

The Reality of Personal Relationships Saves Everything

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You may have heard a polite debate in Merton circles about whether members of the Merton Society are brought together as followers of the person Thomas Merton, or, as argued by Bonnie Thurston in her 1993 presidential address, as people inspired by the message of Thomas Merton.¹ To push the argument further, Fiona Gardner, while serving as a member of the ITMS Board of Directors, stated she was not as much interested in the message of Thomas Merton as it was stated over fifty years ago, but in what Merton would be saying now.² As this point in the logical train of thought, I am going to jump off the tracks. These are important considerations. Yet, I fear the task of putting words in Merton’s mouth or thinking I can be an oracle to proclaim Merton’s message for today. However, I am interested in how the community, this Society, brought together by Merton, is engaging the contemporary world, whether inspired by Merton the person, inspired by his message fixed in print, or seeking some future to which he seemed to be pointing. I am fascinated by the conversations and the civil debate that is a living phenomenon unto itself that persists independently of a person who died over fifty years ago.

On February 21, 1966, Merton wrote to Jim Forest, “In the end . . . it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.”³ It may only be “in the end” that everything is saved, because there is so much to be saved. To ignore the context of this is not to fully grasp the magnitude of what needed saving then and what needs saving now. Forest had written to Merton in the pit of personal despair, a peace activist in anguish. Though opposition to the Vietnam War was growing, more troops were being deployed and casualties were mounting on all sides. There was a maddening feeling that the growing chorus of voices opposing the war was landing upon deaf ears. Even amidst Merton’s letter of encouragement, he acknowledges, “This country is SICK, man [Merton types “SICK” in all caps]. . . . People are fed on myths, they are stuffed up to the eyes with illusions” (*HGL* 295). In his 2017 ITMS Presidential Address, Michael Higgins eloquently drew contemporary parallels to the situation Merton witnessed: “Thomas Merton will not let us forget what happens when words are held hostage by those who intend more than mischief for us, when words have become drones of discontent, missiles of madness, surreal sound bites disconnected from reality, lethal weapons in the hands of advertisers, spin doctors, political apologists, apparatchiks of industry, state, and yes, religion.”⁴

It is the reality of personal relationships that saves. It is personal but not individualistic, a person in relational contact with others in authentic



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community. Merton remained critical to the end of what he called the “heresy of individualism,”⁵ but also critical of the collectivism and of the impersonal institutional culture that stifles personal integrity and the higher goals of community life. In Merton’s conference address in Thailand, the final speech of his life, he states: “we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political force. You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?”⁶

How, then, do we avoid the pitfalls of structures and institutions in order to create true community? The conference we will enjoy does not happen without structures and institutions. Fortunately, at the visioning session at the close of the 2017 conference, a past ITMS President, Bonnie Thurston, gave us good counsel. She warned that the ITMS should avoid a “corporate mentality.” I do not know if I have completely lived up to her challenge as president, or if I knew all of what this warning entails. I took it to mean we should focus on the personal and human side of Society interactions and avoid reducing members and friends to numbers for a database of publication subscribers. Maybe it also meant trying to stay true to what Merton was about, even if that message remains counter-cultural and a softer, gentler, less authentic Merton might be more attractive.

We are living through a time of low trust in institutions. This distrust in our religious institutions has been fed by scandal, such as the vast clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. In March 1968, Merton responds to a letter from writer Czeslaw Milosz, who was leveling some criticism of the Church and confessed being an outsider to it. Merton writes to Milosz:

You can say absolutely nothing about the Church that will shock me. If I stay with the Church it is out of a disillusioned love, and with a realization that I myself could not be happy outside, though I have no guarantee of being happy inside either. In effect, my “happiness” does not depend on any institution or any establishment. As for you, you are part of my “Church” of friends who are in many ways more important to me than the institution.⁷

In a process mirroring distrust of religious institutions, Americans have become more distrusting of the political establishment. There are fewer centrists left in the U.S. Congress and dialogue is breaking down. The polarization of political discourse is off-putting to many Americans, but it has mirrored trends in which citizens have gravitated toward echo chambers, moving to online communities and geographic communities that think and vote alike.

In this atmosphere of low trust, there is a rebellion against the intellectual authority formerly vested in institutions. There is a distrust of the media and the scientific community. The average Google user is deemed an expert because information of all quality levels is so easily acquired. Though we have divided more into partisan camps, such an anti-expert revolt from authoritative knowledge is prevalent along the whole range of the political spectrum, manifesting in such phenomena as climate-change denial or the anti-vaccine movement. In this privileging of individual opinion over expert analysis, we contribute to a solipsistic ethos that is literally lethal to life as we know it as we see in mega-storms, species extinction, and the resurgence of measles and other deadly diseases.

When we banish the experts, we fuel the flames of conspiracy. Most academic studies seem to conclude that conspiracies are not new and not particular to this point in history. Like the revolt against experts, no political party has a monopoly on conspiracy. Yet, given the troubles social media giants like Facebook have had in preventing the rapid spread and wide popularity of untruths in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I find it difficult to think this is not having a detrimental effect on our collective grip on reality. Though conspiracy theories have existed in Merton studies concerning his death from the beginning, we have witnessed the appearance of two books on the subject just since the last conference. I am all in favor of fact-finding in good faith and in working to seek the truth together responsibly. If the goal is a more accurate narrative of the events surrounding Merton's last day, I am supportive only if it does not serve to overshadow the overarching meaning of the 99.9% of the rest of his life. However, if in the end, conclusive findings remain elusive while some writers employ variant details of the last day of Merton's life to disparage the reputation of trusted scholars of Merton's life, please count me out.

At meeting after meeting of the Society, I have seen an alternative to these threats to community. There is a sharing of knowledge and a respectful dialogue. People come out of their silos – academic and non-academic professional, the history professor and the theology professor, the medical doctor and businessperson, the retiree and the graduate student – learning from each other. Interest in Merton is being passed to new generations of readers and scholars. We have seen those who knew Merton continue to pass from this life since last meeting: Harold Talbott, who arranged the meeting between Merton and the Dalai Lama; and Br. Patrick Hart, Merton's last secretary and scholar and editor of many Merton tomes. We have lost members and friends in the Society, those who had served in leadership, presented papers, or contributed to the friendly spirit of the conference, including Donald Grayston, John Collins, Robert Hale, Marie Grip, Nass Cannon and others. From the Daggy Scholars to the founding members of the Society, there is an exchange of energy and wisdom that animates this space. Maybe it is not unique, but I know of nothing like it. My wish is that we take this spirit inspired by Thomas Merton and nurtured in this community, and plant seeds of respectful dialogue in our disparate networks, so that just maybe, in the midst of this “mad place,” the reality of these personal relationships may have a chance to begin saving everything.

1. See Bonnie B. Thurston, “The Heresy of Individualism” [Presidential Address – ITMS Third General Meeting, Colorado Springs, CO], *The Merton Seasonal* 18.3/4 (Summer/Autumn 1993) 6-9.
2. Fiona Gardner, during a conference call at the June 4, 2016 meeting of the ITMS Board of Directors.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
4. Michael W. Higgins, “Light in a Darkening Landscape” [Presidential Address – ITMS Fifteenth General Meeting, Olean, NY], *The Merton Seasonal* 42.3 (Fall 2017) 3.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 128.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 338.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 85-86.