

Joan Baez, Ira Sandperl, and Thomas Merton's Non-Violent Activism

By Thomas Spencer

In December 1966, Ira Sandperl, a teacher, Gandhi scholar, and outspoken advocate for peace and non-violence, and Joan Baez, the internationally known folk singer, visited Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton's close friend Wilbur "Ping" Ferry arranged the visit with the abbot, James Fox. Sandperl and Baez made a profound impression on Merton. As he later wrote Ferry, "They can help me just by being around: they are an inspiration."¹

Merton derived such inspiration from meeting people like Sandperl and Baez who not only shared common beliefs and principles but who also possessed eclectic interests that Merton could enjoy and appreciate. Sandperl, a self-taught scholar, and Baez, a talented and gifted singer, provided Merton with the type of fellowship and intellectual stimulation he found lacking at Gethsemani. Coming when it did, the visit was a welcome respite from the emotional turmoil Merton was experiencing in his personal life and from disagreements with his abbot. More importantly, their interest in visiting Merton attests to the far-reaching influence of what Baez describes as Merton's "non-violent activism." Although many might not think of Merton as an activist in the truest sense, others such as Baez and Sandperl certainly did. A close examination of Merton's writings on peace and non-violence at this time shows that he did use the term activist in calling upon Christians of all faiths to further the cause of peace. Baez's impressions of Merton's importance and Merton's writings confirm that activism is a term that can be defined in different ways.

Merton as Activist

Merton did not participate in peace demonstrations or commit acts of civil disobedience in the cause for peace, but by the end of 1966, his books and essays had established him as a leading authority on non-violence, and one of the best known Catholic priests associated with the peace movement. The long-standing influence of Gandhi on his work and the importance of Gandhian non-violence in Merton's writing were described well in a recent essay in the *The Merton Seasonal*.² Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Merton studied Gandhi and worked diligently at developing a deeply personal and well-integrated philosophy of non-violence that he could apply to his own life and by doing so, convey to others through his writings.

Merton first articulated the need for activism in a series of essays beginning in 1961 with his well-known article in *The Catholic Worker*, "The Root of War is Fear." In this article, later reprinted as a chapter

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in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton calls upon all Christians to become activists in the cause for peace. This did not necessarily mean making a public statement, or marching in protest, but a personal commitment to prayer, overcoming fear, which fosters intolerance and violence, and working together in unity. Most importantly, loving one another, and embracing the goodness in all people, even one's enemies, was absolutely essential to formulating an authentic and personal philosophy of non-violence.³

In other essays that followed Merton further elaborated on the necessity of activism for all Christians. In "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility" (*PP* 37-47) and "Danish Non-Violent Resistance to Hitler" (*PP* 150-53) he articulated again that peace is a responsibility for every Christian, and stressed the necessity of collective action. He praised the Danes for resisting the Holocaust and stated that it was successful because they mutually believed in the fundamental principle of love thy neighbor as thyself.

Articles on Gandhi further developed the theme of unity of purpose and action and the Christian basis of true non-violence. In "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant"⁴ and "A Tribute to Gandhi"⁵ he espoused a theme central to Gandhi's philosophy and vital to all religions, i.e., that "Truth is the law of our being" (*GNV* 11). Although Gandhi was not Christian, he followed the basic Christian commitment to the law of love and truth. This is essentially what Merton felt all Christians must do.

Merton did not totally discount acts of civil disobedience in the quest for non-violence. He allowed that at times such acts were necessary to point out the evil of a particular law, but he consistently argued that such protest must be well grounded with Christian roots. Such acts should be polite and charitable. Resistance and non-violence should not be used as a means to create an image to promote oneself. As early as January 1963, he told Jim Forest of the Catholic Worker that it would be good if the non-violent movement could get a "more solid foundation, and deeper roots, spiritual roots" (*HGL* 273; *TMLL* 256).

It is because he believed so strongly in the Christian basis of non-violent protest that he frequently disagreed with the type of activism exhibited by many in the peace movement. When one peace marcher complained to him about the bickering within the movement's leadership Merton noted in his journal that "They claim to be Gandhians, but you cannot practice Gandhian non-violence without deep spiritual roots in prayer and abandonment to God." Too many in the movement tend to measure success "by the amount of space they get in the press" (*TTW* 111 [4/23/61]).

He voiced similar feelings about those who routinely burned their draft cards. In his article "Peace and Protest" Merton states, "I do not advocate the burning of draft cards."⁶ He saw it more as an ambiguous act that did not send a clear and responsible or well-reasoned message to a public that was likely confused and frightened. In a 1968 article in *Ave Maria* on the Berrigan brothers' draft board raids, he added that resistance to the Selective Service Act seemed oriented more to the rightness and conviction of the protesters than it did to point out the deeper-lying significance and importance of the evil of war (*PP* 322-25).

Merton involved himself in the peace movement, but he was careful in doing so. He understood, even if others did not, that by allowing one's name to be used and one's support publicized one became an activist whether others considered you one or not. Aligning with a controversial cause or organization could prove problematic to his community and to him personally. More significantly,

it could undermine one's spiritual authenticity. In his sponsorship of the Catholic Peace Fellowship he wanted it made clear that "people should never be led to assume that I am personally behind a specific project or demonstration."⁷ During the 1960s, for example, Merton's support of many peace-related activities attracted the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee who were conducting ongoing hearings on the peace movement. The Committee never officially opened an investigative file on him, but by sponsoring the Voters Pledge Campaign for a Peaceful Settlement in Viet Nam, contributing to a Center for Study of Democratic Institutions pamphlet "Therefore Choose Life," signing a declaration of protest against the Vietnam war in a pamphlet labeled "Individuals Against Crime," and publishing his compilation *Faith and Violence*, Merton insured that the Committee would include his name in their master index.⁸

More of a concern for Merton was associating with organizations that conducted activities he considered contrary to true Christian non-violence. When a young man from the Catholic Worker movement immolated himself at a peace demonstration in New York, it so upset him that he wrote both Jim Forest of the Catholic Peace Fellowship and Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker asking that his name be withdrawn from sponsorship. After much discussion he agreed to continue, but the lack of seriousness about the true meaning of non-violence by some peace proponents concerned him (*HGL* 148-50; 285-88).

Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl

One individual who was serious about non-violence and who appreciated Merton's philosophy was Joan Baez. Baez's early upbringing and parental influences instilled in her a deep sense of the "sanctity of human life" and exposed her to formative ideas regarding pacifism and social activism. Her father Albert was a physicist and engineer who taught at numerous universities around the country. His work on defense contracts for the government led him to seriously question the nature of his vocation and led to his conversion to Quakerism.⁹



Joan Baez at the Merton Center – March 2009

It was at a Quaker meeting that Baez met Ira Sandperl. She was a high school student in Palo Alto and he was much older, but Sandperl made a strong impression on the young Baez. Raised in an affluent and well-educated family, Sandperl shared similar beliefs about pacifism and social justice, which he, too, learned as a young child. As a student at Stanford University during World War II, he tried unsuccessfully to generate concern among the faculty for the harsh treatment of Japanese-Americans on the west coast. Early on in his life Sandperl developed an interest in Mahatma Gandhi after seeing a book about him in the window of a local bookstore. His exposure to Gandhi changed his life. He eventually dropped out of Stanford and devoted himself to the study of non-violence

and in particular Gandhi's teachings on non-violence. Scholarly and widely read, he developed a reputation in the San Francisco Bay area as a self-taught authority on Gandhi and non-violent activism. By the early 1960s Sandperl was well known for his social activism and public protests for the cause of peace, some of which earned short jail sentences. He helped organize numerous vigils and marches at companies doing defense work throughout the late 1950s and into the sixties and was a frequent speaker at peace rallies, public forums and other gatherings that promoted peace and non-violence.¹⁰

Baez and Sandperl soon developed a close friendship, which she describes as a "platonic, deeply spiritual relationship." He acted as a mentor and friend who helped provide an intellectual background for her interest in non-violence. By her own admission she was not part of "the reading community" and Sandperl introduced her to a whole new world of ideas that would strengthen her intellectual foundation for her feelings about social justice and peace.¹¹ As a young girl Baez developed a deep interest in music. She learned to play the guitar, and blessed with a beautiful singing voice and the right set of opportunities, she became one of the most well-known and commercially successful folk singers in America by the early 1960s. She and Ira Sandperl participated in numerous social justice causes, anti-war demonstrations and civil rights protests. Many of her songs became synonymous with the peace movement and she frequently played these songs at such rallies and demonstrations.

In July 1965, Baez and Sandperl announced the opening of a school, the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence, near Carmel, California. The Institute accepted fifteen students at a time who gathered to read, meditate, discuss non-violence, and generally work toward self-improvement. Merton's essays and poems were among the materials they used at the Institute (Didion 43-45). Baez viewed Merton as a true activist. She admitted that not being a literary person she had not read a good deal of Merton's writings prior to her visit to Gethsemani. What was more significant in her eyes was his willingness to take a stance, especially given his position. In this respect she believed their views on non-violence were similar. She called it "non-violent activism," as opposed to "passive resistance." His willingness to publish on topics of war, peace and non-violence indicated he was not content to sit passively by, "safe behind the walls of Gethsemani" (Wilkes 43-44). He threw himself into the conflict and by doing so became an activist. He put himself at risk for criticism within his community as well as his large reader audience. He was obviously serious about non-violence and she noted, "Anybody who is serious about non-violence moves me very much and has an influence on me."¹²

Sandperl on the other hand was intellectual and widely read and he was more familiar with Merton's writings. He had read *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*¹³ prior to visiting Gethsemani and he referred to Merton's essay "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant" as one of the best essays ever written on the man. He had also incorporated many of Merton's ideas on non-violence into his own teaching. According to Sandperl, Martin Luther King, Jr. requested that he deliver a series of training sessions to Civil Rights Workers based on Merton's philosophy of non-violence. Although he does not remember the exact date, it most likely took place at a retreat for Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff in St. Helena, South Carolina in November 1966.¹⁴

Wilbur "Ping" Ferry, Merton's good friend who was vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, arranged for Sandperl and Baez to meet Merton at

Gethsemani. He referred to Baez and Sandperl as “fine people” and “leading practitioners” of non-violence on the west coast. He said Baez especially was a very knowledgeable and charming woman. Knowing Merton’s interest in her music, he had taken the liberty of giving her several of Merton’s poems that he thought could be set to music, something Baez expressed interest in doing.¹⁵

Merton was quite familiar with Baez before their visit, although it is not known if he knew of Sandperl. His journal entries note that he had taken a special interest in her music and in particular one song entitled “Silver Dagger,” which he played repeatedly. The song hit a personal note for Merton at the time he was in love with a young nurse. This relationship, coupled with problems with the abbot, caused Merton a good deal of emotional turmoil as his journals attest. The song’s lyrics about a love that cannot succeed paralleled Merton’s own experience.¹⁶

The Visit to Gethsemani

Sandperl and Baez visited Gethsemani on December 8, 1966, on their way to Atlanta for a Southern Christian Leadership Conference meeting. According to Baez they discussed important topics such as the war and non-violence and in particular Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who had visited Merton at Gethsemani the previous May. Merton published a tribute to him (*FV* 106-108; *PP* 260-62) and wrote a letter nominating him for the Nobel Peace prize.¹⁷ Merton, Baez, and Sandperl spent a good deal of time laughing, socializing and picnicking on carry-out hamburgers (Wilkes 42-43). Baez jokingly described the three of them as Piglet (Baez), Owl (Sandperl) and Pooh (Merton).¹⁸ Later at the Hermitage they drank what Sandperl recalls was “one of the best bottles of Scotch” he could recall and discussed the war as well as Merton’s personal life. Baez and Merton had a debate over the violent lyrics in some of the Bob Dylan songs he was playing, and Merton confided to them his love for the young nurse. Sandperl came away with the impression that Merton seemed frustrated and wanted to leave the Trappists (Sandperl interview).

Merton’s recollection of the meeting is more detailed, but essentially the same. He called it a “memorable day.” He noted that Joan did not care for the abbot (although she did give him her latest recording, *Noel*). He also states that Baez told him that she had discovered prayer by reading his books. With Sandperl he discussed books, civil rights and Martin Luther King. Merton was more than impressed with Baez, whom he referred to a “precious, authentic, totally human person,” a “mixture of frailty and understanding.” An offer to take Merton along with them the next day to see the nurse, did not materialize, which both Merton and Baez later said was probably a good thing (*LL* 167-68; Baez 132).

Baez and Sandperl came away from their meeting impressed with Merton’s sense of humanity. Sandperl refers to him as a “lovely, lovely man” while Baez described him as “a man who emanates warmth and honesty” (Baez 131). She was taken by his ability to laugh and describes him as a strange combination of a “good, obedient monk” and a rebel. She again referred to his activism stating that the writings and stances he took “gave priests and nuns and other Church people the courage to take steps they wouldn’t otherwise have taken” (Wilkes 43).

Merton was uplifted by their brief visit, as is evident in his letter to Ping Ferry afterward. He noted how much he profited from meeting them and said he “enjoyed every minute of it.” He referred especially to Baez as a “person of total integrity and purity of heart.” He noted he would send them “some of the stuff we crank out around here” (*HGL* 229-30). Most significantly he found

Baez a truly authentic practitioner of non-violence. He later told Martin Marty that “My position is on the Christian non-violent left, particularly that segment of it which is occupied by Dorothy Day, the Catholic Peace Fellowship, and people like Joan Baez” (*HGL* 458; *TMLL* 239).

Following the visit, Merton and Sandperl initiated a year-long correspondence that further demonstrated the significant ways the short meeting impacted all involved. Responding to Sandperl’s thank you in which he noted how “enriched” Joan and he were by their visit, Merton responded with a lengthy letter affirming that “it was good to have you here, good to have someone to talk to about things that matter” (*WF* 115-16). He said he was sending some poems that might be set to music and offered to send some notes on Syrian monasticism if they were interested. He also referred to a soon to be published pamphlet, “Blessed Are the Meek,” which was a summary of Merton’s views on the Christian roots of non-violence (*FV* 14-29; *PP* 248-59). He dedicated the pamphlet to Baez.

Sandperl’s letters kept Merton abreast of activities and their travels. While in Japan he wrote Merton stating that he thought of him often. He discussed Japanese Christians and Buddhist monks and noted how similar their aspirations were to those of Christians. They address the same questions: “how do we bring about the Kingdom of Heaven or how do we let the kingdom of God manifest itself in ourselves?” He expressed his appreciation for the materials Merton sent and referred to his book on Gandhi, which they were using at the Institute. In several letters Sandperl stated the wish that they could sit down and talk. He hoped they all could meet again soon.¹⁹

Merton obviously appreciated the notes coming at a time when he found discussion of such matters problematic. He told Sandperl “it is terribly important for us all to be in contact with those of like mind” and that he was always available for discussion within the limits of what the administration would tolerate. He stated, “I am always very close to you both.” He reminded them in one note that “the mail is heavily censored” (*WF* 116-17).

Merton’s long-term impact on Baez was evident years after his death. She had always admired his poetry and when Jim Forest gave her the poem about Merton’s brother who was killed during World War II (“For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943”) it so moved Baez that she wrote the song “The Bells of Gethsemani.” Although it is not recorded on any of her albums, the lyrics are posted on her website and Merton is credited as the lyricist.²⁰ In 1975, seven years after Merton’s death, she was awarded the Merton Award by the Thomas Merton Center for Peace and Justice in Pittsburgh.

Conclusion

Merton’s brief meeting at Gethsemani with Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl provides an interesting backdrop with which to view his life in late 1966, just two years before his death. In love with a young woman, at odds with his abbot over many issues, and pulled in sometimes contradictory directions by those in the peace movement, he was experiencing a wide variety of emotions and at times self-doubt about the importance of his writings. The visit from these two charismatic individuals bolstered his spirits and offered an opportunity to have both meaningful dialogue on issues of importance and relaxing conversation about personal issues.

The visit further testifies to Merton’s important place in the peace movement of the 1960s. His “non-violent activism” had established him as a leading authority on non-violence and the way to achieve a more peaceful world. His contributions extended far beyond just the books he wrote on

the topic. He was an inspiration to others, such as Baez, not just for what he wrote, but also for his willingness to write it. Most significantly for readers today, Merton's writings provide important lessons on how all can become activists in the cause of peace. Activism through prayer, thoughtful reflection on the implications of violence in our own thoughts and actions, and aligning with others who share a similar vision for a better and more peaceful world are just some of the ways we all can become "non-violent activists."

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 230 [12/9/66]; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text. The letter is also quoted in part in the recently published collection *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters – The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008) 288; subsequent references will be cited as "TMLL" parenthetically in the text.
2. Paul Dekar, "Thomas Merton, Gandhi, the 'Uprising' of Youth in the '60s, and Building Non-violent Movements Today," *The Merton Seasonal* 31.4 (Winter 2006) 16-23; on Merton's interest in Gandhi, see Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 57 [10/10/60], 69 [11/22/60]; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
3. "The Root of War Is Fear," in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 11-19 (subsequent references will be cited as "PP" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 112-22. As William Shannon notes (PP 11), the *Catholic Worker* article includes three substantial paragraphs not found in the book chapter.
4. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 1-20 (subsequent references will be cited as "GNI" parenthetically in the text); the essay first appeared in *Jubilee* 12 (January 1965) 12-17.
5. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 221-34; the essay was first published in *Ramparts* 3 (Dec. 1964) 29-32, under the title "Gandhi: The Gentle Revolutionary," and is reprinted with that title in *Passion for Peace* (202-209).
6. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 43; subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text.
7. Merton's concern about making sure his name was not linked to a specific project is found in his December 3, 1965 letter to Jim Forest of the Catholic Peace Fellowship (HGL 289; TMLL 261).
8. Records of the House Un-American Activities Committee are closed to research but a survey of the Master Index notes Merton's inclusion (Kristen Wilhelm [National Archives Program Branch] to Thomas Spencer, August 12, 1999).
9. Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) 1-42; subsequent references will be cited as "Baez" parenthetically in the text. See also Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 45; subsequent references will be cited as "Wilkes" parenthetically in the text.
10. Ira Sandperl, *A Little Kinder* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1974) ix-x; telephone interview with Ira Sandperl, July 8, 2007.
11. Baez 42; Joan Didion, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 95-96; subsequent references will be cited as "Didion" parenthetically in the text.
12. See Wilkes' unedited interview with Baez for his *Merton: A Film Biography* (4) in the archives at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).
14. Sandperl interview, July 7, 2007; see also Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 552.
15. W. H. Ferry to Merton, December 1, 1966 (Thomas Merton Center archives).
16. Merton makes several references to the song in his journal. See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 83, 91, 92, 93; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text..
17. See Merton's June 27, 1966 letter to the Nobel Institute in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 115; subsequent references will be cited as

“*WF*” parenthetically in the text.

18. See Wilkes’ unedited interview.

19. Ira Sandperl to Merton, June 30, July 30, September 4, 1967 and undated letter (Thomas Merton Center archives).

20. See Wilkes 44-45; “The Bells of Gethsemani” can be found on Joan Baez’s website at www.joanbaez.com.