

Share the Prayer – Know the Soul

Review of

You Know My Soul: Reflections on Merton Prayers

By John Wu, Jr.

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Reviewed by **Ellyn Crutcher**

You Know My Soul is a practical companion for anyone's use in the midst of their everyday experiences. From the hundreds of Merton prayers and calligraphies, John Wu, Jr. has chosen just 16 gems. Each calligraphy and Merton prayer is accompanied by Wu's 3-to-6-page reflection. It is a treasured paperback to tuck in a purse or tote in a fanny pack. Each double-page of text carries a Chinese language translation by Marcela Chang on the left and the original English on the right.

The full text of the Merton prayer and calligraphy paired with it by Wu function as an appetizer and entrée, along with a side dish of your own journey, all complemented by Wu's commentary on the specific Merton prayer as a dessert. These pearls are accessible randomly, according to the reader's mood, feelings and immediate need. It's quite a free experience to be unshackled from a linear approach requiring the book to be read in sequence.

Hugh O'Donnell, CM's Preface is a window into the Wu family. The author's namesake father was "an outstanding diplomat, Chinese scholar, and expert on international law" (iv). Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography led him to "the maternal face of God" (iv) and his Catholic faith. He translated the Psalms and the New Testament into literary Chinese. Merton and the senior Wu corresponded from the early 1960s. There are 80 items in the exchange. *The Way of Chuang Tzu* is one of the fruits of their friendship. O'Donnell finds "something profoundly unitive" among these 16 prayers. As a contemplative, Merton tuned in to the heart of God and "the love that moves the heavens and the earth." Merton had an "unlimited curiosity" for all that was different in the lives of others, and a "sympathetic heart." In selecting the 16 prayers, Wu is in the "same divine rhythms," making them the "prayers of every contemporary pilgrim journeying into the heart of God." Although unified, the selected Merton prayers also reflect a familiar Merton theme: paradox. "The embrace of darkness leads to light. The embrace of emptiness leads to freedom. Unconditional surrender and trust lead to the fullness of life in God" (vi).

Five days before his wedding, John Wu, Jr. wrote to Merton that he and his prospective wife, Terry, would be camping their way south from New Jersey to Gethsemani. Merton replied with joy and told him: "there's no problem about staying on the property here somewhere as long as you like" (xi). Wu confesses that a Trappist monastery is "a strange place to visit on one's honeymoon" (ix), but Merton didn't think so. Neither do I find it odd: I spent my wedding night in Shaker lodgings at

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Pleasant Hill. Wu's two-day honeymoon at the abbey made him and his bride among the first to be privy to Thomas Merton's plans for a trip to Asia in the Fall of 1968. Merton was still organizing his itinerary, but hoped to surprise Wu's father in Taiwan and perhaps join Wu's Maryknoll brother at his mission with the Bunun aboriginal tribe.

The newlyweds spent time with Merton at Monk's Pond, the namesake site of the publication of Merton's poetry magazine, to which the senior Wu contributed a piece on Zen. Merton said Mass for the Wu family at his new chapel in the hermitage the next morning. Wu's personal snapshots illustrate their honeymoon pilgrimage and time spent relaxing with Merton. Concluding his Preface, Wu observed that "Merton identified with neither the old nor the new; instead he seemed always to have identified with the authentic, not only in the Catholic Church but in all religious, philosophical and aesthetic traditions, large or small" (xxiii).

In contrast to Wu's intimate tale of his Preface, his Introduction highlights Merton's significance for all of us. He cites Merton's "Confucian love of learning, the Taoist love of nature, and the Zen spirit of personal freedom" (7). In corresponding with 1800 people, Merton invested in knowing his correspondents' works and ideas first so he could "dialogue at a deep and profitable level" (11). H. H. the Dalai Lama confirms that Merton was "well-informed" and therefore, "acted as a strong bridge between our two very different religious traditions" (13).

John Wu, Jr. felt attracted to Merton because of "his love of cultures" and his "fearlessness in going towards whatever direction – *not he*, but – God wanted him to take" (13). One included prayer resonates because it is so simple and universally understandable: "*Lord, it is nearly midnight and I am waiting for You in the darkness and great silence. I am sorry for all my sins. Do not let me ask any more than to sit in the darkness and light no more lights of my own*" (31). Wu's commentary on this particular prayer offers the wise observation: "Sometimes, it is very necessary just to keep quiet, to let our silence merge with His Silence" (33).

During a close family member's health crisis last summer, as I began my first reading of Wu's book, the following Merton prayer had special resonance: "*Tribulation detaches us from the things of nothingness in which we spend ourselves and die. Therefore, tribulation gives us life. . . . Let me then withdraw all my love for scattered, vain things . . . and let me place everything in Thee, where it will take root and live, instead of being spent in barrenness*" (43). In Wu's commentary, he ponders the gift of tribulation and observes that sorrows might serve as a great boon because they lead us back to our true self, take us into deeper sympathy and connectedness with others in their daily trials, drive us to realizing helplessness and to that vulnerable junction where God's grace can find us (see 45, 47, 49). In this Merton prayer and Wu reflection, readers receive a distillation of themes from Psalms, the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes.

In another prayer, Merton cries out: "*Have mercy on my darkness, my weakness, my confusion. Have mercy on my infidelity, my cowardice, my turning about in circles, my wandering, my evasions. I do not ask anything but such mercy, always, in everything, mercy*" (163). Despite our human frailty, Wu reminds us that a great lesson emerges from mercy: "*God cannot not love*" (169). Sitting with this reflection offers a reader a sense of consolation and lasting hope.

Wu's final selected prayer places us in "*that half-minute, which was enough for a lifetime*" when after Communion Merton experienced "*pure love*" (205). Wu shares his own transcendent experience while meditating on the word "Love." Wu's personal revelations invite us all to make our vocation "*the hallowing of the everyday*" (217).