? Did Merton have anything to do with Daniels, or vice versa? Do the statues tell us anything about that?” I inquired and found that the statues were a gift of a benefactor who commissioned two sets to be produced – one for his parish in Topsfield, Massachusetts, and the other for the Abbey of Gethsemani. As far as I can discover, Merton, in his journals, only made passing references to Daniels in the context of the statues and never addressed his martyrdom. For example, in one of those journal entries Merton wrote: “Eventually, after reading, I went for a walk to the Gethsemani statues in the Grove (the Jon Daniels statues).”⁵ Curiously, the day of Daniels’ death – August 20, 1965 – was the same day that Merton moved into his hermitage. It could be that he lost touch with current events for a while.

Nevertheless, Merton certainly was concerned about racial injustice. Among the myriad social issues presented him in the sixties, civil rights was perhaps second to the threat of nuclear war in his mind. He could be cynical about the race problem, as witnessed in one of his journal entries from December 1966: “Even if all the problems of civil rights were solved tomorrow, the same mean bastards would be pulling tricks on other people ‘for their own good’ – only some of the mean bastards would now be black” (*LL* 176). Jon and Tom likely would have had a lively debate on that topic.

Neither did I find mention of Merton in Daniels’ writings. They apparently were on parallel paths along their journeys of faith. I like to think, though, that the statues representing Jesus and the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemani are a bridge between those paths, that their presence on that lonely hill in Nelson County, Kentucky, provides us with layers of meaning yet to be discerned. They are to remind us of the depth of faith that is available to us all. I will continue to visit them with such in mind. Just as Jesus faced his own despair, his own death, and tested his faith, so Thomas Merton and Jonathan Daniels invite us to do the same.

The pilgrimage to Hayneville that I attended ended with a church service in the county court house. It is a beautifully kept building, looking out over the town square with its civil war monument and a newer one commemorating Jonathan. Some five hundred of us celebrants packed the spacious courtroom, with the altar and lectern set up on the tables in front that are accustomed to seeing action as stations for the prosecutor and accused. This was the very same courtroom where Coleman’s trial was held. A choir of whites and blacks sat in the jury box, a poignant reminder of the changing times. The eucharist was dedicated not only to Jon Daniels, but also to eleven other Alabama martyrs of the civil rights movement. The preacher, a bishop from the seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts where Daniels had been a student, took the congregation by storm. He paced and ranted, pointing fingers at us “Christians” and asking for affirmation of his claims. “Yes!” and “Amen!” echoed against the whitewashed walls. What I recall most from that sermon, apart from his charismatic style, was his unambiguous message that both chided and exhorted. He made it clear that, if we were in Hayneville only to memorialize and wax sentimental about events of the past, we were there for the wrong reason. What we had to take with us, he asserted, was the determination to put our faith and actions to work now and tomorrow, to gain strength from those who went before, to bring justice to God’s people in our own towns and cities. Now! Who would argue with that? Tom wouldn’t. Jon wouldn’t.



- 1 Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2000).
- 2 William J. Schneider, *American Martyr: The Jon Daniels Story* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as "Schneider" parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 347.
- 4 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.
- 5 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 265 [July 16, 1967]; see also: "My place on the edge of St. Malachy's field is gone – people will be there for the statues (monument to Jon Daniels). Bro. Giles is working there now, putting in Dogwoods and so on" (LL 202 [March 5, 1967]); and Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 15 [November 25, 1967]: "I went over to the wood where the Jonathan Daniel sculptures are now, and read some selections from Origen."