

Thomas Merton: Seeder of Radical Action and the Enlightened Heart

Joan D. Chittister, OSB

To speak about a well-published monk from a cloistered community who has been dead 30 years presumes 2 questions: First, how was he different? And secondly: so what?

Thomas Merton's patchwork life is a comfort to the average person. It is at the same time a confusion. Merton was a precocious child, an out-of-control youth, a dissipated young man, a college playboy, an intellectual. Thomas Merton was not the boy next door. He was a man who walked the path from hell to heaven, exposing the journey at every turn so that the rest of us could find hope and meaning in our own journey.

There are several stories that may best explain the influence and the place of Thomas Merton in contemporary society and spiritual development. Two are from the Sufi masters; one is from a personal source.

Once upon a time, the first story tells, some disciples begged their old and ailing master not to die.

'But if I do not go, how will you *ever* see?' the Master said to them.

'But what is it we can possibly see when you are gone?'

With a twinkle in his eye, they say, the Master answered, 'All I ever did in my entire life was to sit on the river bank handing out river water. After I'm gone, I trust that you will notice the river?'

The lesson rings true: What teachers teach us while they live is one thing; the quality of what they leave us to think about for the rest of our lives is another. Thomas Merton was a fascinating, engaging, offbeat, charming and provocative personality, true. But what he directed the world to see was far more than the mystique, the mystery of the cloistered life. He left us things worth thinking about for a long, long time.

In the second story, a Seeker said to the Master, 'Master, I am intent on the spiritual life. May I become your disciple?'

And the Master answered, 'You are only a disciple because your eyes are closed. The day you open them you will see that there is nothing you can learn from me or anyone else.'

'But if that is the case', the Seeker said, 'what then is a master for?'

'The purpose of a master', the Holy One replied, 'is to make you see the uselessness of having one.'

Thomas Merton's legacy was surely to make us see beyond himself, to bring us to see the rivers around us, to enable us to understand the difference between piety and spirituality, between pseudo and real contemplation as he did.

The third story is about a 15-year-old who read only one 'holy' book in the entire sophomore year of high school, and that by accident. The book was called *Seeds of Contemplation*¹ and the youngster discovered at a much later date that that one book had made everything in life look different.

In fact, Merton leaves all of us with two masterful challenges—to discover the world around us and to find the contemplative spirit within. He did it from a difficult distance, and he did it, at that time, almost alone in a world whose piety was private and whose religion was ritual: In the face of a World War II generation whose sense of life had been jaded by a pervasive presence of violent death; whose idea of development had become unrestrained consumption; whose religion had been sin, sorrow, repentance and petition for favors from a vending machine economy and American God; whose notion of freedom was untrammelled individualism, uncritical Americanism and uncontested international messianism. But Merton, the monk, was a leading critic of nuclearism, a voice for nonviolence in a time of civil strife, a pathfinder in East-West ecumenism, a model of globalism, a founder of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, a theologian of ecology, a social analyst, a public figure, a man with an awareness of the feminine dimension of God. On the last day of his life in Bangkok at a conference of Benedictine and Cistercian abbots he told us, 'The monastic is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures...saying that the claims of the world are fraudulent'.

He was, in other words, a genuine contemplative who left insights enough to seed an entire generation in both contemplation and action.

1. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CN: New Directions, 1949).

Thomas Merton was clearly another kind of monk. Merton was a monastic whose monasticism sprang from a single-minded search for God in life rather than from a single-minded escape from the world for life in God, as ironic as that may seem coming from a cloistered monk.

Merton's monasticism was a revolution equaled only by the origin of Benedictine monasticism itself. Until the sixth century, monasticism had been an exercise in private and personal spirituality. It was Benedict who, on the other hand, made human community itself the essence of sanctity. Merton's monasticism, too, was a revolution that took monasticism out of the confines of the local monastery and situated it in a concern for world community itself. Merton's monasticism was a monasticism concentrated on the presence of God in the present.

Merton saw the world through a heart uncluttered by formulas and undimmed by systems. He taught more than piety and asceticism for its own sake. He taught concepts that flew in the face of tradition then and fly in the face of culture still: The sin of poverty, the moral imperative of peace, the rectitude of stewardship, the holy power of non-violence, the sanctity of globalism and the essence of enlightenment. Merton sowed seeds of contemplation that led to action—an often forgotten but always bedrock spiritual concept.

In Jewish spirituality, for instance, two concepts dominate and are intertwined: The one, *devekut*, translates as 'clinging to God' or contemplation; the other, *tikkun o'lam*, translates 'repairing the world' or the work of justice. One without the other—contemplation without justice, clinging to mystery without repairing the real world—is unfinished, the tradition teaches, is dark without light, is grand without great, is soul without body.

Scripture is equally clear about the concept as well: Samuel, Solomon, Abraham and David, Judith and Esther, Mary and Mary Magdalen, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter and Paul all cling to God, all converse with God. All contemplate the presence of God in life and all of them are called to do something about it.

Contemplation, Merton teaches us, is learning to see the world as God sees the world. The contemplative sees the world through the eyes of God and the real contemplative is driven to respond according to the mind of God for it. Clinging to God, in other words, generates the passion it takes to repair the world. Merton's monastic contemplation joins those two concepts again, this time in the face of a culture that is inclined more to rituals than to this kind of contemplative dimension of religion.

Indeed, Merton spent his life dealing out river water to a world yet disinclined to see the river itself but claiming to be following it. Merton handed out river water to soften the dry and sterile ground of religion gone hard, and life gone barren. In *Seeds of Contemplation*—his earliest work—Merton shows us six rivers still running today, still needing our attention: Poverty, militarism, ecological stewardship, nonviolence, globalism and the enlightenment that is contemplation.

Poverty and the depths of human indignity it spawns is a river Merton wants us to see. It is in *Seeds of Contemplation* that he writes: 'Even the desire of contemplation can be impure when we forget that true contemplation means the complete destruction of all selfishness ...'²

It is in *Seeds of Contemplation*, then, that we first come to realize that behind Merton we must come to see the river of poverty that flows outside the pale of a pseudo-contemplation and cloaks itself selfishly in the mysterious and the unreal as a way to avoid God where God really is: in the people who need us.

Consequently, we have a culture seemingly religious that talks soaringly about the lives of its successful, but has little or no ear at all for the sagas of those whose lives weave a lesser tale, a culture that sees even religion as the comfort of the self. As a result, some of us find the world a wonderful place to live in. Our newspapers record our progress, our statues remember our public heroes, our cities enshrine our economic temples. But Fifth Avenue is light years away from Harlem. Trump Towers, where the rich live, is a planet removed from the train tunnels under it where the homeless live. The White House is an entire culture away from the people who have no money, no clout, no power, no highly paid lobbyists to make their case.

The wealthy, Durning writes in *The State of the World 1990*, in the 1990s have seen the value of their goods increase 20 times since 1900, the products of their industries 50 times and their personal travel 1000 times. Yet, in the last 15 years alone, the disparities between the rich and poor of the world have widened obscenely. In this decade—our decade—this world housed 157 billionaires, and over two million millionaires, but it did not house 100 million homeless at all.³ While we go to church and we go to church and we go to church. What kind of contemplation is that? What kind of religious action is that?

In this country alone, we spend 5 billion dollars each year to lower

2. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 34.

3. Alan B. Durning, 'Ending Poverty', in *The State of the World 1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 135.

our calorie consumption while 400 million people around the world cannot eat at all and so waste away with starved bodies or live with underfed and stunted brains—people we then call 'dumb', 'stupid', 'incapable', 'illiterate', 'uneducated', 'uncouth'—while we hoard grain in barns to use as political power against those for whom death is a happier thought than life. The river of poverty runs through New Delhi and Manila and through New York and Chicago and Miami, as well. Where are the contemplatives who will leave their churches and open their hearts long enough to cling to God by repairing the effects of poverty? Because if we do not, Merton warns us, 'Even the desire for contemplation will be impure'.⁴

Militarism is a river Merton wants us to see. Behind Merton, we must also come to see the river of pain that is caused by the warmongers of the world and which flows alongside the chanting churchgoers who see God outside the world instead of within it. Merton insisted in *Seeds of Contemplation*: 'People who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves imagine that they can only "find themselves" by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world...'⁵ And our age, perhaps, has done it best, and done it globally while we protest that we are a nation under God.

Both the Bishop of Boston and the Bishop of Baghdad, for instance, called the war in the Persian Gulf 'just'. Surely there is something wrong either with the theory or with the theology of those who call themselves religious if the theory of the just war can be read totally differently and with the same ease by all sides at the same time.

In our time, too, for the first time in history, we have justified the extermination of women and children on the grounds that indiscriminate assaults against civilians saved soldiers. It is time, surely, to contemplate the possibility that what we really need to contemplate now, in our time, is a theory of the 'unjust war'.

And what we have not destroyed with weaponry itself—an army of over 200,000 in the Persian Gulf alone, for instance—we have destroyed simply by the making of them. We have used our best minds, our best resources and the bulk of our national budget to build what will destroy people rather than to build what will develop them. 'Our policy', Secretary William Cohen said in August 1998, 'is significant force'. Indeed we have seduced our industries, our university system and even the religious community into equating security with

4. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 34.

5. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 38.

militarism. And we have paid a great price for it. To satisfy our vampire's appetite for militarism, we have threatened the level of human services available in this country: schools, hospitals, housing, welfare, the arts. We have absorbed the resources of other nations that it takes to make or base our weapons and so dimmed the hopes of the children of the future.

According to over 30 research organizations in the United States, during that 6-week war we fought so gloriously in the Gulf, here at home 1240 children died from the effects of poverty; 4000 infants died due to low birth weight; 68,750 dropped out of school; and 4000 workers became unemployed—all conditions we say we now cannot afford to fix. Clearly, war kills everyone, even those who are lucky enough to win it. As long as mothers in Iraq, punished by sanctions aimed at men, go on to this day giving their choleric children water from rivers running with garbage and thick with human excrement we are, at best, only pseudo-contemplative.

The fact may be that we lose as much as we win in war. We lose our humanity, perhaps, because we have failed to contemplate that the river of pain that runs through the world cannot be staunched by force and the failure of reason.

Ecological stewardship is a river Merton wants us to see. Behind Merton, because of Merton, we must come to see the river of human debris that gushes past the pious 'contemplatives' who substitute praying for a prayerful respect for the cycle of nature and the circle of life. 'A tree gives glory to God first of all by being a tree', Merton taught us in *Seeds of Contemplation*. 'This particular tree will give glory to God', he went on, 'by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or ever will do'.⁶ 'The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt ... this particular April sky ... that great, gashed, half-naked mountain are all holy in the sight of God, all imitate God',⁷ Merton wrote.

But one at a time, we are destroying them, unconsciously, carelessly, callously. We are missing the river. But we call ourselves religious, disciples, a chosen people 'Under God'. 'Life is the greatest bargain', the Yiddish proverb says, 'we get it for nothing'. But we have come to treat it as nothing, too. We have spoiled our nests as no animal would do and we justify it in the name of 'maintaining a stan-

dard of living' that is making the globe unlivable and being human inhumane.

Air pollution was cited by scientists as a serious problem in the early 1970s. The data was clear then. A political commitment to curb industrial waste that would soften campaign coffers or lose votes or yield international economic supremacy, however, definitely was not.

According to scientist Hilary French in *The State of the World 1990*, severe health problems related to air pollution now cover the globe. In the United States, French says, 150 million people—over half the population of the country—breathe air considered unhealthy by the environmental protection agency. In Hungary, every seventeenth death is caused by air pollution. In India, French confirms, breathing the air in Bombay is equivalent to smoking ten cigarettes a day. And Mexico, the capital city with notoriously noxious air, is considered—irony of ironies—a hardship post for diplomats of countries who go to conferences on the environment but refuse to agree to pollution standards that would clear it up. The environmental impacts are even more startling: acid rain and air pollution are decimating crops, devastating forests and destroying lakes and buildings, too, even in the industrialized countries of the world.⁸ 'Till the garden and keep it', the Scripture mandate (Gen. 2.15), has become 'seize the garden and rape it'. And we have yet to elevate the survival of the globe to the level of a moral concern.

Nonviolence is a river Merton wants us to see. Behind Merton, because of Merton's call to contemplation, we must come to see as well the river of nonviolence. Real contemplatives know all creation to be a piece of God's presence in the world and so to be revered and treated tenderly. Violence has simply run its course: War is now obsolete. War is much more than conflict, it is social annihilation. Human relations on such grand scale require cooperation not coercion.

What we defeat we destroy, true, but most of all we destroy something in ourselves. What we do to one another gouges out the center of our own lives. To napalm children is to pour acid on my own soul. To pulverize a nation in just 43 days, to turn cities to ash in minutes, is not to make life cheap, it is to make life vulgar. To refuse restraint, to refuse nonviolent means of conflict resolution and then to wonder why the streets of our cities run with the blood of our own children is schizophrenic. To wonder why guns become the playthings of

6. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 24.

7. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 25-26.

8. Hilary French, 'Clearing the Air', in *The State of the World 1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), pp. 98-118.

children, or why families are torn apart by domestic murders, or why women are routinely beaten, or why drugs become the desensitizer of choice in a world where violence is social and economic and domestic as well as military, is to raise denial to the level of high art. We have taught our children well and they have learned quickly. We are reaping what we have sown. We are getting what we asked for.

Into that climate of nationalism and chauvinism and unholy righteousness came Thomas Merton in *Seeds of Contemplation* with waters of loving nonviolence. 'To say that I am made in the image of God', Merton says, 'is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love'.⁹ 'Because God's love is in me', he wrote to us, 'it can come to you from a different and special direction that would be closed if God did not live in me...and because it is in both of us, God has greater glory. God's love is expressed in two more ways in which it might not otherwise be expressed.'¹⁰

'Violence in a house', the rabbis say, 'is like a worm in fruit'. It destroys what otherwise looks healthy and firm and good but which is harboring within it the cause of its own decline. Violence is eating the heart right out of this country—in private homes and police stations, in personal relationships, playgrounds and public policies. Violence is our national disease. Walking gently through life is our only real hope of gentling the world. God's love, Merton teaches us, can only come through me. The love of God for which I seek can only come through you.

Globalism is a river Merton wants us to see. Behind Merton, we must come to see as well the river of globalism that flows through the real contemplatives who find God everywhere.

'The more I become identified with God', wrote Merton in *Seeds of Contemplation*, 'the more I will be identified with all the others who are identified with God'.¹¹ 'We are members one of another', he wrote in an intellectually insular USA, 'and everything that is given to one member is given to the whole body'.¹²

'The saints are glad to be saints', he told us in a new and powerful insight into sanctity, 'not because their sanctity makes them admirable to others but because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else...it delivers them from the burden of

judging others and condemning them'.¹³ And he told us this in a world that suspected almost everybody and saw the world as a place to be evangelized into Western culture, US politics, white power and uncurbed capitalism.

He saw the world as good, its many peoples as gifts of the same God, its religions as many manifestations of the one God, its differences a revelation to the world. He asked us to open our eyes and see what no law ever taught: That life is not a set of boundaries; life is a river of possibilities to be cultivated, a tide of differences to be respected, to be held in awe.

When people are doing our work for wages we ourselves would not accept we must begin to ask what there is about us that enables us to exploit them. When US industries engage in business practices on the international level that would not be allowed in Rochester, New York, we must begin to ask, if we are really contemplatives, what is it in our own souls that allows us to treat other people as if they were not people at all. When the resources of the world are controlled by the few, when the mineral deposits of one nation are held hostage by another, we must begin to ask, if we are really contemplatives, whether there isn't already an international welfare system where the poor nations support the rich ones, and haven't we created it while we deny our own poor the same.

Where are the contemplatives like Merton who will begin to see, who will begin to ask at what moral peril we have bought our wealth and our power and our standard of living? 'It is God's love that speaks to me in the birds and streams', Merton said in *Seeds of Contemplation*, '...but if God's will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that God is...'¹⁴ When the starving sick lie dying on subway grates, if I am a contemplative, Merton would say, I must become the love that God is.

When the underemployed workers in Detroit lose their homes and their dignity, I must become the love that God is. When the blacks die in Soweto because they are black, and kill one another in the housing projects of Chicago because they are in despair of being black in a white world, I must become the love that God is. When Iraqi children die in American wars, and crack babies languish on our own streets, if I am really a contemplative, I must become the love that God is.

Globalism, to Merton, is the ability to open my heart and my mind, my arms and my policies to the whole world, not simply the world

9. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 46.

10. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 50.

11. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 47.

12. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 42.

13. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 43.

14. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 18.

that is my color, my class. No mastery of past pious disciplines—no matter how time-honored, no matter how good—substitutes, in Merton's mind, for real contemplation, for the ability to see with the eyes of God.

Enlightenment, real contemplation, is a river Merton wants us religious types to see. He calls us all to another way of looking at life and another way of living it. Merton calls us, leads us, to the river of enlightenment. 'Go into the desert', Merton teaches us in *Seeds of Contemplation*, 'not to escape others but in order to find them in God'.¹⁵ No amount of religious ritual, no quantity of religious reading, no degrees in religious history will forgive us the responsibility to be religious people, to bind the world together again in God.

Once upon a time, the Sufi tell, a master whose disciples were about to go on the salvific pilgrimage gave them each a bitter gourd to take with them into every holy shrine for every holy prayer. When the disciples returned from their holy and sanctifying journey, the master requested that each of the acrid gourds be cooked for the welcome home dinner. 'Ah', the master said, as the disciples gagged on the biting taste, 'I see that no amount of holy water has been able to sweeten what was sour'.

Over and over again Merton tells us in *Seeds of Contemplation* that simply living the law and repeating the ritual is not enough. Merton calls us to sweeten what is tinged with sharp in us, to repair what is broken in us, to cling to the God who is God, yes, but for the sake of a whole hurting world gone sour, not simply for my own spiritual satisfaction.

The person with an enlightened heart knows that God is only where there is both mercy and justice. The person with an enlightened heart cries out in a long, single-noted wail for justice and mercy, justice and mercy, justice and mercy for those who do not have it and those who cannot get it for themselves. The person with an enlightened heart speaks from the vantage point of the heart of the God who created the now skeletally starved of Ethiopia, and the beaten women of the Americas, and the street children of the world who are scavenging their dying way through the back alleys of life, and the slaughtered soldiers who were running from Kuwait for home, and who says to each of us: 'Cain, where is your brother?'

The person with the enlightened heart knows that the purpose of the human voice is to give sound to the voiceless until, finally, the world begins to hear what the enlightened heart has come to know—

God's presence here, now, in everyone. Where the person stands who has an enlightened heart is more like the reign of God than it was before they got there: The property is beautiful, the litter is gone, the street is safe, the stranger is welcomed, the poor are fed, the refugee is housed, the works of war become works of peace. Nothing else is acceptable to Merton. Nothing else is called holy because any other defilement of life says that the world belongs to me rather than that I and it belong to God.

The person with an enlightened heart is on earth to care for it, not to consume it. The person with an enlightened heart is detached from what holds the world in the grip of money-lust and patriarchal power. Once upon a time, the Sufi say, a Holy One said to the businessman: 'As the fish perished on dry land, so you perish when you get entangled in the world. The fish must return to the water; you must return to God.'

The businessman was aghast. 'Are you saying that I must give up my business and go into a monastery?'

And the Holy One said, 'No, no, hold on to your business and go into your heart'.

Merton's concept of contemplation leads to the same insight: There are two things that corrode the human endeavor: wanting more of everything and never knowing the meaning of enough.

God knows, we need *Seeds of Contemplation* now, here. For instance, we underpay the underpaid *machiladores* who make computer boards for 50 dollars in Tijuana, and then we resell the same boards in San Diego 10 miles away for 500 dollars. We export factories, but not fair labor standards or medical insurance, 'because', one businessman told me, 'anything else would be "inappropriate" for those people, in that culture'. Since when are shoes for children and food for babies and houses for old people 'inappropriate' for any culture?

The person with an enlightened heart is emptied of the need to take up all the space and use up all the goods and grind up all the people. No ethnic jokes are ever told by the person with an enlightened heart; no sexist language is ever used; no racial slurs are ever uttered. No enemy bashing is ever practiced. People are people, not colors or sexes or ages or types.

The enlightened heart sees the other, all the others, as a separate manifestation of God and takes in the whole world in order not to leave God out. 'The ultimate perfection of the contemplative life', Merton insists, in *Seeds of Contemplation*, 'is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing a private vision of God; it is a sea of

15. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 42.

love... God is the life of all of us and we are all one in God.¹⁶ We are all one with Nelson Mandela, and we are all one with Yasser Arafat, and we are all one with Saddam Hussein, and we are all one with the children in the squatters' settlements of South Africa, and we are all one with the AIDS patients in the San Francisco hospices, and we are all one with the people in Panama whose homes we destroyed and have yet to restore as we promised. We are all one, the contemplative knows, so it is not just that their salvation depends on us. The fact is that our salvation depends on how we deal with Nelson Mandela and Timothy McVeigh and Hussein and child murderers whom we have trained to kill. The person with an enlightened heart sees hospitality as the tabernacle of the world. Either God is in the other or God is not, and if God is in the other we dare not leave them out.

There are some things that the contemplative, the person with an enlightened heart, simply will not do because they contribute to the destruction of the world rather than to its development. The person with an enlightened heart, for instance, will not promote weaponry. The person with a monastic heart will not buy a T-shirt or a toy a bumper sticker or a banner that glorifies war. The person with an enlightened heart will not poison the land or foul the waters or dump waste in foreign countries so that the poor there will die from what makes the wealthy here richer. The person with an enlightened heart advocates for policies that work for the poor and the homeless and the underemployed as well as the secure. The person with an enlightened heart remembers the forgotten generation of children who need daycare and lunch and the arts and opportunities of life if the next generation is to have the possibilities and the quality that marked the last. The person with the enlightened heart realizes that the questions of this age cannot be answered with the limited vision of the past.

The person with Merton's enlightened contemplative heart knows that war has gone far beyond the conflict of armies to the ruination of whole civilizations, knows that poverty is not an accident of nature, it is the foreign policy of wealthy nations and the debt crisis of ones made poor due to the ravishing by other ones, knows that the globe is not a cosmic garbage dump, knows that force only triggers force and makes things worse, and that the only thing we have yet to try on violence is nonviolence.

The person with Merton's enlightened contemplative heart knows that the globe has no natural boundaries, only unnatural divisions. Indeed, Thomas Merton has sat on the river bank doling out water for

over 50 years. He sowed seeds of contemplation that changed the mentality of the world and sowed the seeds of soul that let loose the force of radical action. Like those Benedictine monastics before him who brought order to a ruined empire and gave agriculture back to a stampeded civilization, and reforested the stony valleys of Europe, and saved the learning of the ages by copying the books themselves, Merton hearkens us back to the values that saved civilizations before us so that a civilization desperately in need of peace and nonviolence and stewardship and a sense of the divine in the mundane can be saved again—if we will only see the rivers to which his life points.

It is not an easy task but it has succeeded, if not for all, at least for many; if not for many, at least for me. I do not know who the first master was who was a giver of water. I do not know who the first master was to tell us that there was a religion so religious that it far exceeded the law. But one thing I do know for sure. I know that Merton seeded young hearts as well as old because I was the 15-year-old who read *Seeds of Contemplation* 45 years ago and was never the same again.

I learned from Merton, for instance, that the rivers of poverty and war and planetary poison rage around us while we claim religiosity. I also learned that the rivers of peace and nonviolence and globalism are possible if we will only contemplate God long enough, practice *devekut* and *tikkun o'lam* deeply enough, come to see God clearly enough, want God intensely enough to find God where God really is: here, all around us, within us, and within the ones born in stables and driven from the temples of the world, as well. Indeed, contemplation is not an easy task. It cannot be done in isolation. It cannot be done for its own sake.

The Sufi tell the story of the Holy One who was walking along the flooding banks of a raging river when suddenly he saw an arachnid cling to a tree branch only inches above the swollen stream. 'Poor thing', the Holy One said. 'Scorpions can't swim. If the waters reach that hanging branch, that spider will surely drown.'

And then the Holy One dropped to the ground and began to crawl along the branch toward the spider. But every time the Holy One touched the spider, it stung the hand that reached to rescue it. A passerby said firmly, 'Don't you realize that if you try to handle that scorpion, it will sting you?'

'Of course', the Holy One said, 'but simply because it is the scorpion's nature to sting, does not mean that I should abandon my human nature to save.'

Merton shows us a contemplation steeped in action, a clinging to

16. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 48.

God that demands the repair of the world, an enlightenment that leads to change and hope and holiness. My prayer for people who steep themselves in Merton is that they also steep themselves in a God who is in the world calling us all to a new enlightenment of heart, beyond the law, beyond the books, to a long look at God where God is and where God is not, to the contemplation that leads to action. The ages are full proof: sting it must—this contemplation of God in reality—but for the sake of those who live in hope of a better world, save it will. Sting it must, but save it surely will if we finally come to realize that though nothing we do changes the past, everything we do changes the future.