

Wild Seeds: Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day

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The desire for the wild is central to the American psyche, as is the desire, perhaps even the need, to domesticate the wild, to tame it. As the Kentucky farmer/writer Wendell Berry suggests, we need and desire both to preserve and domesticate the wild.¹

Of course, as a commentator on things cultural and agricultural Berry writes primarily of the land itself. Here, I explore a related, but broader, notion that allows us to see certain people and their work as wild. It allows us to see that we need and desire both to preserve and domesticate these wild people and their wild works.

I suggest that Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day are wild. As such, we need—and I hope desire—to honor their wildness. So too we need—and I hope desire—to domesticate them even a little. This, as I look back on it, was the impetus for the Symposium on Merton and Day that was hosted by Rivier College in April 1998: 'What, Then, Must We Do? The Legacies of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day'.

If by 'wild' I mean something that is not cultivated—and I do—at first glance it seems that I am hard pressed to claim that Merton and Day are wild. Both, clearly, bear the marks of cultivation. Merton, Columbia man and monk, was cultivated by two institutions that are sometimes antithetical to the wild. The academy is inherently conservative, an institution that preserves and propagates the norms of the culture. The church is also inherently conservative. It preserves and propagates the norms of faith as it understands them, defined by tradition. So too Day bears the marks of cultivation. Her sacramental faith was at its best conservative. Hers was an orthodox understanding of the godhead.

1. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 30.

That said, both were wild. This is an easy enough claim to make for Day. Who but somebody wild could take the orthodox tenets of the Roman Catholic Church and found upon them the Catholic Worker movement? Who but somebody wild could take the orthodox tenets of the Roman Catholic Church and found upon them a pacifist position that rejected even World War II as a just war? Who but somebody wild could take the orthodox tenets of the Roman Catholic Church and found upon them a life witness that would put her into frequent conflict with ecclesial and political authorities alike? Day was no hothouse flower.

So too Merton was wild. Who but somebody wild, rooted in the academy and living in the monastery, could initiate conversations between Roman Catholicism and Zen Buddhism? Who but somebody wild, rooted in the academy and living in the monastery, could write a postmodern, avant-garde poem like *'The Geography of Lograire'*? Who but somebody wild, rooted in the academy and living in the monastery, could write decisively against a national policy of nuclear deterrence? Merton was no trained plant.

Catching the wild scents of Merton and Day in the Fall of 1996, a group of faculty, staff and administrators at Rivier College decided to organize a symposium that would, at least for a weekend, take some of Merton's and Day's seeds and cast them into the domesticated confines of the academy, hoping that some wildness might take root.

This was no small undertaking for Rivier. The College had to decide to devote financial and human resources to this weekend, resources that are not excessively abundant on small campuses. Faculty teach relatively heavy loads, and have little time to devote to ad-hoc tasks. Also, as a tuition-driven institution, Rivier had to ask itself if the financial costs were worth it: advertisements in *America* and in the *National Catholic Reporter*, the possibility that registration fees would not cover costs, and the like.

Cautions raised, the College felt that the symposium was worth it. As an institution trying to further its mission, rooted as it is in the tradition of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, Rivier has dedicated itself to promoting a Catholic, Liberal Education for Social Justice. This is not to say that the College is in the business of propaganda. Quite the contrary is true: it is committed fully to the rigors of modern academic inquiry. Nonetheless, it is fully committed as well to its identity as a Catholic institution, in particular as a Catholic institution that wants the dialectic of faith and reason to consider the needs of a suffering world.

Not incidentally, the symposium is part of a wider web of activities

at the College, largely sponsored by its Center for Peace and Social Justice. During the summer the Center hosts the Institute for Peace and Social Justice, a week-long program in which presenters and participants gather to consider a range of issues and concerns. The Center is also planning another symposium, tentatively scheduled for April 2000. This symposium will center around the anniversaries of the murders of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the four churchwomen in El Salvador, asking North Americans, in the Jubilee year, to consider anew their relationships to our Latin American brothers and sisters.

That said, with the Merton and Day symposium, the wild seeds of Thomas and Dorothy found a home at Rivier, at least for a weekend.

Imagine Marc Ellis, the dynamic Jewish theologian and social critic, and author of such books as *A Year at the Catholic Worker, Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* and *Unholy Alliance*,² speaking about both Merton and Day to an audience that included elderly nuns in modified habit, academics, social activists, students, Christians of various leanings, and Jews.

Also imagine one of Dorothy Day's early companions, an ancient Catholic Worker up from New York City, watching the riveting play of Dorothy Day, *Haunted by God*.

In addition imagine the president of an American Catholic College—Sr Lucille Thibodeau of Rivier—introducing the notorious Fr Daniel Berrigan, SJ—artist, ex-con, raconteur—for the conference's keynote address. Sr Lucille, Harvard PhD in Comparative Literature, feted Berrigan as one of the profound prophetic voices of the twentieth century, a voice who challenges us all to live more authentic lives.

Then imagine Fr Berrigan speaking to a crowd of 350 people for nearly one hour, weaving a commentary of his own relationships with Merton and Day together with his poetry. It was Berrigan at his best and, fortunately for readers of the *The Merton Annual*, it is a Berrigan already available in *The Merton Annual* 11 (pp. 49-66). Father George Kilcourse painstakingly worked from the videotaped version of Fr Berrigan's presentation to present a written copy of one of America's wild Fathers speaking about members of his own line.

This imaginative exercise could go on, ranging through numerous, and extraordinary, concurrent sessions and informal conversations that occurred throughout the weekend. Two revised presentations merit particular commentary, however, in part because they appear in

The Merton Annual 12, in part because they well represent the domesticated wildness of Merton and Day.

'Dorothy Day, Welfare Reform and Personal Responsibility', by Harry Murray, examines Day within the context of contemporary debates about welfare and welfare reform. Murray argues, in sum, that Day's understanding of 'personal responsibility' is not hampered by the individualism promoted by market capitalism. It is, rather, a sense of responsibility that includes 'all humanity.' Rather than confining themselves to their own cultivated plots, Murray suggests that Day wants humans to extend their range as fully as they can, to sow themselves as members of the world, bound only by the love of God.

Marilyn Sunderman, RSM, offers 'Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day on Prayer, Conscience and Christian Social Responsibility: A Comparative Study'. While this expanded scholarly essay offers a multifaceted comparison of Day and Merton, particularly fascinating is its discussion of the importance of the natural world for these two writers. When Sunderman reminds us that Day herself pointed to, for instance, 'the song of birds', we realize that those days living on the ocean's wild shore, prior to her conversion, are not incidental to Day's religious life. So too Merton, as Sunderman says, 'reveled in the glory of creation', and was fascinated by woods, oceans and deserts.

These papers remind us, as did Berrigan's performance, as did the entire Symposium at Rivier, that Merton and Day are wild seeds. When we cultivate them at our institutional gatherings, they challenge our norms, and, with time, may create hybrid species that are domestic, yet, always, wild.

2. *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987); *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in our Time* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).