

Attending Nature's Festival

Review of

When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Kathleen Deignan

Drawings by John Giuliani

Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003

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Reviewed by **Wayne Simsic**

Those who identify with Thomas Merton's deep affection for the natural world have waited long for a book like this. The monk's writings, especially his journals and poetry, inspire a connection with creation and outline an eco-spirituality that has significant relevance for us today. This delightful book edited by Kathleen Deignan, with icon-like drawings by John Giuliani, answers a significant need by introducing the reader to a spiritual master who cares for and celebrates the natural world as integral to the spiritual path.

The book opens with a poignant forward by Thomas Berry proposing Thomas Merton as a guide for our profound need today to awaken to a sense of the sacred in the natural world. Without loving nature we will not save it and Merton's love shows us the way. Kathleen Deignan then sets the stage with an insightful and well rounded introductory essay. She explores Merton's intimacy with the woods as well as the influences that shaped his "natural contemplation": Benedictine monasticism, Celtic spirituality, and Zen Buddhism. She describes the paradise experience, the sense of unity Merton uncovered through Sophia, "the very love that unifies the cosmos" (39). Fittingly, she concludes with the monk's importance for a global spirituality that "reflects and fosters a new sense of the sacrality of the natural world and of human identity within it" (39).

Most of the book is dedicated to a selection of over three hundred excerpts from Merton's writings on nature, divided into the following chapters: "To Know Living Things"; "Seasons"; "Elements"; "Firmament"; "Creatures"; "Festivals"; "Presences"; and "Sanctuary." I list these not only to introduce the book but to demonstrate the multifaceted relationship this rapturous monk had with the wheeling universe. Reading through the selections I found myself drawn into an awareness of the primordial ground shared by myself and the world around me, and into a poet's sensitivity to the inscape and dynamism of matter. This will, I suspect, be the reader's experience as well, and goes far to commend Kathleen Deignan's choice of writings. She makes no attempt to include all of Merton's nature writings but ferrets out those that have deep resonance. She succeeds admirably.

The title of the book, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, aptly describes Thomas Merton's compassionate openness to the world around him. He was a contemplative whose discovery of the soul's

own light in the purifying element of silence and solitude allowed him to see that light reflected in all creation. He writes, "I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is at the center of all other loves" (171). Every so often he became a lightning rod, his entire being shivering from the shock of sheer grace. Is it surprising that he celebrates the natural world spontaneously, blesses it, and cares deeply?

This book, too, has the capacity to leave you struck with wonder, peeled open by the animated splendor of rain, mountains, air, and light; and it may leave you in love with the universe. After reading you will want to walk outside and gaze, simply gaze; renewed in the depth of your soul by awe and delight.