[*TMA* 13 (2000) 127-143]

Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom: An Interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL

Conducted by George A. Kilcourse, Jr
Edited by Paul Stokell

Jane Marie Richardson, SL was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. She entered the Sisters of Loretto community in Nerinx, Kentucky in 1946. Her studies have taken her to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, the Institut Catholique in Paris, and the Pontifical Academy Regina Mundi in Rome. Sr Jane Marie has taught music and theology in Denver, Saint Louis, and Louisville. She founded the Cedars of Peace Retreat Center at the Loretto Motherhouse in 1976. In addition to ongoing service with the Loretto community as an administrator and a member of the national staff, she works in spiritual counselling and retreat work. She spoke with Fr George Kilcourse in January of this year.

Kilcourse: It's a privilege to welcome you for this interview, Jane Marie. You were one of the youngest members of the Sisters of Loretto who knew Thomas Merton. I understand that Sister Mary Luke Tobin introduced you to him. Would you first tell us something about her influence on you.

Richardson: Sister Mary Luke has been a dear friend for 40 years. We met in 1958 when I was teaching at Loretto High School in Louisville. This woman popped in my classroom one morning, grabbed a chair and sat in it—with the back of the chair in front! She then asked me to play the piano for her! Just a simple beginning of a very fine gift.

Since then, I have been her assistant; I was one of her councilors when she was our community's president, from 1964 to 1970. Working with her any time was and is a privilege. This was especially true

during the years of the Second Vatican Council. Much of my study time in Rome overlapped with Vatican II .

We have continued to share life and responsibilities in Loretto—we continue to deepen our friendship. Presently, I visit Mary Luke weekly at our motherhouse where she has retired. Our conversations cover a wide range of interests, including new books and articles, events in the world and in the church, possibilities and new hopes for the new century, etc. Luke is still extremely interested in all kinds of issues and matters of the church.

Kilcourse: Do you have a sense of who took the initiative in the friendship between Sister Mary Luke and Merton? I know, for example, that he wrote to Douglas Steere that he should meet Mary Luke while he was attending the sessions of Vatican II as an official Protestant observer ('auditor') and she as an official Catholic woman observer. She relayed to him at the monastery insights from Bernard Haring and others. Merton sought her out to learn more about the dynamics of the council.

Richardson: I believe that it was Mary Luke who took the initiative. In the late 1950s, what was called the Sister Formation Conference was getting under way and one of our sisters was heading that up at the time. This was one of the first efforts to try to renew women's religious communities. Luke felt that Merton would have a lot to contribute to the thinking of and about religious women. She had already read a lot of his material by then. He responded by coming to Loretto in 1958. He seemed to enjoy himself, and there was a 'homey' kind of atmosphere—I remember him spilling a little something and he was a bit embarrassed about it, but delightfully so! Not long after this, Luke asked Merton to come to Loretto and give talks to our novices and to the Council. He was allowed to do this and had lots of energy for it.

I had a chance on one of these early occasions to ask him about his views on prayer. His reply to me was simply, 'I imagine you pray as well as anyone else.' The longer I live, the more those words mean to me. I always come back to that moment whenever I feel my prayer is not what it should be. Such a gift!

Then, in 1962, when Mary Luke was preparing to go to Rome for Vatican II, she met with Merton to get his input and thinking. It was my luck to be Luke's companion since I had studied there and knew the city. Merton was so hopeful, so enthusiastic, about the Council and very eager to stay in close touch regarding information and developments. I think he saw its potential more than most of us did.

Kilcourse: I understand that there was a tape that Merton made, an assessment of the Sisters of Loretto constitution revised just a couple of years after the Council. You played a major role in writing that document and incorporating insights from the Council. Do you recall Merton's enthusiasm for it?

Richardson: Yes, I remember well Merton's upbeat response, he was wonderful about it. When we did that first draft I was holed up in some spot in Illinois, and as soon as I got back to Kentucky, we went to see him—we wanted his reaction and comments. He was so affirming even of the very idea of trying to make the constitutions of a community much more positive and uplifting, in this case, much more expressive of a woman's experience and point of view. We were trying to capture some of that great spirit flowing from the Council. It was such a time of new hope and promise.

Merton, of course, was on this same wavelength, and he was very enthusiastic about this early draft. He read it carefully and then, very modestly, as was his way, offered helpful comments and suggestions. As always, I was moved by his intelligence and wisdom and by what I tend to call his shyness. Maybe diffidence or humility says it better—he was just always so respectful when offering advice or suggestions. In any case, we felt very understood and supported.

Like other religious congregations, we in Loretto responded to the Council's call to update our way of life (*Perfectae caritatis*). Merton's practical sense and religious insights were a real help there. Luke consulted him over the years about the implementation of the Council's directives. It remains, to this day, a rather small (but significant) document.

Kilcourse: Tell us about Sister Mary Luke's role in your knowing Merton.

Richardson: Well, she introduced me to him. Through the 1960s, Luke had the need to visit Merton with some regularity. Quite simply, I drove and Luke didn't! As her assistant on Loretto's General Council, we had gotten to know each other quite well and we did a lot of community work together. It's also true that Luke knew of my desire to lead a more contemplative life and she respected that. I think she knew it would be helpful for me to get to know him, to hear some of his ideas and thoughts about that. And it certainly was a wonderful grace, really. I'm very grateful for the opportunity—I was always included in their discussions, and that was a gift.

Kilcourse: Had you read any of Merton's writing before you arrived at Loretto? Did a particular book or essay have any effect upon your decision to choose the religious life?

Richardson: No, actually, since I had entered Loretto before most of Merton's books were written. I first saw him in 1949, at the Corpus Christi procession at Gethsemani, and someone had to point him out to me. I knew enough about him to be very curious! I was teaching out in Colorado and elsewhere in the 1950s, so I didn't have the opportunity to see him during that time.

I did read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and liked it very much. I liked the ease of reading it, his style impressed me. The content mind-boggled me, there was so much drama in it—certainly not pedestrian! The connection between that and my impression of everything at the time—that was a challenge to my own thinking. It raised questions for me: 'What is it about the contemplative life?'

Kilcourse: In his 1962 essay on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Loretto Community in Kentucky, Merton wrote that poignant reflection, 'Loretto and Gethsemani.' The land on which the Abbey sits was originally the site of the 1812 Sisters of Loretto foundation; it was only in 1848 that your community exchanged the property for a new site, I understand. I was pleased to see it as an Appendix to *The Springs of Contemplation*[1] (the 1967 and 1968 retreats for contemplative prioresses) that you edited. How have you reflected about that special essay?

Richardson: Over the years I have read that essay many times and each time I give thanks for the quiet sense of communion that marks the relationship of Gethsemani and Loretto. Both Gethsemani and Loretto have a mutual devotion to Mary, Mother of Sorrows and the Cross—I have always appreciated that. 'O Suffering Jesus, O Sorrowful Mary' has been a basic prayer in Loretto since our foundation. Merton used it as an identifying point for us. This is so common now, when we talk about the 'spirituality' of a group or a parish. It wasn't done so much then.

And it has struck me that we had the same 'earth roots.' I find meaningful that we have, in our beginning years, actually lived on the same Kentucky ground: it marks the spirit of our communities—a kind of earthiness that tends to keep us simple, and a kind of spa-

1. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992.

ciousness that encourages us to stretch our minds and hearts beyond the immediate and visible. It is so uniting to me. It makes us at Loretto glad that Gethsemani is there. Sisters at Loretto have always had some sort of relationship with some of the monks there, usually as our spiritual directors.

Kilcourse: Merton talks about a contemplative dimension at both Loretto and Gethsemani. He calls it 'a secret' that 'has nothing to communicate to the multitudes... It is a secret that reveals itself only partially even to those who live for a long time in our valley.' Have you found such a kinship between the motherhouse and the abbey?

Richardson: Yes, and I believe there are other sisters at Loretto who feel a similar kind of oneness and communion with Gethsemani, especially those whose life work is now 'full-time' prayer. There is a mutual appreciation. But there have always been those who identify more closely with the life and spirit of Gethsemani, sisters who have decided quite consciously to lead a more contemplative life. And a number of monks have been extremely generous with their time and advice in this regard.

Of course, I love the descriptive phrase about a 'secret' that Loretto and Gethsemani share, 'A quiet mixture of wisdom and madness, a triumph of hope over despair'. In putting those things together, Merton wants us to trust in God's providence, in our simple beginnings. He wants us to love and understand the world and, at the same time, to maintain serious reserves in its regard. 'We are in the world of our time...we are, of course, engaging...yet we are in it to save it...we cannot be altogether part of it.' This paradoxical approach to life, to our world, to our vocation, seems to me right on target. He cautions us against believing that 'because we are the richest people in the world we are also the most righteous'. Still so timely.

And, just one more little piece: 'The Cross is the sign of contradiction, but it is also the sign of reconciliation.' I like that very much... really meaningful. By the time the essay was written in 1962, that secret was more and more of a treasure, a sense of God's blessing.

Kilcourse: I like the way Merton describes the Sisters of Loretto as 'daughters, not of the American, but of the French Revolution'. He goes on to describe your community as 'not satisfied with the status quo' and as 'exiles at odds with materialism, commercialism, and secularism' and thereby beginning to be 'fully faithful to Christ' in the 'post-Christian era.'

Richardson: This is one of the finest things that anyone has ever said about the Sisters of Loretto and I pray that we can all live up to that description. I value it—it's a challenge.

For instance, during the Vietnam conflict, to get involved with protest—writing letters, demonstrating—at that time, was courageous. Some women always asked, 'Is this all right? Can we do this?' It was the beginning of our involvement in justice issues.

Kilcourse: You are a trained musician. In a sense you share with Merton an artist's and a contemplative's temperament. How did you discover your interest in music?

Richardson: I grew up in a home where hearing and liking music was a fact of life: my grandfather tuned pianos and organs (occasionally I got to go with him, a great treat!), my mother had a beautiful and powerful voice, one aunt was a gifted pianist. We always had a piano in my home. I heard music from early childhood on and always wanted to 'make music,' too. That remains true to this day.

When I entered Loretto, I was recommended for training in music by one of the doctors who tested my hearing! I've done less teaching since my musical training than before. I have always enjoyed composing over 100 songs (close to 150) for worship. (Maybe I need a business manager!) I always remember a saying of St Augustine that a friend told me a long time ago: 'The one who sings prays twice'. Singing the gospel at Christmas and the Exultet at Easter remain two highlights of the year.

I don't remember playing or singing for Merton. I can't remember a time when I play my song 'Jonah, My Child' that it doesn't move people. That paragraph he wrote (from *The Sign of Jonas*) really came from the heart, his self-knowledge, his awareness of God's action in his life. No matter how gifted or prolific he was, he really did have a deep sense of God breathing, rescuing him from himself.

Kilcourse: Would you tell us about the first time you met Thomas Merton. Was it at Loretto or at Gethsemani? What was he like?

I first met Merton at Loretto, in 1958, when he came over to Loretto to visit Luke. I asked to speak with him alone and found him gentle, kind and understanding, very low-key. It was a special moment, a grace. He had a certain streak of timidity in him, of shyness. He had a speaking style such that whatever he offered, it was very deferential, tentative. He had as part of his style a willingness to yield, to retreat. I do think that it was part of his makeup, perhaps the result of his

adaptation to community. He had a wonderful combination of 'Let's go! Let's do this!' and 'Go ahead, what's stopping you?' At the same time, he had an attitude of great respect for others.

Kilcourse: On later occasions Merton interacted with groups of the women in the Loretto community. I understand that he even talked on occasion to those in the novitiate. Can you recall anything in particular that characterized those exchanges with the community?

Richardson: I wasn't present at many of those. One novice at the time told me recently that her conversations with him helped to shape her thinking. There was, though, from those time I remember, a lot of laughter and good feeling! And almost always something significant to think about after the exchange was over, either personal or about community or about relationships or the church. I learned so much from him.

Kilcourse: One of the people that Merton introduced to Loretto was Daniel Walsh. When he came to Kentucky from New York City Merton recommended him as a lecturer for philosophy courses at the motherhouse. I always recall seeing in the library at Knob's Haven [the retreat house at the motherhouse] that splendid color photograph of Merton with Dan on 'Fr Walsh's' ordination day. Could you say something about Dan's influence at Loretto?

Richardson: Luke learned about Dan's coming. She was always in the lookout for possibilities. We had a couple of nice picnics with him on the grounds at Loretto. Everyone I know at Loretto enjoyed and revered Dan Walsh. He was so kindly, had quiet humor, and was so intelligent and informative. I think everyone looked forward to his classes, his presentations. He was so simple, down-to-earth, receptive to others' thoughts and opinions. Just a well-balanced and beautiful person. His influence on the novices was particularly notable. He seemed to understand, not only their questions and comments, but also the persons behind them.

Whenever Dan Walsh had conversations with Merton, they were both so animated. They were both such good thinkers and good friends.

Kilcourse: Your own choice to live in a hermitage at Loretto must have been somewhat influenced by Merton's pioneering experiment. Did you ever have occasion to discuss this with him?

Richardson: I remember one conversation I had with Merton before any of this happened. We were sitting at the small table before the main window in his hermitage, drinking something, and I told him about my desire to live and pray in a similar kind of spot. He asked, 'How many others do you need?' And I said, 'None'. And he replied, 'Why not?' It was all I needed. He went directly to the heart of the matter and it was a defining moment for me.

In 1970, not long after Merton had died, I was given permission to live alone in a basement apartment at the motherhouse. This proved to be very congenial. At the same time, I still had a desire to live in a small place that would be 'on its own,' as it were. Two years later a small little house on the property became available. I lived there four years and then received permission to build a little cluster of cabins, nestled in our Loretto woods.

Kilcourse: How has this project of the hermitages—you call it 'Cedars of Peace'—developed over the years? What role do you now play?

Richardson: I don't remember the first interior movements about the design of the cabins, but there were a number of visitors who would ask, 'How did you come to live in a place like this?' There got to be a number of visitors who would be interested in such a place for short periods of time. So I asked.

Cedars of Peace now has eight cabins: six for individual use (rental), one a small chapel for Compline and one as a small 'common house' or meeting area. Until 1992 I served as director and maintenance person. At that time I needed to meet responsibilities in Louisville so I began looking for someone to look after Cedars. Sister Agnes Hoormann, RSCJ had lived at Cedars two years and was interested in staying longer; she accepted the role and continues in it now. We currently see ourselves as co-directors and meet about once a month. Recently, we've had fewer people than usual, so we're praying for ways to answer that.

Kilcourse: In your ministry you serve as a spiritual director and offer retreats to people seeking a contemplative center for their lives. Describe for us how you see the hunger for a deeper spiritual life in our time.

Richardson: I don't pretend to know where it's coming from, except from God's Holy Spirit. I do think that the chaotic times that had been part of our decade make for some restlessness, plus some of the pres-

sures of society that weigh on people. Those who are fortunate to know persons who seem to be less restless—I think that makes an impression on a lot of folks. It makes people want to talk. The immediacy of people now around the whole world is significant, a beginning at least of an awareness of our global responsibility. The world is very competitive, and tensions and stress affect health. People want to find ways to help themselves and are finding spirituality to be a priority now.

I believe there is a very great hunger for a deeper spiritual life on the part of many people. Books and magazines on the spiritual life abound; retreat centers have multiplied in the last 10 to 15 years. Contemplation, wordless prayer, is almost a household word now. Parish missions and days of prayer are on the increase. All this points to an increased awareness of spiritual hunger and a desire to assuage this hunger on the part of many people.

Kilcourse: Is there a definition of spirituality that you find most apropos? How does this relate to our ongoing ecumenical context? our emerging interreligious context?

Richardson: There really isn't. That question really stumps me! I think it is a recognition of our full humanity, and a desire to respect it and develop and nourish it by conscious effort. Maybe it's a way of saying, 'Yes, I want my life to be like that, and I'm going to take the means to see that it's more like that.'

We have just lived through a century that, while wondrous in many of its developments, has also witnessed unsurpassed horrors: two world wars, the holocaust, the atom bomb. I think the search for meaning is paramount and has led many to probe life and its possibilities much more deeply. Spirituality is simply a very personal form of this probing. It leads to an unfolding and ever more conscious belief that God, the Spirit, the Creator is the center of all life and therefore of one's own life. From this realization come meaning and purpose, plus a hope and conviction that life, my life, is greater than all of its parts, that the gift of myself is beyond price.

And so I want to deepen this awareness and let it have more influence in my behavior, choices, relationships; in other words, I desire to have a more 'examined ' life. I want to contribute to the making of a better world, as a whole, and to a better world where all human life takes place. This involves dealing with those unseen parts of myself that determine my actions as well as my motivations, indeed, the very meaning of my life. This desire inaugurates a serious spiritual life, the

search for a suitable 'spirituality' that speaks to my soul and nourished my well-being. I think this understanding of spirituality brings with it the realization that I am not alone; that everyone else has a desire and hunger similar to my own; that we need, in fact, to assist and encourage one another; that we need to learn from others; that more and more we need to welcome others into our lives and understand what is important and meaningful to them. We need to hear from those who differ from ourselves, else nothing new will ever come into our thinking and loving.

Ecumenically, this means we are open to honor, respect, listen to, and learn from others. It means that the more we understand others who are searching for what is true and meaningful, the more we ourselves will grow and deepen in our search and desire. Interreligious dialogue is essential for the truth—it is greater than any one of us and each of us has a bit of it to be honored and shared and celebrated. For those of us who believe there is but one God from whom comes all life, nothing can really be alien.

Kilcourse: Could you say something about people who seek a deeper spiritual life but not a religious life in community? I know, for example, that the Loretto community has many 'associate' members.

Richardson: Yes, we do have about 200 associate members, both men and women, Catholic and not. For the most part, they're a very active group! I think the overt, emergent spiritual hungers and desires and practices is a grace in the church at this time. I think that in a parish setting it is now the way it is being done—that story is being multiplied! I don't see that as an undermining of religious life in terms of community. It's a movement of the Holy Spirit.

Think of it: parish missions, parish education, college courses, other things unavailable 20 years ago. The laity really was an impetus of Vatican II, and the recognition of their active role in the church is happening! It helps with family life and so on. The development of a conscious depth of existence is nurtured, I think, by the effects of Vatican II. It's a wonderful thing. There are more and more opportunities now to communicate well, and use our wonderful tools of technology such as the Internet for the 'Universal Call to Holiness'.

These persons are a vital part of our community, its spirit and its mission. As for living a deep spiritual life outside a religious community, that has always been the way most people have done it! So, of course, one can lead a very prayerful and directed life without belonging to a specific community. However, belonging to a church com-

munity or a religious community can be a great support, a great source of expanding understanding, a wonderful sense of belonging and presence. Friends do this, too, of course.

Kilcourse: Let's talk for awhile about the book *The Springs of Contemplation*. You edited this series of conferences that Merton presented to a dozen contemplative prioresses in December 1967 and May 1968. I understand that you accompanied Sister Mary Luke—under Merton's rubric of her providing transportation and welcoming them—at some of these meetings at the Abbey of Gethsemani. It was a revolutionary endeavor at that time, wasn't it?

Richardson: Yes, it was, and I don't think Merton was too keen on it at the time! There were about 12 leaders of women's religious communities at the first meetings which took place in December of 1967, and a few less in the spring of 1968. This kind of gathering was unique: small but widely representative, informal and free with serious intent to learn and change and try new things. Prayer together united us in a way that made us comfortable with each other, trusting of each other.

The fact that Merton would give so much time to women religious was actually a unique and privileged phenomenon, a mark of openness. His graciousness and humor put everyone at ease and those present were able to speak of the most serious things with ease and forthrightness. A real sense of being united in God's presence seemed palpable. Merton, of course, did much to set this tone—easy, enjoyable—and maintain it throughout all the discussions. Before this, most religious superiors kept their community problems to themselves. There was a lot of back-and-forth exchange.

Kilcourse: The topics that Merton addressed in these conferences presented in *The Springs of Contemplation* remind me of some of his essays in *Contemplation in a World of Action*[2] [posthumously published essays about monastic formation and dialogue with the world] because he situates reform in the broader context of inner renewal. But the contemplative core in both volumes is paramount. How did you come up with the title for the volume?

Richardson: Actually, it was Mary Luke who came up with the title. We were walking one day along a lake, and later had a picnic there.

2. New York: Doubleday, 1971.

We were talking about it and wanted to convey the idea of nourishment and wholeness sparked by all the conversations we had. We were aware of Merton's 'seeds' but of course, did not want to copy that. One of us said something about water; we played with this a bit and then Luke said 'What about 'springs'?' We both knew that was it.

Kilcourse: There is much in Merton's conferences in *The Springs of Contemplation* that addresses community life. Yet he balances this with a healthy respect for freedom, personal expression, and charisms. He even speaks of contemplative life as a prophetic vocation. Do you have any reflections in the wake of editing these conferences almost a decade ago?

Richardson: Not directly. I think it keeps alive some of the insights which were unique and still not out of date. Some individuals and groups can still profit from this material. To experience many of these groups and people finding application of these document makes me very happy. Not everything that fell from Merton's lips was a pearl, but he had some insights that are almost timeless, and because they are so significantly what it means to be a human being before the face of God! This gift, the way he put thought and word together, is really marvelous.

Only an ever-deepening realization that the topics Merton brought up were indeed pertinent to a new and better understanding of religious life. And I see more and more how much we still need to ponder his insights, to steer us through the waters of true freedom, not license, and true prayer, not simply innovations.

Kilcourse: In her Introduction to *The Springs of Contemplation*, Sister Mary Luke Tobin applauds how Merton-the-teacher's 'skill at communicating showed itself in his ability to open up to us new ways of seeing and new hopes for our human and religious lives.' She also credits him with encouraging these religious women to develop their vocation as a 'new maturity within a patriarchal system'.

Richardson: Absolutely. He did it so easily, and in a totally non-threatening way. A few persons there were a little uptight, but they wouldn't have been there at all if they hadn't been wanting something back for their communities. So everybody there was receptive, and equally able to hear some of the suggestions or ideas. They were asking, 'How could we do this?' It seemed to me—almost visibly—that a number of those women were noticeably 'freed up' to entertain the

changes that were in process out of Vatican II because of Merton's responses.

Luke, as usual, is right on target. Merton's whole approach allayed a lot of fears of reactions from Rome, freed us to see things in fresh ways, to try different things, to make some changes according to the document, to trust in the Spirit that was among us, to be willing to risk the old-time securities, to take hold of our lives as intelligent and capable women. To change clothes, how we traveled, how we did our ministries—this was all very refreshing.

Kilcourse: One chapter in *The Springs of Contemplation* is entitled 'The Feminist Mystique'. His references to Mary Daly's writing make it obvious that he has been reading her critique. He also includes Jung on the anima. This is also in the timeframe of his important exchange of correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether. How perceptive was Merton (for his time) when it came to the rise of feminist consciousness—especially feminist consciousness within the church?

Richardson: Well, certainly, I think Merton had a little more consciousness about it than some persons (men *and* women) who were writing about it at the time! He had his finger on the pulse of the times, the post Vatican-II era, the Vietnam era, and so on.

He was ahead of almost all others, including women religious, in this recognition of a growing feminist consciousness and its meaning for our whole society, as well as for women's religious communities. I think he was ahead of most people in this regard. But I think he was still struggling with what it all really might mean. He never seemed to question it as a fact but he was still trying to foresee what this recognition of women as full persons might mean in society as a whole and in the church. We joked once about the ordination of women and, if I remember correctly, he acknowledged the idea but felt it needed more thought. We did, too. Merton had such good common sense. He knew what was right and also how difficult it was for some people to accept and follow what this meant, especially in regard to the rightful positions of women in the church.

Kilcourse: Merton has been scrutinized for his infatuation with a student nurse in 1966. This is all recounted in volume 6 of his journals, *Learning to Love*.[3] Do you find it vexing that whenever mention is made of Merton and 'the feminine' that people automatically gravi-

3. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.

tate to this short-lived relationship and overlook his healthy interaction with women religious whom he encouraged to break out of 'the feminine mystique'?

Richardson: I do. I was in a meeting about a year ago and something like this happened. I certainly find it sad, yes, probably vexing, that Merton's indiscretions should loom larger than his perceptive and thoughtful positions on women as a whole. Merton was too intelligent and fearless—free!—to give credence to 'the feminine mystique.'

Interest is usually aroused when it comes to this subject. I can understand the curiosity behind it. It's a zeroing-in on something which can all too quickly turn into a fixation on the sexual desires of Merton, or his needs, and how healthy it all was. It's almost like a gossip-column type affair! In terms of him and women, it was an awareness that the *mores* had to change, that the possibilities of women's contributions to society as a whole were much greater. So, when discussion about this happens, I try to say a sentence or two, but then I move on!

Kilcourse: I want to quote from one of the last chapters of *The Springs of Contemplation*. It's not exactly the first place where a reader might search for such an intimate, journal-like revelation but I find it quite striking. Two years after he had met the nurse, Merton comments on a question about virginity and young people not accepting this consecrated state 'as being higher.'

> There is a real freedom in simply not being involved in sex. I don't know how to explain it; its just a more free kind of life. But, of course, sex is liberating, too, even though it can be oppressive in another way. It depends on the way we are made, like fasting or anything else. To be liberated from sex gives a certain relaxed sense. When you're involved in a sexual situation you can get very caught up in it. Anybody who's been deeply in love knows what it's like. If it's too involved, there's real slavery, because you can't think of anything else. And there's no question of praying.
>
> We're not talking here about a married relationship but about a passionate relationship. It takes all you've got. There's no time or energy for anything else. It seems to me that anyone who knows what that involves would be delighted to be released from it. To feel free again, to be able to pray if you want, to have a sense of being alone, are things we value in our life. Some people can give themselves to another in married life and still have something similar. But there are people called to this kind of freedom as a way of life, and they appreciate it. There is something telling them, This is for me, this is my choice' (p. 179).

I find that one of the most transparent statements I've ever read in Thomas Merton. Would you comment? It must have been a passage that struck the hearers in 1968—and you as editor again a decade ago.

Richardson: First of all, those paragraphs are pure gold, Merton at his freest and best. He has, as Martin Luther King, Jr would put it, 'been to the mountaintop'. He sees life though the best possible lens, that of inner and outer freedom. I cannot agree with you more that this is a gem of a passage, a marvelous expression of his knowledge, insight, spirit and experience all rolled into one.

I think this freedom of his was a hard-won freedom. It's more of an understanding which does not detach, but rather creates bonds. In any case, it's a wisdom found in these paragraphs. If one is thinking along these lines, it frees one up to quality relationships with persons. It's a passage that not only freeing, but instructive, and liberating! The wisdom speaks for itself. It's truth.

Kilcourse: Would you find this statement a vindication of sorts for Merton in the face of those who feel he had not resolved the relationship?

Richardson: I think what he is saying is genuine, and springs from his experience, and his reflection and prayer on that experience. I think it's valid, and he has the words to express it. It's a hard-won realization. He entered fully into anything—he had a love of life. He could enter into issues. His aliveness was very strong, contagious. And this enthusiasm of his is very telling. To realize that he could be loved and be found that desirable by a woman was, to me, an intoxication. I think to follow the Abbot's direction at that time had to be hard, and clearly his passion was very great. To withdraw from the relationship had to be costly and difficult. This reflection on freedom makes me find that Merton is not protesting too much!

Kilcourse: One of your contributions to Merton studies and interest has been the composition of the beautiful lyric, 'Jonah, My Child'. You get right to the point by returning to this metaphor of Jonah—and Merton's experience of God's mercy. Tell us something about the inspiration for this music.

Richardson: For as long as I can remember, probably since my reading of *The Sign of Jonas* when it first appeared, I have loved and treasured and meditated on these final lines in the book. God's mercy has

always seemed to me to be most wonderful and strengthening and these lines capture that faith. So, when I read them and sat with them the music came, by itself, as it were, as if it had simply been waiting for the moment. I consider it one of the best things I have ever done, perhaps even the best. I am forever grateful for the words and the music, the beautiful wedding of the two.

Kilcourse: I've had the privilege of hearing you play and sing this song on several occasions. It touches people deeply. And I notice how you yourself are deeply moved when you render it to us. What happens?

Richardson: What happens? When I sing this song, there is nothing but joy-in-God present, nothing but immense gratitude for...everything.

Kilcourse: What do you see as important for future Merton studies, retreats, and his message for a new generation, especially those which are experiencing a degree of post-Vatican II reactionary conservatism?

Richardson: I do think it is important to keep introducing young people to Merton through his writings and discussions on them, through his art and what it suggests, through his poetry (the more accessible ones) and to keep telling his story. There are so many courses and books and discussion groups on his work even now. I think this will touch young people with gifts in that direction, and serve as a stepping stone. There is such an interest to know more about him. Stories last a long time in our memory and can move our hearts years and years later.

I think Merton would be valuable to those experiencing the reactions today, perhaps in the form of a retreat. Long hours of prayer and contemplation shaped so much of what Merton said. I think being more overt about teaching prayer is what's important here, in family life, in academic life, in the counseling life and in parish situations. In that context, Merton was more countercultural, always ahead rather than behind.

Kilcourse: What cautions would you give us in our study and use of Merton?

Richardson: To be enthusiastic without exaggerating, to be appreciative without bragging, to be simple without selling anything, to tell

your personal story about Merton when judged feasible but with care and caution.

Kilcourse: Finally, what's the most important thing to remember about the Thomas Merton you knew?

Richardson: That for him, freedom—true freedom—and God were inseparable, perhaps synonymous.

Kilcourse: Thank you, Jane Marie, for sharing your reflections with our readers.