

“I Spoke Most of Prayer”: Thomas Merton on the West Coast (September 11-October 15, 1968)

By **Bonnie Thurston**

“All I can give is the little that I have . . .”¹

Introduction

On September 10, 1968, Thomas Merton left the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani on what would be his final journey. On October 15, he departed San Francisco for what Robinson Jeffers, “that Pacific Blake” whom Merton read as he was leaving Gethsemani, called “Mother Asia.”² The intervening month is one of the most documented periods in Merton’s life,³ and, oddly, one of the least mined by Merton readers and scholars. In his introduction to Merton’s talk at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, CA, Walter Capps writes, “the journey to the West Coast (to Alaska and California), before proceeding to Asia, was his first extended time away from the monastic community after taking his initial vows some twenty-seven years before. What does a monk choose to do the first time he is away from his abbey? What does he talk about?” (*PAJ* 2). Merton wrote in his journal on October 8, during the last week of the period, “I spoke most of prayer” (*OSM* 199).

His talks given between the departure from Gethsemani and the departure for Asia represent Merton’s last extended public remarks on prayer. In her presentation “Merton in Alaska,” given to the Eighth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, Elizabeth M. O’Hara, RSM noted that “the conferences that Merton gave” were “a sort of spiritual farewell, a grand synthesis of a life of reading, reflection, and prayer.”⁴ After sketching the itinerary of the period, this essay surveys Merton’s “spiritual farewell,” his “West Coast teachings on prayer,” and concludes with some practical conclusions we might draw from them.

Itinerary

Merton left Gethsemani on September 10 and spent the night at what was then St. Bonaventure’s Friary at Bellarmine College in Louisville. Early on September 11 he flew via O’Hare Airport in Chicago to Albuquerque, NM where “this hippie down at Christ in the Desert, a really lovely guy . . . met me at the plane” (*TMA* 110). (Merton was taken with this young man and describes him in the journal entry of September 19 [*OSM* 186] and at length in one of his Alaskan conferences [*TMA* 110-11].) On September 11-13 Merton made a return visit to Christ in the Desert monastery,



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which he'd visited in May, 1968.⁵ On September 12 he met the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, whom Merton described as "a woman of extraordinary quality" (*OSM* 174). On September 14 and 15 Merton attended the Jicarilla Apache Festival at their reservation, allowed to be present at the ceremonies and dances because his host, Don Devereux, had introduced Merton as "a holy man."⁶

On September 16 Merton flew from Albuquerque to Chicago ("Very bumpy flying" [*OSM* 177]) where he stayed "at the new Poor Clare convent" and gave an evening talk (*OSM* 179). On September 17 he was en route to Alaska. Reading his journal from September 10 to 17, I was struck by the number of references to the Bardo (the death-and-immediately-after state described in Tibetan Buddhism). Merton was reading and making extensive, incisive comments on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Since we know Merton died in December, his journal entry of September 13 is eerie: "A journey is a bad death if you ingeniously grasp or remove all that you had and were before you started, so that in the end you do not change in the least. . . . I am not going 'home.' The purpose of this death is to become truly homeless" (*OSM* 174).

Merton was in Alaska from September 18 to October 2. "I am here," he wrote in his journal, "in answer to someone's prayer" (*OSM* 182). His Alaskan schedule is dizzying. After landing in Anchorage he was driven to Eagle River where he stayed at the Convent of the Precious Blood and gave conferences. He subsequently traveled to Anchorage, Cordova, Valdez (yes, *that* Valdez), Juneau, Ketchikan, Yakutat. Part of the reason for this "walk-about" was that Merton was looking for hermitage sites. He writes in his journal, "it seems to me that if I am to be a hermit in the U.S., Alaska is probably the place for it" (*OSM* 193). In long letters to his abbot, Flavian Burns (of blessed memory), he is enthusiastic but tentative, not wanting to prejudice what he may find in Asia.⁷ Merton gave a day of recollection for the sisters of the Anchorage Diocese at Providence Hospital on September 29, and for fifty priests of the diocese at the Precious Blood Convent on October 1. The following day he flew to San Francisco where he met a teen-aged correspondent and her family and "slept nine hours in the (expensive) motel" (*OSM* 198).

On October 3 he flew to Santa Barbara, where he was met by his friend since 1961, Wilbur H. ("Ping") Ferry, and made "a brief informal presentation before a meeting of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions" (*PAJ* 1). Merton agreed to speak to this gathering of intellectuals about what he hoped to do and learn in Asia "so long, as he put it, as there was 'no immediate press publicity'" (*PAJ* 7). The plan was that he would return after the Asian journey to report on what had actually happened. That, of course, did not occur, but the verbatim transcript of Merton's presentation provides a fascinating insight into his ability to engage with serious intellectuals and into his personal "agenda" in Asia, as well as his thoughts about monastic relevance and renewal, and idolatry as a secular *and* religious problem.

Ferry then drove Merton back to San Francisco along the coast, looking for hermitage sites. Merton concluded, "There is little or no hope of the real kind of solitude I look for" (*OSM* 200). In San Francisco Merton met poet and correspondent Czeslaw Milosz and his wife, and on October 5 re-arranged his travel plans to include Dharamsala and the Dalai Lama. On October 8 or 9 he returned to the Cistercian women's monastery of Our Lady of the Redwoods, which he had visited the previous May, for a three-day conference on contemplative life to begin October 11. It was arranged by Abbess Myriam Dardenne, perhaps at the request of Mother Benedicta of the Immaculate Heart sisters of Monroe, MI, but perhaps, as his letters to Mother Myriam suggest,⁸ at

Merton's own request (*OSM* 200). By October 13 he was back in San Francisco, from which he left for Asia on the fifteenth. Contra his journal entry of September 13, he wrote on the plane on the fifteenth: "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body" (*OSM* 205).

If you are more than a little confused and exhausted by Merton's journey to this point, I entirely sympathize. The constant movement reveals the frenetic side of Merton's character. However, some cohesion is provided by the consistent themes of monastic renewal (generally and Merton's own in search of hermitages) and of prayer. In light of Luke 8:1-3, it is worth pointing out that the hospitality for most of this journey was provided by religious women: Poor Clares in Chicago, Precious Blood Sisters in Alaska (with a conference for Alaskan religious women), Cistercians in California. In fact, some of Merton's best teaching on prayer was given to women religious. We now turn to his "spiritual farewell," the public talks Merton gave, with an ear to hearing what he said about prayer.

The Alaskan Conferences

On three occasions in Alaska, Merton spoke on prayer. September 18 to 21 was spent giving a workshop for the sisters of the Monastery of the Precious Blood in Eagle River, north of Anchorage. On September 29 he preached a day of recollection for diocesan sisters at Providence Hospital in Anchorage. The tapes of those conferences were sent to Gethsemani, transcribed by Br. Patrick Hart, and edited by Naomi Burton Stone (*TMA* 69). In late 1970 and early 1971, in *Sisters Today*, "there appeared each month for seven months a transcription of one of Merton's Alaska conferences" (O'Hara 2). On October 1, Merton gave a day of recollection for priests at the Monastery of the Precious Blood which was taped, transcribed and originally published in *The Priest* (*TMA* 69). All eight talks were collected, re-edited and published in *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, one of the richest sources for Merton's mature teaching on prayer.

The talks reflect a synthesis of Merton's wide reading. They rely heavily on Pauline theology and the Desert tradition of the fourth century. They allude to Platonism, Descartes, Teilhard de Chardin, Abraham Maslow and Buddhist doctrine. They make use of Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (a considered choice since Alaska was mission territory for the Russian Church) and the German radical Protestant, Bruderhof founder Eberhard Arnold. Jewish theologian Martin Buber, and Sufi thinkers, including the Iranian psychologist A. Reza Arasteh, appear in the same talk, "The Life that Unifies," perhaps the meatiest of the eight (*TMA* 143-55). Frequently encountered are the general themes of prayer and identity⁹ and of the freedom evident in a authentic life of prayer. There are practical teachings about *lectio divina*, intercessory prayer and distractions in prayer.

Prayer and Identity

Merton says that "Prayer and identity go together" (*TMA* 129). He uses the existentialist term "alienation" to describe the absence of prayerfulness. "Alienation is the psychological condition of somebody who is never allowed to be fully himself. . . . [H]e does not belong to himself" (*TMA* 74). "[H]e is always dominated by somebody else's ideas or somebody else's tastes or somebody else's saying that this is the way to act and this is the way to see things" (*TMA* 75). On the other hand, "Contemplatives are people who escape this alienation" (*TMA* 75). For Merton, "contemplation" is not a prayer technique, but a mode of being. "Contemplation," he says, "is really simple openness to God at every moment, and deep peace" (*TMA* 143). The contemplative stance is that assumed by the authentic rather than the alienated person. "What leads you into this . . . is a life of prayer. At this

center you will experience the love and mercy of God for yourself and find your true identity as a person to whom God has been merciful and continues to be merciful” (*TMA* 160). “[Y]ou pray with your heart,” Merton says; “you pray with your whole life” (*TMA* 129). “[T]he real meaning of our life is to develop people who really love God and who radiate love . . . For that they have to be fully unified and fully themselves – real people” (*TMA* 149). Merton’s friend the “psychoanalyst who is a Persian Muslim” (*TMA* 145) (Arasteh¹⁰) explains that human maturity, which he calls “final integration,” occurs when “the person becomes fully and completely himself as he is intended to be, . . . a full and complete lover” (*TMA* 146). Prayer moves toward “final integration, or final unification of the person in love . . . that takes him beyond the limits of himself” (*TMA* 147).

So psychological individuation in prayer is not “individuality.” Far from separating one from others, deep, authentic prayer unites. “When I pray I am, in a certain sense, everybody. The mind that prays in me is more than my own mind, and the thoughts that come up in me are more than my own thoughts because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody” (*TMA* 135). “All prayer is communion, not only between Christ and me but also between everybody in the Church and myself” (*TMA* 136). “When I pray the Church prays in me” (*TMA* 134).

Prayer and Freedom

The psychic individuation and authenticity which for Merton is a by-product of prayer means that prayer, itself, must be carried out in freedom. He frequently reiterates the point that “It isn’t a question of there being one right way to pray, or one right answer to the question of prayer, and we should be perfectly free to explore all sorts of avenues and ways of prayer” (*TMA* 81). “[L]et’s respect individual differences and let each one do what is best for him or her” (*TMA* 91). “[E]verybody is different, and we have to learn to respect our differences” (*TMA* 115). Consequently, Merton opposes the use of “prayer-manuals” (*TMA* 116) and any “purely mechanical formula” (*TMA* 117).

What Merton recommends is the “spirit of freedom which we learn to experience in a life of prayer” (*TMA* 78). It is from St. Paul (the biblical writer most frequently quoted in the Alaska conferences) that Merton says we learn that “prayer is our real freedom”¹¹ (*TMA* 113). “[P]rayer takes us beyond the law. When you are praying you are, in a certain sense, an outlaw. There is no law between the heart and God” (*TMA* 118). “This is what Christ came on earth for,” Merton asserts, “to give people this kind of freedom, this kind of simplicity” (*TMA* 141). Practically speaking, Merton says there is only one rule in prayer: “the only rule that there is in prayer is that you never say anything that you don’t mean” (*TMA* 119). “[E]ach one has to pray in such a way that it is personally real” (*TMA* 141).

Practical Advice

Merton’s Alaskan conferences exhibit an extraordinary blend of spiritual psychology and theology. They also gave very practical, down-to-earth advice like “be honest, don’t say in prayer what you don’t mean.” “You don’t get to God through a system. You speak from your heart” (*TMA* 118). He taught a very simple form of *lectio*: “You take the Bible or some book that means a great deal to you, and you read quietly in such a way that when you get something to chew on you stop and chew” (*TMA* 82). He devoted a significant part of the talk “Prayer and Conscience” (*TMA* 129-42) to the persistent difficulty of distraction in prayer. “The thing to do is not to exclude everything

but to bring it all in. Try to realize that distractions go away if you have time for them to go away. . . . What do you do with distractions? You either simply let them pass by and ignore them, or you let them pass by and be perfectly content to have them. If you don't pay any attention to them, the distractions don't remain" (*TMA* 138). "If you don't wrestle with distractions wildly and just let them go by for a while, they get less and less, and after a while there is nothing much left" (*TMA* 139).

Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

Merton's talks in Alaska were for religious and priests, persons like himself who had surrendered themselves to Christ and the journey into the heart of God. His audience on October 3 was made up of intellectuals, only a few of whom shared his Christian assumptions. Even the religious thinkers in attendance, for example C. Edward Crowther, an Anglican bishop from England with experience in South Africa; former Episcopal Bishop of California, James Pike (whose notoriety some of you may remember); philosopher and medieval scholar William Gorman, and John Cogley, then religion editor of *The New York Times*, were of a rather different stripe than Merton. The plan was that he would present the first of a two-part series, "some informal ideas as to how everything looks about the trip" and on his return "would report on what he had learned, whether his expectations had been fulfilled" (*PAJ* 7). Walter Capps, who transcribed, edited and published Merton's presentation and the question-and-answer period that followed, was impressed by Merton's "intellectual seriousness," his ability "to be critical of some of the institutional features of the way of life to which he had committed himself" and "of some of the prevailing attitudes and practices of the Catholic Church." He noted both Merton's "tendency to be self-deprecating" and his "unusual ability to exercise control over the multidimensionality of such conversations" (*PAJ* 9).

Merton's informal presentation outlines his Asian itinerary in the context of monastic renewal and inter-religious dialogue which leads the Q-&-A session to focus on the need for monastic renewal (*PAJ* 40-42), the definition of a monk ("You become a completely marginal person in order to break through the inevitable artificiality of social life" [*PAJ* 42]; "The monk is a layperson in the desert, who is not incorporated into the hierarchy" [*PAJ* 49; see also 65]), and the possibility that the Church is an idolatrous institution (*PAJ* 53, 61-65). Relevant to Merton's teaching on prayer were his responses to questions on pentecostalism ("doesn't fit well with monastic life" [*PAJ* 44]) and on mysticism, a term which he didn't find helpful or use with any frequency. (For example, in the Alaskan conference "The Life that Unifies," Merton suggests "the term 'mystic'. . . . causes a great deal of consternation. . . . [Y]ou have to be very careful about how you talk of mysticism" [*TMA* 144]).

Asked about the influence of Eastern mysticism on "pop spirituality," Merton responded that we live in a society that is sick because "it's completely from the top of the head. It's completely cerebral" (*PAJ* 48). Eastern traditions engage more of the whole person.¹² Asked whether he is speaking about "a transformation of consciousness" (*PAJ* 54), Merton replies in the affirmative. His responses echo teaching in Alaska that prayer engages the whole person, that one prays with the whole self.

The question of whether "there is a specifically Christian mysticism" (*PAJ* 57) dominated the second half of the Q-&-A session. Although Merton supposes there might be, he confesses himself "more interested in the universal" (*PAJ* 57). This shifts the discussion to whether too firm a commitment to any religious tradition risks idolatry, which then moves back to the personal question

“how do you remain involved and detached at the same time?” (*PAJ* 69). Merton’s response is worth quoting at length: “The task of the solitary person and the hermit is to realize within himself . . . a universal consciousness and to contribute this, to feed this back . . . into the communal consciousness which is necessarily more involved in localized consciousness, and in such a way that there will be a kind of dialectical development toward a more universal consciousness” (*PAJ* 69). Merton’s nearly final comment is “I think we must all get to the point of being universal persons” (*PAJ* 70).

Clearly Merton is dealing with spirituality, but in an intellectual context more at the theoretical than the practical level. Nevertheless one hears a clear articulation of ideas that were crucial in the Alaskan conferences: 1. that prayer/spirituality must engage the whole person; 2. that one’s prayer is a point of connectedness with others; and 3. as he says explicitly in Santa Barbara, “you have to impose on yourself a discipline which lasts a long time,” but “Look out for the external forms. It is so easy to take the external forms for the reality” (*PAJ* 55). Prayer, in short, is not synonymous with any given *method* of prayer.

Our Lady of the Redwoods

When he arrives at the monastery of Cistercian women in Redwoods, CA Merton is returning to a community he had visited and enjoyed in May, 1968, to his friend the highly intelligent and charismatic Abbess Myriam Dardenne (of blessed memory), to whom he had written many letters, and to a gathering of men and women religious, mostly monastic, who had specifically asked him to speak about prayer. Not surprisingly, on arrival he notes in his journal “A feeling of oversaturation with talk, food, drink, movement, sensations” (*OSM* 199). It must have been a relief to be in a Cistercian house. Although, as in Santa Barbara, the context was monastic renewal, here he was among those who shared not only his chosen life, but many of his assumptions. On September 7 he wrote to Mother Myriam that he wasn’t sure what he would say: “All I can give is the little that I have, which is certainly nothing” (*SC* 396-97). Less than a year after the meeting, Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, recorded his recollections of this meeting for *Monastic Studies*. According to Br. David, “To start where you are and to become aware of the connections . . . was Thomas Merton’s approach to prayer” (Steindl-Rast 80). The similarity to Merton’s formulation in the Alaskan conference “The Life that Unifies” that prayer is “simple openness to God at every moment” is striking (*TMA* 143). “In prayer,” Merton told his fellow monastics, “we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there” (Steindl-Rast 80). To paraphrase, fundamentally prayer is being awake, being aware in the present moment (which is also a basic Buddhist understanding).

Three other themes from the Alaskan conferences are likewise prominent in his Redwoods talks: prayer and identity, prayer and freedom, and the danger of the imposition of rigid forms of prayer. Br. David reflects that “Finding your true self and living a life of prayer were not two things for Thomas Merton” (Steindl-Rast 85). “[T]he real contemplative standard,” he said, “is to have no standard, to be just yourself. That’s what God is asking of us, to be ourselves” (Steindl-Rast 83). “Christ wants me to grow,” Merton noted. “I should simply let this growing unfold in my prayer” (Steindl-Rast 82).

Merton believed religious institutions had “great importance in helping people find themselves in prayer.” He emphasized, “The institution must serve the development of the individual person. . . . What we need are person-centered communities, not institution-centered ones” (Steindl-Rast

85). Indeed, “the supreme reward in a religious community should be that a man or a woman be set free for what they most desire” (Steindl-Rast 87). Merton believed “that what we want to do is to pray. After all, why did any of us become religious if we didn’t want to pray?” (Steindl-Rast 84). Religious institutions, then, should set people free to be persons of prayer. But Merton foresaw the danger “that our very prayers get between God and us. The great thing in prayer is not to pray, but to go directly to God. If saying your prayers is an obstacle to prayer, cut it out. Let Jesus pray. . . . Forget yourself. Enter into the prayer of Jesus. Let him pray in you. . . . The best way to pray is: stop. Let prayer pray within you, whether you know it or not. This means a deep awareness of our true inner identity” (Steindl-Rast 87).

As anyone who tries consistently to pray the offices knows, “saying prayers” is not necessarily praying! One can be saying the words, but the focus of attention and the heart can be elsewhere. Forms of prayer, especially rigidly imposed ones, can, themselves, be hindrances to authentic prayer. Merton’s advice? “[D]iscover what is useful . . . then discard structures that don’t help, and keep structures that do help. . . . What does matter is that it helps you become yourself, that it helps you live a life of prayer” (Steindl-Rast 85).

Related to this is a practical problem heretofore only alluded to: time. It takes time to pray. Br. David notes, “The idea of taking time to experience, to savor, to let life fully come to itself in us, was a key idea in Thomas Merton’s reflections on prayer” (*TMA* 81). “If we really want prayer,” Merton explained,

we’ll have to give it time. We must slow down to a human tempo and we’ll begin to have time to listen. . . . The reason why we don’t take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. . . . We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God’s own good time, his *kairos*. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us. (Steindl-Rast 81)

In Alaska Merton insisted on one rule: honesty in prayer; don’t say what you don’t mean. Relatedly, at Redwoods he spoke beautifully about intercessory prayer. “We are not rainmakers, but Christians. In our dealings with God he is free and so are we. It’s simply a need for me to express my love by praying for my friends; it’s like embracing them. If you love another person, it’s God’s love being realized” (Steindl-Rast 88). In intercessory prayer, we express our love for others and for the world. Here is Merton’s practical connection between identity and prayer. “What truly matters is not how to get the most out of life, but how to recollect yourself so that you can fully give yourself” (Steindl-Rast 83). At the confluence of a Christian’s identity and prayer is love, a love which has its origin and model in Christ’s own selflessness.

On October 13 in San Francisco, where Merton had driven with two postulants from the Redwoods, he wrote, “The three-day . . . workshop at Redwoods seems to have gone well [O]n Tuesday fly to Bangkok” (*OSM* 201). His whirlwind interlude between Our Lady of Gethsemani and Mother Asia was nearly over. On October 15 he was over the “very blue” Pacific, “with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way May I not come back without having settled the great affair” (*OSM* 205).

Conclusions

In addition to being slightly breathless in the face of Merton's great energy, where does this leave *us*? What does his "spiritual farewell," his last American teaching on prayer offer us? Let me suggest three points for consideration, under the headings non-duality, simplicity and temporality. The context of these reflections, like Merton's own, is Christian tradition, theology and practice.

Non-duality

When Merton insists that identity and prayer are so intrinsically related as to be practically inseparable, he is breaking down a series of traditional, but unfortunate, dualities. First, there is (or should be!) no difference between my life and my prayer. Prayer is not one item in a subcategory of "things to do." Prayer is who we were created to be. How I pray is who I am, and who I am is how I pray. As Merton wrote in *Thoughts in Solitude*, "A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all."¹³ We are either prayer-full or we are not.

Second, in prayer there is no duality between my life and God's life in me. This is what Merton was writing about in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: "Within myself is a metaphorical apex of existence at which I am held in being by my Creator. God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself. . . . [I]f I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself."¹⁴ Merton's understanding owes a great deal to what is called St. Paul's "Christ mysticism," Christ *in* the believer, the believer in Christ. It also reflects traditional monastic teaching, particularly that of Evagrius who "thought human beings originated in the mind of God."¹⁵

Third, prayer, itself, subsumes duality. The one who prays is united with who and what is prayed for. In authentic intercessory prayer a consciousness more universal than my individuality is operative. As Merton said in his Alaskan talk "Prayer and Conscience," "When I pray I am, in a certain sense, everybody. The mind that prays in me is more than my own mind, and the thoughts that come up in me are more than my own thoughts because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody" (*TMA* 135). This is the logical working out of Merton's idea in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that we look for identity "not only in God but in other men" (*NSC* 51; for further development, see chapters 7-10). In prayer who I am is everybody.

Practically, though mysteriously, prayer overcomes dualities because of "this deeper consciousness of here I am and here is God and here are all these things which all belong to God. He and I and they are all involved in one love" (*TMA* 140). Would it go too far to say that created things in their intended identity *are* one love? This is what I think Merton means by his teaching on community (*com-unity*, "with unity"). The Christian's authentic identity in God and in prayer leads him or her, not into isolation (even if he or she is a solitary), but into community, "with-ness" to all that God created, keeps in being, loves.

The early Church worried about whether a solitary person should pray the Our Father alone since all its pronouns are plural and concluded it was acceptable because the prayer *couldn't* be prayed alone. Not only did the Church assume someone else somewhere would be praying it, but its very language draws Christians into the realm of "*Our* Father" and "us." By extension, I think this is the community into which Merton thinks prayer draws the Christian: "you are more than yourself . . . in praying," he remarked in Alaska (*TMA* 135). To summarize Merton's teaching about

non-duality: authentic prayer overcomes personal alienation and communal separation. It is how we become “one in the Spirit, one in the Lord.”

Simplicity

In his last teachings Merton suggests that one reason we have trouble with prayer is that we make a such a big deal out of what is essentially very simple, in part because our understanding of prayer is too narrow. For example, if you say “prayer” to a parish group, its members are likely to think “intercession,” a mode or type of prayer, but not prayer itself. Merton opened his first talk in Alaska: “The renewal of the contemplative life . . . should be first of all a kind of simplification” (*TMA* 72), introducing the idea that underlies all the others. Most simply to pray is “To start where you are and to become aware of the connections” (Steindl-Rast 80). Merton’s distrust of rigid methods of prayer or systematic prayer manuals is that they make so many rules around the basic activity of prayer which is simple “alertness” and “aliveness,” beginning with aliveness to the life of the body and the senses. Praying with language is equally simple. “You speak to God as a child to a father and you go to Him and tell Him what you want Him to know and then He tells you what He wants you to know You don’t get to God through a system. You speak from your heart” (*TMA* 118). *Cor ad cor loquitur* as the old Latin adage has it – heart speaks to heart.

Prayer gets complex when our definition of prayer is too narrow. Prayer gets complex when it becomes a matter of certain *kinds* of prayer (intercession or centering prayer, for example) or a certain *method* of prayer (the Hours or the Exercises of St. Ignatius or the Salesian Method). We worry if we are “doing it right.” But if, in essence, prayer is open-ness to, awareness of God’s love at the root of all that is, how can we “get it wrong”? How could God’s love, the root of Being, the *primum mobile* be wrong? As we noted in thinking about non-duality, prayer is not something we do; it is who we are, all of who we are.

Temporality

That being the case, ultimately prayer transcends finite time. Because our identity is prayer, we are made for eternity. Setting aside “time for prayer” exercises our eternity. Because our identity is human, our potential timelessness is limited by temporality. Temporarily (!) we live in beginning, middle, end time. Merton says, “If we really want prayer, we’ll have to give it time” (Steindl-Rast 81). In the life of prayer, practice *does* make perfect. In the disordered culture in which we live if we are to become who we are, paradoxically, we normally begin to uncover our identity by consistently practicing some form or method of prayer. Buddhism speaks of prayer forms as “practices.” To be asked “what is your practice?” is to be asked “who are you?” We are as we pray. We aren’t if we don’t.

If we want to know our identity as people of prayer, we will have to “spend our time” praying – which is to say, we will have to give the practice of prayer priority. To do so, to give prayer time, also helps with the great practical difficulty of distractions. In the Alaskan conference “Prayer and Conscience,” Merton suggests that hurried prayer leads to distractions (*TMA* 138-39). If prayer can be given enough time, distractions dissipate on their own. We are eternal beings in time. Whether we realize it or not, how we “spend our time,” is a clear indication of our *real* identity. Persons who say “I don’t have time to pray” only reveal they don’t yet know who they are. A person who doesn’t have a prayer discipline or practice exhibits disordered priorities and uncertain identity. “Practice” and “priority” are the “killer P’s” of temporality.

Finally, simply, and in Merton’s own words, “nothing that anyone says will be that important.

The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get to it is by praying” (Steindl-Rast 79). How? “let things alone and give yourself time and [be] patient and attentive and open to God” (*TMA* 140).¹⁶

1. Thomas Merton to Mother Myriam Dardenne in a letter of September 7, 1968 on a proposed conference on prayer, in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 396; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.
2. 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) 167; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.
3. The period is covered in Merton’s journal entries in both *Other Side of the Mountain* 171-201 and in Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 5-35 (subsequent references will be cited as “TMA” parenthetically in the text). The dozen or so letters he wrote during this time appear mainly in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 101, 243 (subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text) and in *School of Charity* 398-404. Transcripts of his talks in Alaska appear in *Thomas Merton in Alaska* 67-162 (some were previously published in *Sisters Today*). The full transcript of his dialogue at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, CA appears in Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 30-70 (subsequent references will be cited as “PAJ” parenthetically in the text). Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB provided a report on Merton’s conferences at Our Lady of the Redwoods in his essay “Man of Prayer” in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974) 79-89 (subsequent references will be cited as “Steindl-Rast” parenthetically in the text); the same essay appeared in *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969) 1-10 as “Recollections of Thomas Merton’s Last Days in the West.”
4. Elizabeth M. O’Hara, RSM, “Merton and Alaska,” unpublished presentation given at the Eighth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, June 5, 2003 (page 2 of the manuscript she so graciously gave me) (subsequent references will be cited as “O’Hara” parenthetically in the text).
5. See Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982) 26-36.
6. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 539.
7. See *School of Charity* 398 [9/25/68], 399-401 [9/26/68], 401-402 [10/1/68], 402-403 [10/9/68].
8. For the genesis of the meeting, see Merton’s letters to Mother Myriam (SC 386-87 [6/29/68], 389-91 [7/11/68], 393 [8/5/68], 395-97 [9/7/68]).
9. For more on this subject see Merton’s “Authentic Identity is Prayerful Existence,” edited by Glenn Crider, *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 16-24.
10. See, for example, A. Reza Arasteh, *Growth to Selfhood: The Sufi Contribution to Islam* (London: Penguin Arkana Books, 1990).
11. One wonders if Merton has in mind Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ set us free, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”
12. One is reminded of the work of Bede Griffiths, whose writing Merton knew: see, for example, *Christ in India* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966).
13. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 56.
14. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 37; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
15. Angela Tilby, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (London: SPCK, 2009) 177.
16. An earlier form of this article was presented as a lecture at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, October 26, 2009.

Urge to Travel A Found Poem*

By **Scott Dalgarno**

Fr. George came bursting in. Made signs of
“Thank you” three or four times, and departed.
Last night he came down and wandered around

the monastery. Reverend Father, who used to be
the infirmarian, says that sometimes, when
they are near death, they get the urge to travel.

There was a Brother Mary up there who used to be
the gatekeeper. He was dying. He had a wooden leg
and cane. He used to take his cane and go clumping

around instead of staying in bed. They hid his wooden
leg. He found it behind the door, and put it on
and got going. They hid it again, in a closet

where he couldn’t find it. He lay in bed waving
his hands and making signs, “The cane! The cane!”
There was another Brother who was dying. It was summer,

and very hot. He was in bed with very few clothes on.
They found him walking out of the infirmary with nothing
on but a shirt. “Where are you going?” they asked him.

“Nebraska!” he said.

*From a March 15, 1949 journal entry of Thomas Merton (*Entering the Silence* 292).



Scott Dalgarno

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