

“Testimony” to a Vision Shared

By Leslie Ann Kartholl

I first met Thomas Merton entirely by accident, in the clearance aisle of a local bookstore. There, stuck between the overstocked bestsellers and dog-eared used books, was a small white paperback called *New Seeds of Contemplation*. I still don't know what attracted me to it – I had never heard of Merton, and being from a decidedly Protestant upbringing, I wasn't particularly interested in monks. But I was interested in spiritual things, and for fifty cents, I figured that I couldn't lose. It turned out to be a great investment.

On the surface, a Trappist monk and a Protestant mother of two would seem to have few things in common. In a house that fairly rocks with the noise and activity of pets and children and husbands (only one, but it often seems like there are more), solitude is not something that is easy to find. I am drowned daily by the voices and energy and need that wash over me at daybreak and keep me submerged until I collapse into bed. There is little time or little room for contemplation, for losing myself in meditation, for traveling beyond the mundane world of dirty dishes and cereal boxes into the presence of God. What do I know but alarm clocks, runny noses, and wrinkled shirts? What do I know of journeying to that secret place where I can rest at the feet of God? What do I know of the cloister?

What I did know was the cloister of a good book. I started reading *New Seeds of Contemplation* on a weekend trip to the lake. I was struck by the brilliance of it all – by the pure, uncluttered honesty. Every word seemed to grab at me, to shake me, to challenge me to break camp and push on. Merton's voice rang true to me, and I felt as if I had found a friend who would lead me out of the desert.

I am no stranger to that desert – my own desert which is as hot and dry and lifeless as the Sahara. I wander like Israel, trudging up hills that slip out from beneath my feet as I go nowhere. I retrace the same footsteps, the same dunes and valleys, and I wonder why I can never seem to get out. I am distracted by mirages – those times when I think I have seen water, when I rush forward and dive in, only to find that I am swimming in hot sand. Merton's dreams and ideas were an oasis – palm trees, cool breezes and bright, sparkling water pouring from a rock.

What do a Trappist monk and a mother of two have in common? We both long for the fullness of God, for belonging completely to the One who made us. We both need to push aside the myriad things that block us from that completion. We both need to fall naked and helpless before the One who loves us – who loves *us* – not what we can do, not what we say, not what we accomplish.



Leslie Ann Kartholl

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We both need to understand the great paradox of the Christian life – that it is undeniably communal and completely personal. We both need to learn how to balance the temporal world, its relationships, its demands, with the eternal, essential reality of God. We both need to drink at the same fountain, follow the same fire, reach for the same light, and be swept along by the same spirit.

I'm no expert on Merton, and I know that some of his ideas and ideals are far beyond my scope or understanding. But that doesn't alter the fact that he changed the way that I think about my life, and my relationship to my Father. He has even changed my attitude about the desert – I have learned that its not always bad to be there, that sometimes being stuck in the desert is the only place where I can hear God clearly.

About three years ago, I heard of the opportunity to submit some artwork for an exhibit called "Testimony." The purpose of this traveling exhibit was to provide inspiration and encouragement at schools, detention centers, hospitals, churches and prisons. I was excited by the chance to be a part of this, and I immediately started working on a portrait of Thomas Merton.

Along with the painting, I composed a portrait in words that described what I saw in Thomas Merton. I entitled it "Unity":

There is a place beyond time, beyond the senses, even beyond knowledge, in which one can enter into the presence of God. It requires great sacrifice, discipline and humility to get there. It is a place where, inexplicably, the Creator and the created commune. Few are willing to "go the distance," but there are some who take the risk of losing their lives to gain His life.

This was the way Thomas Merton chose to live. He was a brilliant young man, educated in the best schools, well-read, well-traveled, with an extraordinary talent as a writer. He felt the call to give it all up – his past, his present, and seemingly his future – and to devote himself entirely to God. Merton chose the monastic life and hoped to totally withdraw himself from the world. He had dreams of living in complete solitude, with nothing and no one to interfere in his quest for the knowledge of the Almighty.

God had other plans, however. Merton was required by the religious order he joined to continue writing. He wrote about his own experiences, the contemplative life, the place where God and man meet intimately, the joy of forsaking all for Him. Through his quest for anonymity, he suddenly became famous. He said he felt as if God had pulled him out of the world and had suddenly thrown it back into his lap.

Slowly and painfully he came to the realization that God had withdrawn him from the world in order to minister to the world. He began to understand the ascetic and monastic lifestyle as a strengthening place for his own particular vocation. He learned that his rejection of the world's values was not a rejection of the world's populace. He acquired a heart of compassion, and from his cloistered walls, he reached out to the world. Merton learned: "Every other man is a piece of myself for I am a part and a member of mankind. Every Christian is part of my own body. . . . Solitude, humility, self-denial . . . none of these make sense except in relation to the central reality which is God's love. . . . Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit. . . 'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent,

a part of the main” (Thomas Merton, *No Man is An Island*).

My portrait of Merton was accepted for the exhibit and traveled for two years. On occasion, artists were asked to go to an exhibit and share with the persons who were viewing it. I had the opportunity to go to a boys’ detention center, and spent an incredible evening talking to the young men. I heard about their own experiences, people who had been a help and inspiration in their lives, their dreams for the future, their hopes beyond the locked doors and barbed wire. “Testimony” evolved into regular art instruction at the detention center and a maximum-security prison. Even though the exhibit has ended, the classes continue. I think Merton would have liked the idea of convicts with pastels and paintbrushes.

I met Merton “by accident,” but I am sure it was actually no accident at all. Fifty cents bought me a new way of thinking about God, myself, the world around me. Fifty cents gave me new hope, a desire to continue to seek God’s will for my life, and a goal to strive for in my relationship with Him. And fifty cents introduced me to a man that I wish I had had the pleasure to know beyond his writings. I think it is great testimony to Merton that, more than thirty years after his death, a non-Catholic, married woman can credit him with renewing and reviving her spiritual life. The truth that he wrote, his insights, his epiphanies, I embrace as my own, because I recognize it as the truth of God.