

## Thomas Merton Has Influenced our Lives

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*A Merton Discussion Group in Denver, Colorado*  
*Edited by Fred Eyerman*

The authors of these reflections are a small group of primarily lay persons, living in the Denver (Colorado) area, who meet once a month to read and discuss the thought of Thomas Merton. We gather at the local Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange under the coordination of its director, Sr Rose Annette Liddell, SL. We are all practicing Roman Catholics. Our group includes four lay women, six lay men and Sr Rose Annette. All but four of the lay persons had some experience with seminary, priesthood or religious life. All, but two, have been married and one is a widow. All, but one, have been Roman Catholics since childhood. All of us meditate on a fairly regular basis and most have some understanding of the Centering Prayer process initiated in Denver by Fr Thomas Keating. We each know or have been influenced by Sr Mary Luke Tobin, SL, a close friend of Merton, who lived in Denver until her recent retirement to Nerinx, Kentucky. We are all over 40 and most have a fairly good remembrance of the living Thomas Merton and the changes brought to the Roman Church by the Second Vatican Council.

We were in the midst of a study of *The Intimate Merton*<sup>1</sup> when one of our members, Fred, returned from Shantivanam 'House of Prayer' in Easton, Kansas, with word of the planned special section of the 2003 *Merton Annual*. The staff of Shantivanam had been asked to contribute a reflection on the section's theme, 'Lay Spirituality, Merton and Contemplative Life beyond the Monastery'. Robert Graves of Shantivanam contacted Victor Kramer who extended a like invitation to Fred who brought it to the discussion group. We talked together about one member writing an article for the annual. Several group members have been

1. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001).

reading and studying Merton's thought for years. We decided it might be more beneficial and interesting to offer a shared reflection on the theme. After all, we were mostly lay persons, each loves and has been influenced by Merton's thought, and all are active in the contemplative life.

At our September 2002 meeting, we developed a set of questions that individual members wanted to address to the theme, 'Lay Spirituality, Merton and Contemplative Life beyond the Monastery'. Each group member was asked to spend time during the intervening month preparing their own response to the questions. At our October meeting, we held a two-hour taped discussion centered on the questions. Nine of the eleven group members took part in the discussion. A transcript of the tape was made and then edited by Fred and Sr Rose Annette. This article is the summary of our collective response. It will have, at times, the incomplete, not fully wrapped up, feel of a taped interview or discussion. We will wander at times, or, as Fred's wife, Carol, describes such meanderings, there will be a lot of 'bird-walking' in and out of individual questions. We offer this as our insight into how the life and thought of Thomas Merton provided an initial seed and continues to enliven the spirituality and contemplative life of ten lay persons and one religious woman, living outside the monastery, in the daily, noisy and often chaotic life of Denver, Colorado. We hope it will invite others to a similar reflection.

As mentioned above, our discussion was centered on a series of questions developed out of the theme, 'Lay Spirituality, Merton and Contemplative Life beyond the Monastery'. The article will be structured around our responses to each of the questions.

### The Discussion

*Merton Thought beyond the Cut and Dry. What Are Ways He Influenced Lay People in the Post-Vatican II World, such as the Contemplative Life, Social Justice Insights, or Other Areas?*

In response to this question we not only expressed Merton's influence on ourselves and others, but also several members remembered back to the beginnings of their life journeys with his thought. We all agreed that Merton influenced a wide, international audience through his books, letters, journals, and the many articles he wrote. Richard, who first read Merton as an evangelical Christian, was especially touched by his letters, that Merton responded to so many and varied people throughout the world, by their questions to him and the kinds of answers he gave. He

noted that we don't often hear the content of the letter sent to Merton, but his responses were beautiful. Richard was also impressed by Merton's journals, by the process through which his thought developed.

More specifically, Fred, a retired adult educator and bookkeeper, and others were touched by Merton's words that have become daily prayers for many. The lovely prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude*<sup>2</sup> that begins, 'My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going...', has been used by Fred for many years and shared with friends facing life crises. It was the daily prayer of a friend who suffered for many years with MS (Multiple Sclerosis), is still used by his widow, and is a constant companion of friends rejected by their adult daughter and family. Happily, thank God and Thomas Merton, the families in the latter situation have been reconciled. Fred believes that Merton's words express both his closeness to God and his deep, down humanness. His words, especially the preceding prayer, have helped Fred live through and get in touch with God in difficult times. Joanne, a mother who works with her dentist husband, picked up on the prayer theme. She first met Merton while doing a term paper on *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>3</sup> in high school. Joanne couldn't put Merton's book down. It was so good. She was really upset when she later discovered that Merton was embarrassed about his autobiography. She reflected that, as he matured, he met life at a deeper level and went beyond and rejected some of the thought in his earlier writings. She, like Fred and Tom, whom you will meet later, hasn't read a lot of books by Merton. Joanne's biggest influences have been the articles and book excerpts that she received over many years in numerous Merton workshops, retreats, and discussion and prayer groups. Rose Annette reminded us that Mary Luke (Tobin) passed out a goodly portion of Merton's writings at Denver-area retreats and other events. 'Mary Luke was forever passing out handouts so those of us who went to those retreats over the years, just by that, have read a good bit of Merton'. Joanne likes two prayers in particular: the one mentioned by Fred, and the words Merton expressed while standing on a corner in Louisville, Kentucky. She has reproduced both on little cards which are posted near the light switches of her two guest bedrooms. People who stay with Joanne and Larry can't miss reading them. She has received many good comments from guests formerly unfamiliar with Merton.

Gerry, a single man who works as a computer-aided design (CAD) specialist for engineering companies, began his reflections by remember-

2. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

ing a television anchorman for a Mobile, Alabama station he met at the Merton Conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Gerry 'thought that very interesting since the average TV anchorperson, or politician, is not influenced by the likes of Merton'. Much laughter followed! One constant of our discussion was the frequent laughter that Merton's life and thought, and our own experience with these, brought to the meeting. Gerry's first encounter with Merton's writing was in his junior year of high school when he read *Faith and Violence*.<sup>4</sup> Later, as a freshman in college, he was part of a parish liturgy group in Chicago. The group's task was to prepare comments for use during the Sunday Masses. The group used, for reflection, a new book, *Thomas Merton on Prayer*,<sup>5</sup> written by a Jesuit priest. Gerry thought the book was fantastic. Unlike others in the group whose involvement with Merton has been more sporadic, Gerry has continued to read Merton through the intervening years and leads Merton discussions with the Peace and Justice Committee at his parish in Denver. Larry, a dentist, picked up on Gerry's comments, remembering that it was also in high school, in his junior year many years before Gerry, that he received the first edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* when it came out, in 1948. Merton's autobiography was very popular in Larry's school. Larry read and re-read it, but that was all he read of Merton at that time. In dental school, the only Catholic living with five other bachelors, he got into the habit of dropping Merton-isms on his unsuspecting housemates. Joanne, Larry's wife exclaimed, 'and they needed those!' Since college, Larry, like Gerry, has had an ongoing and deepening relationship with Merton's works.

Helen, a retired nurse, was a senior in high school in 1948 when her English teacher, a nun, introduced her to *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Helen remarked, 'You know, I wanted to plow right through it!' The next year, 1949, she received the burlap edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>6</sup> Helen entered the convent where she could not keep books. Knowing of her love of Merton, Helen's mother typed and sent to Helen, chapter by chapter, the entire contents of *The Sign of Jonas*.<sup>7</sup> Helen remarked, 'Then there were *Raids on the Unspeakable*,<sup>8</sup> *New Seeds of Contemplation*,<sup>9</sup>

4. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

5. John J. Higgins, SJ, *Thomas Merton on Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975).

6. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).

7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

8. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1962).

*Contemplation and Action*,<sup>10</sup> plus all those things Mary Luke gave us. He's always been one that I looked for in books. I could read his books over and over again. Even in *The Sign of Jonas*, there was just so much about him, he was so human and honest, and I appreciated his need for solitude. When he would get too involved in things, he had to go outside, to get into nature, his ability to pray out there...all of this influenced me a lot. I remember when I was in nursing school; everybody would go downstairs for coffee and a smoke. Instead, I would go outside for 15 minutes and walk, just to get away from all the noise and smoking and coffee. I felt refreshed when I came back. It made a difference, just that little bit of solitude. And I think Merton did the same, only on a great and grand scale'.

Fred picked up on Helen's remembrances of the balancing of action and contemplation in Merton. Fred said that what always struck him about Merton was his ability to keep a foot in both worlds. I know when I get too much on the action side, without centering myself, I get really shallow. And when I am quiet and reserved, not responding to the needs around me, I feel a similar dis-ease. Merton was able to hold these two poles in creative tension. And that was when it wasn't popular for a monk to be involved in the action side of life.

Rose added that Merton was, at times, criticized for speaking out and taking action by writing letters and other contributions. Merton wrote quite a bit for Dorothy Day's paper, *The Catholic Worker*. Tom, a former Jesuit who has been deeply involved for many years in action for justice and peace, talked here about his own relationship with Merton. Tom, like many others, first met Merton through *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He thought he enjoyed the book but it wasn't, as far as he knew, that influential in his life. He had not read a lot of Merton's books until he joined our small group. Most of his reading has been articles, and primarily those related to social issues, the war in Vietnam and nuclear weapons, like the article I passed out to the group a couple of months ago. That's what's influenced me, that particular element in Merton, his focus on social action issues, though, just from reading the diaries in the small group, I have seen again the importance of the contemplative part of life. So I think that's one thing that Merton brings out for everyone, that the contemplative life is not just for the Trappists off in Gethsemani, but everyone needs quiet for centering, for focus, for reminding ourselves where we are and what we're about and what the purpose of our lives is.

10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

Mary, a college teacher and widow, brought a comprehensive view to our discussion. When Mary was growing up, her mother read Merton. Her mother's favorite was *The Sign of Jonas*. Mary had *No Man Is an Island*<sup>11</sup> and read, but can't remember when, Merton's autobiography. She didn't find *The Seven Storey Mountain* too influential but liked Merton's reflective books. When she entered the convent, she so loved his works that, in Mary's words, 'I floated around the convent thinking I was Thomas Merton!' (Loud laughter!) He continues to influence Mary today. She has tapes of Merton, conferences with the monks that she plays daily while driving in her car.<sup>12</sup> In the tapes, Mary reflects, Merton is talking to monks, 'but he never just talks to the monks. In his writings, in the introductions to his books, he says that these are for ALL READERS (emphasis added!)'. Mary, in preparing for our discussion, looked at the dedications of the many Merton books she possesses and not once did she find the limit that this was 'just for monks or religious'. They are for everyone. The tapes Mary listens to, which were introducing the monks to the message of Vatican II, stress, both to Merton's audience and to each of us, the need to challenge ourselves to change, to make our own decisions. In Mary's words, Merton, then and now, reminds us that this is a time when you have to be on your own in the sense of developing your own personal, deep, inner life because no one is going to tell you what to do. In a particular tape, Merton challenged the novices to this practice of personal decision-making. Mary quotes Merton saying on the tapes, 'If they invite you to a dance in the dining room tonight, you have to make up your mind whether it's time to leave or...' <sup>13</sup> And Mary reminded us of Merton's humor. On the same tape and subject, he said, 'If they put a turkey in front of you, you've got to decide if you're going to gnaw on it or not'.<sup>14</sup> What Mary was picking up from the tapes was Merton's realization of the excruciating pain of change. And yet Merton understood the need for change. Merton saw so much good in Vatican II and writes often of his admiration of Pope John XXIII. Mary goes on to talk about her understanding of Merton's involvement in social justice. She feels that, consciously or unconsciously, social justice issues permeate all Merton's books. 'What I love most about him is the absolute necessity for a prayer life as the fulcrum of

11. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

12. Thomas Merton, *The Straight Way* (Tape #A2812) (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, NCR). This is one of a series of audio tapes made in the 1960s of Merton's conferences with the novices and other monks of Gethsemani. The Abbot asked that these tapes be made. They were later published by Credence Cassettes.

13. Merton, *The Straight Way*.

14. Merton, *The Straight Way*.

social action. Because without prayer there are other motivations, but with prayer, action is grounded in God. That's what I've always felt. It's influenced me a lot. I am still leery of groups, even though they proclaim something that is good, if I don't get the sense that they are centered in prayer. I usually move away from such groups. I still believe, with Merton, that prayer is the essence of anything that we do'. In preparing for our discussion, Mary got excited, pulling out and thumbing through the many Merton books she possesses. She exclaimed as she concluded her comments, 'It's been a long time that I have been reading Merton... I'm going to reread (pointing to the stack she brought to the meeting) all of these!'

Rose Annette concluded the discussion of the initial question by noting, 'It's amazing how Merton continues to speak today because he was writing and speaking for his time. But you can open any of his books and it's as if he is speaking to the problems of this very day'. We all concurred.

*Each Person Has a Unique Place in the World. How Does the Contemplative Life Help a Person Manifest Self Through One's Individual Vocation/Work? Does Merton Speak to This Issue?*

One of Gerry's favorite themes from Merton is 'becoming who you are'. This idea, Gerry believes, speaks to Question Two. Gerry believes, with Merton, that if you become who you are, aided by the contemplative life, your vocation or the work you do in life will develop naturally. The contemplative spirit also leads one to social action. Conversely, if you're becoming something false, if you've living a lie, you live an illusion that is not truly you. Mary continued Gerry's thought, recalling a book by Merton, *Life and Holiness*,<sup>15</sup> that has as a subtitle, 'Merton's practical guide to holiness in the work-a-day world'. Mary agreed with Gerry that 'it is through prayer that we get to know ourselves, and it is this authenticity that we bring to wherever we are. The more I authenticate myself, the more value I place on the people in my life. I am able to honor their uniqueness and their individuality. Without verbally expressing this to them, the manner in which I treat other persons affirms the value of their existence, the deeper value they have that may be beyond their awareness. Merton's writings, in *Life and Holiness* and elsewhere, contain lots of references to this spark. Once we get the spark, we spread the kind of life affirmation that I have described above'.

Larry, the dentist husband of Joanne, who placed the Merton prayer cards in her guest bedrooms, believes Centering Prayer and contempla-

15. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963).

tion help to stabilize him in his life and work. 'A lot of times, when there is a lot of work going on — dentistry can get pretty heavy and tedious — I seem to notice a difference if I do Centering Prayer. I have a close friend who sat next to me all through dental school. He told me, out of the blue, that when he has a rough morning at the office, he goes home, finds a quiet spot, centers himself, and then comes back and does so much better the rest of the day. So I think Centering Prayer, the contemplative life, psychologically, physically, and psychosomatically, helps a person in his or her work'.

Fred recalled a book that fit the general thrust of this question. *Secular Sanctity*, by Fr Ed Hays (founder of Shantivanam) was written to help people form a new and dynamic spirituality in the midst of our secular, urban world.<sup>16</sup> This book contains many ideas that speak to our question but the one Fred especially liked was Ed's symbol for meditation — dragonfly sitting. In our overactive lives, to grow, like a dragonfly, we need to just sit! To quote Ed, 'When a dragonfly sits, it sits. Its attention is focused on the act of perching on the end of a stick — not upon future flights, its past adventures or some exciting or unpleasant encounter with another dragonfly. My point is, unlike humans, a dragonfly simply sits'.<sup>17</sup> Or, as Merton might say, *just centers!* Fred remembered an experience of his wife, Carol. Carol has meditated since she and Fred studied transcendental meditation many years ago. Carol says she is determined to do transcendental meditation until she has recouped her investment in the lessons, one penny per meditation. She has exceeded her goal! She related to Fred that meditation, which she does twice a day, helps her teach her first-grade class. She believes it is the key to life. When she doesn't meditate, she feels a lack in her life.

Fred seemed to remember, and asked, 'Doesn't Merton have a little book on "How to Meditate?"' Rose remembered it, a very early work, a little pamphlet. [We believe this is *What Is Contemplation?*<sup>18</sup>] Rose said, however, that 'Merton, as a rule, doesn't go so much into technique. He goes more into the spirit of meditation to induce you, to invite you to want to center, to contemplate'. Gerry recalled that Merton sent the prayer, 'Lord, I don't know where I'm going...', to Abdul Aziz, an Islamic professor who asked Merton what Catholic prayer was like. But Merton did not want anyone to know he had done this. Merton was against giving people techniques of prayer. As Gerry expressed this secrecy, 'This was a big sacred for Merton!' Gerry said that when people

16. Edward Hays, *Secular Sanctity* (Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Books, 1984).

17. Hays, *Secular Sanctity*, p. 100. (Quotation used with permission of publisher.)

18. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1981).



would write to Merton and ask, 'How should I pray?' he would say flatly, 'Your prayer is from yourself, from within you, and uniquely your own. If I put a little formula out there, that's against the spirit of what I want to do'. We were lucky that he published even the little pamphlet mentioned above. Rose reminded us of all the Merton prayers published later in Jonathan Montaldo's little book, *Dialogues with Silence*,<sup>19</sup> but also agreed with Gerry that Merton was not one to teach someone 'techniques of prayer'. Rose noted that we have a similar example in the Gospels. They are filled with the words of Jesus but, except for the 'Our Father', we do not find much on 'how to pray'. I guess the lesson is to learn to pray from the *examples* of both Thomas Merton and Jesus. Mary remembered a book by Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*,<sup>20</sup> in which Pennington recalled the conversation Gerry mentioned above between Merton and Abdul Aziz. Merton said to Abdul Aziz, 'I don't talk about my prayer' and then described how he walks in the woods and centers.

*Did Merton Influence the Role of Meditation and Contemplative Prayer in the Life Of Lay Persons?*

This question was partially answered in our responses to Question Two. Merton certainly has influenced the role of meditation and contemplative prayer in the members of our group. As we will discuss in a later question, the words and idea, 'to center', come from Merton. Gerry began by focusing on the 'lay person' part of the question. He remembered reading Eldridge Cleaver's book, *Soul on Ice*,<sup>21</sup> in secondary school and the high praise Cleaver had for Thomas Merton. As Gerry paraphrased him, Cleaver said, 'Here was a brother who definitely knew what was going on!' Richard held up a book of Merton essays<sup>20</sup> and noted that they were from a variety of sources, for example, *America* magazine, a Baptist student publication (remember when Merton used to have groups of Baptists at Gethsemani) and others, all from or directed to lay persons. Rose recalled the makeup of the persons who used to visit Merton. They were not all monks by any means but included many lay men and woman, Catholic and non-Catholic, such as Joan Baez, his artist, architect and poet friends, Victor Hammer, the African-American 'Colonel Hawks', whose restaurant Merton would

19. Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

20. M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

21. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

occasionally visit in Bardstown, and many, many others. They would influence him and in turn would influence his writing.

Merton's many conversations, inside and outside the monastery, led Larry to wonder if Merton kept breaking the vow of silence. With Rose's help, we reached the conclusion that the Trappists take the vow of stability, not silence. Stability was important in order that, unlike the itinerant monks of the Middle Ages, the Trappists would not go roaming all over the place and become a burden on the greater community. In summing up this topic, we conceded our lack of expertise in Benedictine vows. Once Merton had that deeper sense of God, it didn't bother him to be out of the monastery speaking with lay people. It wasn't a distraction for him anymore. Gerry thought, and Rose concurred, that the experience at 4<sup>th</sup> and Walnut in Louisville was a breakthrough in this regard. Mary loved that event. She said of Merton's experience, 'I want to feel like that!' The group breathed a gathering-wide, YES.

Tom entered the conversation here. 'Something struck me when we were reading through *The Intimate Merton* [the group had just completed a discussion of this book!]. The more Merton sought silence, the more he immersed himself in his hermitage, staying first for a few hours and then getting permission to stay overnight and longer, searching for a more remote place...the more he went in that direction...the more he got involved in 'the world'. It's a kind of paradox'. Rose said it goes back to what Fred said about his life. Action/service and contemplation must always be in balance. Action and service require periods of contemplation, solitude, silence, a grounding in God. 'We see this happening in Merton's life and, as you said, Tom, the farther out he went, the farther in he had to go. We see this struggle in his life, and that's where, I think, he speaks to lay people'. Rose noted that people in religious life can more readily find places for quiet and solitude. But the lay person has to struggle to find quiet environments. It helps that someone of the stature of Merton had the same struggle.

Larry brought in a related issue, the many forms of secular meditation practices used today and their effects on our lives. 'Techniques like Dr Benson's 'relaxation response'<sup>22</sup>—I don't know where these techniques were developed, perhaps from people like Merton or transcendental meditation—are not in the spiritual realm but have positive psychological and physical effects. When one does Centering, concentration on one's breath, the practice lowers your heart rate, your metabolism, and has lots of other positive effects. In the same way, when we are receiving spiritual help through Centering Prayer, we are also getting the other

22. Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: Avon Books, 2001).

physical and psychological effects along with the spiritual'. Joanne concurred: 'Mind, body and spirit go together!'

*Did Merton Influence Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, and Others Who Helped Enable the Present Interest of the Laity in Contemplation?*

The people of Denver, the members of our small group included, have been blessed with the influence of many Merton devotees. We have been helped in our Merton development, especially, by Mary Luke Tobin, who celebrated 75 years of life as a Sister of Loretto on 8 December 2002, Rose Annette Liddell, the leader of our small group and also a Sister of Loretto, Joachim Viens, Fr Tom Nelson, CM, the monks of Snowmass Monastery, especially Thomas (Keating) and Theophane, and the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange. The Center for Contemplative Living (Contemplative Outreach of Colorado), begun here by Thomas Keating and Sr Bernadette Teasdale, SCL, has been influential in the lives of hundreds of Coloradoans, of all faith persuasions, for over 20 years. Mary Luke (Tobin) helped start the St Paul United Methodist Church Sunday evenings of Buddhist Christian meditation and sharing. These, and other influences, have enabled the spirituality and active present interest in and practice of contemplation by the laity of Colorado.

Did Merton influence these people and movements and others in the Denver and greater community? Fred was working in adult education at the Catholic archdiocese when Thomas Keating started Contemplative Outreach in Denver. He asked about Merton's influence on this movement. Rose said that it is very great. 'The reason Keating and Pennington called their technique 'Centering Prayer' was because of a phrase Merton used. Earlier, Gerry talked of Merton's correspondence with the Sufi scholar, Abdul Aziz. In a letter to Abdul Aziz, when asked how he prayed, Merton responded, 'this is how I pray, to center'. Keating and Pennington picked this up. They were members of the same Trappist community in Massachusetts and both knew Merton personally. They developed the whole Centering Prayer movement out of Merton's phrase, but also out of Merton's writings as well'.

Fred commented that he had earlier mentioned a book by Ed Hays. Ed was a formative influence in Fred's life. Fred was also greatly influenced by Teilhard de Chardin. 'Teilhard held the insight that the Spirit is in all creation moving all forward to the Omega point. If we don't listen to the Spirit, quietly, we're never going to hear where we're supposed to go'. Fred thinks Ed Hays was influenced by Merton and that Merton was probably influenced by Teilhard. Rose confirmed the Merton-Teilhard connection. Fred said that Ed Hays and Teilhard converge, for him, in Merton.

Mary believes Richard Rohr was influenced by Merton. Helen noted '...the influence of Merton on James Finley, specifically *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*,<sup>23</sup> one's search for God through awareness of the true self, and all the other Merton influences which Finley integrates into his work. Finley has influenced many lay people through his writings and retreats'. Richard has the printed version of the complete teachings of Thomas Keating on centering prayer, transcripts of Keating's tapes. In the fourth volume of *The Spiritual Journey*<sup>24</sup> by Keating, there is an entire section on the life and historical context of Thomas Merton that includes the following connection when explaining the contemplative dimension of centering prayer: 'For Merton, the passionate quest of his life was union with God, and to find ways, through his writing on contemplation, to somehow awaken the seeds of contemplation in others. Again and again the monk shared his own prayer life'.<sup>25</sup> This speaks, too, to Question Three and Merton's influence on the contemplative life of lay persons today. Keating is trying to emphasize the importance of contemplation and meditation in all of our lives and uses Merton to emphasize their importance. Richard included an interesting quote, that came at the end of *The Spiritual Journey's* section on Merton, that shows again the balance between prayer and action in Merton: 'He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to live, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contention of his own obsession, aggressiveness, and his ego-centered ambition'.<sup>26</sup> Richard summarized: 'Obviously Fr Keating was influenced by Thomas Merton because he ends this last, and most spiritual, volume of his tapes with this quote'.

Building on the preceding quote from Merton, Joanne wondered 'what would happen if, worldwide, in every corner of the earth, everybody just stopped and put themselves in the presence of God, or whatever they believe in. I'm wondering if it wouldn't do something phenomenal'. Gerry remembered that when Yitzhak Rabin died, the whole country of Israel just stopped. Joanne continued, 'Put their weapons down and... could we organize that?' Mary added that 'somewhere in Merton is the idea that when we pray, we pray and they pray...it's that unity...and

23. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).

24. Thomas Keating, OCSO, *The Spiritual Journey*. IV. *Contemplation, the Divine Therapy* (Snowmass, CO: St Benedict Monastery, 1992).

25. Keating, *Contemplation, the Divine Therapy*, p. 77.

26. Keating, *Contemplation, the Divine Therapy*, p. 77.

that comes from Merton'. Mary continued to talk of how Merton held so much of this in tension. 'Look at where he could go...the world...in some of his writings he was uttering things about Vietnam and saying this would happen...in the late '60s on his tapes...and then he would say something like, 'I need to go to the dentist before all of this'. That was his continuation, and it goes back to the sense that not everyone is informed but the whole spirit is happening, and I think the centers of contemplative prayer are like that too...Gethsemani and all the other little sets...to me it's consoling that when 'we pray, they pray''. To affirm this, Fred paraphrased a wonderful statement of Gandhi's that he had read recently, 'If 25% of the world meditated, we would have peace'.

*Does Merton Address the Value of Group Meditation? In your Experience, What is the Added Benefit of Meditating with a Group?*

Fred said he asked this question because he and Carol have such good experiences at Shantivanam. At Shantivanam, group meditation is held three times a day, in the morning before breakfast, just before the noon meal, and before dinner. 'There is a marked affect on me at those times'. Fred said that it is easier for him to meditate in a group. He recalled that Contemplative Outreach (Centering Prayer movement) uses groups, there being one at Fred's church each Tuesday evening. Fred said that it takes away the strain of watching the clock and maybe that's what helps. Fred believes that 'In a group it's more than individual, there is a synergy that exists'. Fred said that he wasn't sure whether Merton or the Trappist monks appreciated this value but knows that Thomas Keating does encourage it. Larry recalled his family's experience with transcendental meditation, a movement once very popular in the United States. Larry, Joanne and their six children all attended transcendental meditation classes. The program started everyone out in a quite large group. 'It did seem a lot more effective when we were with a group. I don't know if there was something going on...maybe for the reasons you cited, Fred. It was a controlled situation. You didn't have to pay attention to how long you were doing it'. Larry's brother, Don, led Larry to transcendental meditation and the rest of the family followed. 'We were supposed to come back for periodic group sessions. These helped to reinforce you'.

Rose then tied group meditation to the foundation of some of Merton's own thought on contemplative prayer. 'Actually, a lot of Merton's thought was derived from Buddhist meditation. In the Buddhist countries, the meditation often takes place in the monastery with the monks, and the laity can go there and pray with the monks. I believe Merton got the idea for the sitting meditation and breathing and so forth from the Buddhists and then developed it so that it would lead to contemplation.

Merton added the theistic, the idea of the presence of God, in meditation, whereas in transcendental meditation and in Buddhist sitting meditation, they do not advocate anything about the divine. Within the Christian tradition, meditation leads you to an awareness of God. I don't know that Merton advocated group meditation. That was a later development that came out of his practice of and talking about how important quiet, solitude and sitting were for the development of contemplation. I think the idea of group meditation for Christians came out of his thought rather than being something he actually did'.

Fred reminded the gathering of the nature of the period during which Merton developed his thought on meditation and contemplative prayer. Before the '60s, Vatican II and the opening of awareness in the West of Eastern practices, very few lay people meditated, much less in groups. Gerry added that the prayer life of Roman Catholics then was mostly limited to private, set prayers and liturgical practices such as the Mass, the rosary, holy hours and benediction. Rose added that even in religious communities of the time, what they were calling meditation was quite different from the present practice. 'Someone would read a sentence or two, and you were supposed to think about that, and then they would read out another sentence or two, and then you thought about that, and then, eventually, they would say, 'colloquy', and that was supposed to be your prayer...and that was that...and they called that meditation'.

Helen, who was also in the convent, said she got so tired of that approach. 'It just seemed that there must be something more in the sense of less activity and less thought, resting in God, which is what Centering Prayer really is'. Helen told of her Centering Prayer group. She and Richard join this group each week except the third Wednesday when they attend the Taizé prayer service at a Presbyterian church. Both are group meditation experiences. The Taizé service begins with a half hour of quiet followed by the Taizé prayer. Helen believes '...there is definitely something special about praying in a group—'where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I'—there is a power in the silence when everybody is trying to rest in God and not constantly turn their minds'. Rose added, 'There is an energy, wouldn't you say?' Helen agreed and continued, '...you can feel a presence, an energy. I do much better praying, centering, in a group than by myself'. Gerry mentioned a group that meets at Regis University each Thursday evening. The first half hour is silence followed by one half-hour of discussion about the peace and war issues of the day. 'I'm sure the silence helps the second half of conversation'. Mary recalled the ecumenical group which meets on Sunday afternoons at the United Methodist church. Mary Luke Tobin

introduced Mary to this service and Mary still uses the handout that she received at the service. 'The service is part Christian, part Buddhist and is setup so beautifully. You start out with the motivation that you are really sitting there, not just for yourself, and that feeling goes through the whole service'. The handout Mary received at her first Buddhist-Christian service is so worn from use that she can barely read the print. This merging of East and West, in a group setting, had a significant impact upon her.

*This Question Came from Richard, a Former Episcopalian Who Was Introduced to Merton Through a Small Book on Contemplation. What Was Merton's Influence on Non-Catholic Lay Persons?*

Richard began our response by stating, 'Was I the only non-Catholic lay person in the group?' We jokingly reassured him, 'Yes!' Richard continued. 'I was first introduced to Merton in 1965 in Houston. The *New Seeds of Contemplation* was on the side table of the guest room where I was staying. At the time, I hadn't been to church for 10 years. I read the cover of *New Seeds* and thought of 'seeds' and 'planting', and my attention was drawn to read the entire book. That happened in '65, 37 years ago. I became an Episcopalian in '68. As a result of reading *New Seeds*, in '74, almost 9 years later I joined a small group at St Matthew's Episcopal Church in Houston. We studied and read a little book on Thomas Merton's contemplative prayer. In the group we didn't DO contemplation, we studied it. The books, however, began to open me. When I read *New Seeds* in '65, I had been a Baptist for a time and had no relationship with God or Jesus, just the 'Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep' sort of thing, no real communication. But, over the years, from that seed planning in '65, my prayer life began to change, through '74 and the Houston group, and after I moved to Denver when Helen and I started our studies in Contemplative Outreach in '87 or '88. Those seeds were planted way back there 37 years ago'. It was obvious from Richard's story that his relationship with Merton helped deepen his spiritual life through the years.

Gerry said he did some homework on this question and found many non-Catholics among Merton's acquaintances. Just in Merton's books and letters one finds: Rachel Carson, James Baldwin, Boris Pasternak, James Douglas, Eldridge Cleaver, and many others. Rose said that Thich Nhat Hanh was certainly influenced by Merton, and Merton was greatly influenced by him. We have already talked several times of Merton's relationship with the Sufi scholar, Abdul Aziz. Mary said she was taught at St Mary's College by a Jewish scholar, Schlessinger. Mary found a book in which Schlessinger and Merton were conversing via the mails.

Schlessinger later converted to Catholicism. Richard, Mary's deceased husband and a non-Catholic, liked Merton. Mary said, 'I used to put Merton sayings around the house, on the refrigerator and in other places. Richard would go in for his coffee and read Merton. The people I meet and the books I read in the Twelve Step program all know or use sayings from Merton. It is amazing to me that he just grabs human beings and takes us to a level that is so comforting. I think that is why Merton is so attractive, no matter who you are'. Larry said Merton had this effect on people from the start. His first book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was at the top of the bestseller list for a while. This was unheard of in those days for a somewhat religious book.

*The Modern World Seems to Be Excessively Noisy and Busy. It Also Seems, though Some Would Dispute This, That Prior Ages Did Not Have to Deal with So Much Noise. The Dynamics of Life Are So Different Today. How Does Merton Speak to the 'Noise of the Modern World' and Does He Offer Ways to Deal with This Dis-Ease?*

We started with a catalog of noise, light and other dis-eases that plague our modern culture, specifically those that affect the members of our group living in Colorado. Rose said you almost have to go to the mountains to find quiet. To see the stars is a struggle. Some say that in 10 to 15 years we won't be able to see the Milky Way because of outdoor illumination. The same is true concerning quiet. As we speak, Denver is undergoing a seven-year major highway and light rail project through its center. This project, appropriately called TRex, often creates near unbearable noise in some of our neighborhoods. These, again, were challenges Merton struggled with, even at the monastery. At that very moment the phone rang in the room where we were meeting. Mary exclaimed, 'How appropriate, probably a telemarketer!' Much appreciative laughter followed!

Mary commented, and we all agreed, that sometimes there is no way to avoid noise and other dis-ease today, '...as when kids with boom boxes or cars with blasting stereos, zip up next to you. You think you're in Hell. You can roll the windows up but, still, it's a noisy world'. Gerry talked of sporting events where noise is a constant, especially when the action is hectic. 'Those who run these things just can't exist without noise. In theory, we should be able to have a baseball game without loud noise, but it rarely happens today'. Mary brought in television which is constant noise and tension, with increased noise and sometimes shocking images meant to draw one in during commercials. 'Commercials are so dominant that you're lucky to get 20 minutes of news in a half-hour program'. Larry, a grandfather, was sensitive to the noise bombardment



kids today are experiencing. He and Joanne were recently babysitting their grandchildren. They played the video, *Jimmy Neutron*, that was recommended for the kids. Larry, who fell asleep ten minutes into the video, said it contained one loud sound effect after another. Joanne described it as 'motion and noise'. She remarked that it is not a bad video but is illustrative of the level of noise and tense motion that is bombarding our children. Young children graduate from this to the boom box. Tom predicted that we are going to need more ear specialists in the next 20 or 30 years. Mary said the research is confirming this and Helen, a retired nurse, said the treatment of hearing disorders is a growing career field. Rose believes this constant high level of noise and activity may be a contributing factor to the presence of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in children. 'Your body has a certain rhythm, your heart, a regular electrical pulse. One's stomach has a patterned electrical movement to it. This natural rhythm is disturbed by today's constant pattern of noise'. No wonder children can't sit down and focus.

Gerry responded to the cultural dis-ease challenge by suggesting that one, today, '...must have the capacity to meditate anywhere, in a screaming subway, bus or train, on a busy street, or in a very crowded room with lots of people talking. We need to develop the skills, the capacity, to deal with the noise and not just insist on all being quiet. We need to develop an inner quiet to handle today's noise'. Larry noted that, while Merton got himself a hermitage, 'I can turn off the radio when I'm driving the car. That brings a little bit of silence'. Joanne warmly prodded him not to meditate while driving. Mary remembered some hints concerning noise offered during a retreat by Fr Theophane of Snowmass. Theophane advised that wherever you are, center. Bernadette Teasdale, director of the Center for Contemplative Living in Denver, told a group member that when she is at the airport waiting to pick someone up, she centers herself. This would be very easy to do while riding the light rail and other public transportation. Mary lives alone, and to fight noise, she doesn't put the television on unless it's absolutely necessary.

What else can we do with all this contemporary dis-ease? How do we find a way to center, to contemplate? Mary believes that people who hunger to get away from noise can find ingenious ways. Carol, Fred's first grade teacher wife, uses Mozart to quiet the students when they do desk work. Many contemporary teacher and children's books offer meditation techniques for pre-school and primary students. Fred remembered the experience of a lay man who assists Fr Keating with the 10-day intensive retreats at Snowmass. He has a little child. When the man would do Centering Prayer each morning, the child would sit quietly

with him. As noise is a given today, it is just as natural for our body and mind to seek quiet. Rose observed that animals respond to quiet. People who come to her for spiritual direction comment that 'my dog or cat come and just sit by me when I am meditating'. Animals sense that they are in a quiet time and can participate in it at their own level. Adjustment to quiet is difficult for some, especially teens and young adults. Mary said that '...my son, who is 26, comes over when I am playing mystical music. His response is, 'Oh, Mom, it just gets me nauseous'. My heart sinks. He comes from the boom era. But I leave it on. Me and the animals like it'. Tom reminded us that some of our responses to earlier questions speak to ways we can deal with today's noise and dis-ease. One suggestion is to find one's own hermitage in the midst of the noise. Rose remembered a place in *The Intimate Merton* where Merton complained of noise. It could have been hunters shooting their guns near his hermitage. Merton was conscious of noise and what means are possible to remove it from our lives. Joanne said that Larry has French doors that open to his den. 'That's how he gets away from me'. (Much laughter!) 'When our kids call for their father, I just tell them, 'he's in his cave'. And they know what that means. He's in there meditating'. Fred said the whole purpose of the sacred word in Centering Prayer is to help us get beyond the surface noise to the quiet place below. Richard added that every time you start coming back to the surface, start thinking of things, you're supposed to interject your word to bring you back to the quiet space. At some point, hopefully, you won't need the word. When someone commented, 'I've never gotten there', all agreed. Richard recalled Keating saying that you stay in your sheltered place even if an atomic bomb goes off outside. He said, 'Don't let it bother you, don't come out of it. Maybe Keating can do that!' But the sacred word does help us deal with noise and other distractions, other dis-eases, of today's world. Larry brought up '...the mantra hummed by Buddhist monks to mesmerize and hypnotize them'. 'These are the sounds of the cosmos', offered Richard. Rose said the hum, when the monks do it together, drowns out other noises, helps cut off awareness of other noises. Gerry felt this is 'like singing with the universe'. Larry said it is like the individual mantra presented to him, Joanne and their kids in transcendental meditation.

Noise, bright light, hyperactivity and other dis-eases are givens in today cultural environment. Together, we discovered some creative ways, especially the practice of Centering Prayer and the use of sacred words and other mantras, to help us deal with these dis-eases. Thomas Merton's own example of dealing with the noise in his life, and the programs that have developed out of his inspiration, especially Contemplative Outreach, have added to our list of tools. We spoke earlier of

Merton's dependence on Buddhism for some of his own contemplative practices. Merton's openness to the East and his articulation of the practices of the East, have also helped us on our path to a healthy contemplative life.

### Conclusion

We enjoyed our reflection on the theme, 'Lay Spirituality, Merton and Contemplative Life beyond the Monastery'. We are all over 40 years of age, and have other characteristics not typical of the average small group in today's society. One related question we would address to the greater Merton community is how effectively the thought and inspiration of Merton is being passed on to younger persons, especially the present and future leaders of our world, teens and young adults under 40 years of age. The unique element of Merton's influence is that he has touched each of us, individually, in response to the specific needs and issues in each of our lives. No two persons in the group met or dialogued with Merton in the same way. A common bond within the group is the practice of Centering Prayer or some other kind of meditative practice. Our use of these approaches, unfamiliar for most before Merton, has been greatly influenced by Merton and the programs that developed out of his inspiration, especially Contemplative Outreach. We use his words as prayer and have each found other ways to integrate the influence of Merton into our daily lives. We have valued his insistence on the balance between action and contemplation, and the need for all effective action to be grounded in prayer and God. This insight, if applied to our current political situation, would help bring our world out of the stance of war and closer to peace. Though Merton has not given us any specific techniques of prayer, his has been the seed that has developed into Centering Prayer, group meditation and other common contemplative practices of our day. He has also been inspirational in helping us develop ways to respond to the noise and other dis-ease of our contemporary environment. *In summary, Thomas Merton has deeply influenced each of our lives.*