

Simple Guide to a Complex Design

Review of

Simply Merton: Wisdom from His Journals

By Linus Mundy

Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014

xxii + 138 pp. / \$14.99 paper

Reviewed by **Jen Jones**

Thomas Merton's prolific writings continue to inspire his many erudite enthusiasts as well as newcomers to his profound ideas. In *Simply Merton: Wisdom from His Journals* author Linus Mundy invites readers with hospitality to walk through his journey with Merton and in turn enhance their own. As Mundy contemplates his own relationship with Merton's ideas to gain greater understanding, readers are opened up to fifteen primary themes of wisdom that emerge from Merton's journals. Through his prose, Mundy accompanies his readers, kindly taking their hand, and pointing to Merton's key ideas, whereby both guide and follower take a soul's journey, wandering and wondering toward the grace of God.

Each chapter offers an opportunity to stop, gaze and reflect on the landscape of Merton's ideas and then, with joyful anticipation, move on to the journey's next step. Including excerpts from Merton's works as well as Mundy's interpretation and life experiences, the text is organized in such a way that Mundy seems to murmur to the reader, "Come with me, let me show you what I have seen so I may have a better view too." Closing each chapter, Mundy offers the reader questions to consider in order to more fully engage Merton's wisdom.

The first half of the text is a philosophical frame that situates the second half of the book oriented to the practice of working and living honestly in community with others and God. The book's journey is non-linear because it concludes with the idea of an unending mystery of life – a mystery unrevealed until death. Thus, we are encouraged to continue the journey, invite others to walk with us as we reflect and act, and experience familiar ideas and vistas, but see them differently each time with renewed faith and understanding.

Mundy begins the introduction with the following statement, "The voice of Thomas Merton is alive and with us still. This book tries to capture the essence of Thomas Merton – what really mattered to him during his life" (vii). Considering that Merton proclaimed himself to be a Christian existentialist, a simple revision of the word "essence" to "existence" positions Merton within an existentialist frame as well as orienting the text more suitably to an existential idea of becoming. From Merton's 1.3 million words captured in his journals, Mundy illuminates major ideas important to Merton whose meaning and purpose may never be determined, but may continually open up joyful temporal understanding of the possibilities of human life. Merton seemed to always be treading the waters of life, a metaphor which Mundy explains:

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The truth is that while his twenty-six years of living as a monk might seem to have been a fixed life, it was anything but that: Merton's mind and heart were constantly on the move. He was "swimming" indeed, both above and below the surface. And the only real constant was his desire to please God. (x)

Despite the difficulties in his life, Merton's mind continued to grow as his legs continued to kick – his faith kept him going. The life-world gave Merton much to consider, providing him with perspective and insight so that we may see and live more clearly.

Keenly aware of his own consciousness, Merton lived through enduring suffering and dissatisfaction yet fostered his personal spiritual growth and meaning-making in life. Merton possessed great courage to meet existence, taking on and relieving us of our own anxiety and despair as he moves us to act in personal conversion to please God. Pleasing God is the only *telos*, which is always out of reach in our human life form. Mundy observes that Merton

traveled a long path to self-understanding, a path that can seem endless. But Merton, like few others, gives us this idea that it is OK to travel the long path, to take the long way home, to be confused, quirky, a doubter, even a sinner (to a point). He gives us permission to have no idea where we are going, or to be a sinner and one seeking to be back on the track to holiness at the same time. He leads us to believe that maybe we are better than we think we are – if we want to be better. (xvii)

And so, Mundy shows us the unachievable does not discourage; it offers existential hope for the joy of meeting death. We need not be overburdened to take this journey; the first step is simplicity.

However, simplicity can be evasive since everyday life can be consuming and distract us from the right path of pleasing God. Therefore, Merton calls us to be deliberate in slowing down our lives and finding a peaceful place to be free. Merton found this place in the Abbey of Gethsemani, which Mundy has also found while visiting there. It is a physical place of solitude that fosters clarity of mind. While we may not be afforded the gift of visiting Gethsemani, we can find a place in our lives that allows us to contemplate the glory of God. Mundy writes, "Merton was in this new and desolate place finally free to confront not only himself fiercely and fully, but also to confront God on a most intimate level" (6). In an existential manner, we must have courage to take a leap of faith to, as Merton proclaims, "give up everything for God" (7) without ever knowing what this may mean. Mundy also points out an unknowing of one's true self because we are always in a state of becoming (see 11).

Throughout the work Mundy gestures to similarities between Merton and Augustine. The souls of Augustine and Merton were restless and set ablaze as impetus for their spiritual searching and vocation, which led to, and from, conversion. Merton recognized that life may be conversion from being and nothingness to being and eternity as we acknowledge "the good of existence and of life," but even more, "the acceptance of a higher, inconceivable mode of life entirely beyond our own control and volition, in which all is gift" (26–27). Thus, we must continually leap and get in the habit of leaping to propel our search of unknowing. To keep this restless pursuit from turning into madness of single-mindedness, we must approach the pursuit from a position of single-heartedness, recognizing the Holy Spirit as our guide who puts our mind at ease.

Greater connection to the Holy Spirit is achieved through prayer, which, through continued conversation, de-centers and humbles our thoughts, attitudes and motivations to become other-centered and God-centered, eliciting "the love of neighbor in our everyday actions" (48) and nonviolent

responses to social injustice. Thus, right action is brought about through deliberative action. Action without contemplation, listening and learning is self-centered, fruitless and potentially dangerous. Greater connection to God also occurs when we take our minds off direct thinking and put our bodies to work, which is an integral part of a monk's life. We all have perhaps experienced a time where we have thought too hard on something and then the answer comes to us at a time least expected. Yet we must be mindful of the work in which we partake, as Merton writes: "An activity that is based on the frenzies and impulses of human ambition is a delusion and an obstacle to grace" (87). To prevent this state, our work and thought need to be directed toward a higher purpose, which humbles and opens our sense of wonder and hope while extinguishing feelings of fret and despair. As a result of this reorientation of communicative practices of thought and work, our lives are directed toward practices of love in unity and community, which moves communication to communion.

Communion requires honesty with oneself, or truthfulness, yet communion is and will always be an undefined truth, or mystery. Not knowing is a necessary humility that relieves the burden of seeking definitive answers. Merton's words clarify the relationship of truth and mystery: "the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance" (113). Mundy concludes that Merton gives us blueprints to follow God's beautiful design. He provides guidance on the art of living life now and appreciating all its wonders, and by doing so, preparing the soul for the joy of death. This short guidebook is "simply Merton" but fosters a deeper relationship between the reader and Merton's wisdom, which is anything but simple.