

relations, race and war was of such significant concern that at one point his own order ordered him to stop writing on such issues. Fortunately, Merton did not. But were Merton's public pronouncements of such importance that he had to be murdered, as was President Kennedy, his brother Robert, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prophetic figures?

Whatever the circumstance, Merton's death did not silence him. His writings continued to be read, enhanced since the 1990s with publication of his personal journals and letters. Merton's enormous literary output continues to inspire countless readers who derive wisdom and inspiration in living a full Christian life. In a secular world at a time of unprecedented challenges engendered by climate change, global migration, social injustice and war, Merton's spirituality, monastic practices and writing matter.

Paul R. Dekar

DE WAAL, Esther, *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey*, Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023), pp. 136. ISBN 979-8-4008-00035-1 (paper) \$22.95.

Esther de Waal cautions the reader that her book *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey* "is not a book about Thomas Merton" (21). Rather, "It simply shows the succession of steps taken by one woman in trying to draw closer to God with Merton's help" (21). De Waal's book is a refreshing embrace of Merton's insistence, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!"¹ She invites us to begin alongside her, by offering her own prayerful musings along with excerpts from Merton's writings, a selection of his photographs and wisdom from earlier monastic voices and the psalms.²

Taking days or a full week away for a formal retreat may be logistically or economically difficult, but that does not mean that a retreat is out of reach. Rather, de Waal encourages her readers to recognize that "time apart is essential" and to pursue solitude in creative yet realistic ways (17). She suggests a few possibilities: "whether by setting aside perhaps an hour or so every morning for a week or alternatively one whole morning a week over a couple of months. . . . Perhaps one corner of a room can become a small place of prayer, marked out with pictures or an icon. A lighted candle is always good. Perhaps there will be some objects such as

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 43.

2. This book is a reissue of Esther de Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993), with a new Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston, accompanying the earlier Foreword by Henri Nouwen.

stones or bits of wood If it is summer there may well be a place out of doors which lends itself as a suitable secluded spot. Maybe there is a side chapel in a nearby church where it is possible for me to spend time undisturbed” (17-18). What is essential, says de Waal, is that a time of retreat provides an opportunity to “learn to be alone,” a phrase she draws from a chapter in Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*.³

In this passage, as in many others, de Waal not only conveys flexibility in practices of solitary prayer but also prompts her readers to do the work of discerning what will work for them in their particular circumstances. While cautioning against preoccupation with “techniques and methods,” she states plainly that her book “is given to help to get you started and the use you make of it must be entirely your own for this is the only way it can work in you and for you” (21).

In doing so, she echoes the humility found in Merton’s own writings, frequently in prefaces and author’s notes. For instance, in the preface of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he rejects the notion that the book should be read as a guide for “how to become a contemplative,” remarking, “One might as well write a book: ‘how to be an angel’” (NSC x). In the author’s note at the beginning of the same text, he remarks, “And so this book makes no claim to be revolutionary or even especially original. We sincerely hope it does not contain a line that is new to Christian tradition” (NSC xiv).

Yet, like Merton, she balances a recognition of the varieties of readers’ circumstances and perspectives with a commitment to convey what is “non-negotiable” in the search for solitude. She says, “To strive or to strain for results, or to feel that by now you should be getting somewhere, achieving something, is the wrong approach. It is important to be relaxed about what is happening. Time is not important” (23). De Waal is alert to the chief stumbling-block in contemplation – the tendency of what Merton calls the “false self” to get in our way. To turn a retreat into an assessment of our contemplative capabilities is to miss the point. The goal is not mastery through close alignment with a formula for successful solitude so much as it is a release of attachment to the need for spiritual achievement. Or as Merton memorably put it in *Thoughts in Solitude*, “What is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits.”⁴

Gentleness and a willingness to savor, to absorb what resonates, is the approach de Waal insists on: “The really important thing is that if any paragraph or phrase or just one single word, strikes a note, stop at that

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 80 (subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text).

4. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 14.

point, linger there, staying with what it has to say to you” (22). De Waal encourages the same approach with the photographs from Merton that she has chosen to include. One photograph accompanies each day of the retreat; the only practical difficulty is the need to flip back and forth to look at the photograph while reading the text for that day.

After recognizing the variety of approaches to retreat yet insisting on essentials in one’s approach to retreat, de Waal provides an impressive overview of Merton’s life and work before moving into the seven days of retreat. A detailed review of each day of the retreat seems antithetical to the spirit of the book and indeed to Merton’s convictions as well. Rather than summarize what spiritual insights emerge in my reading, I recommend you read and pray with this text for yourself, and see what happens. What Merton says in the author’s note about *New Seeds of Contemplation* appears to apply: “The book does not claim, either, to be a work of art. Practically anybody else with the same interests might possibly have written it much better. . . . For this is the kind of book that achieves an effect that is not and cannot be controlled by any human author. If you can bring yourself, somehow, to read it in communion with the God in Whose Presence it was written, it will interest you and you will probably draw from fruit from it, more by His grace than by the author’s efforts” (*NSC* xv).

Emma McDonald Kennedy

CANNON, Nass, Jr., *In Search of the Healing Spirit*, edited by Clare E. B. Cannon, Bryant Cannon and John Cannon (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications 2023), pp. xxi +142. ISBN 978-1-6667-5553-4 (paper) \$21.00.

In Search of the Healing Spirit is an intimate collection of essays and articles written by Dr. Nass Cannon, Jr., who was a renowned professor of medicine, philanthropist and distinguished Thomas Merton scholar. He was also a cherished member of the International Thomas Merton Society. This book was compiled, revised and published posthumously by Clare E. B. Cannon, Bryant Cannon and John Cannon, who edited the book in honor of their beloved father. The editors also added their thoughtful and heartfelt personal notes. In the Foreword, Dr. Cannon’s son John tells us about his father’s generous heart and deep Catholic faith. The book’s Introduction, written by Bryant Cannon, provides a brief biography of Dr. Cannon, touching on his altruism, his soul-searching and his deep connection with Thomas Merton. In the Afterword, Dr. Cannon’s daughter Clare offers an insightful look at the loving soul of Dr. Cannon and their beautiful father–daughter relationship.

This book introduces readers to some of Dr. Cannon’s meditations,