

## Caregivers Revisit: Merton's Waters of Siloam

By Joanne Flynn

In 1949, near the time of his ordination, Thomas Merton wrote *The Waters of Siloe*. In the Prologue he explains the title comes from Isaiah 8:6: it is a reference to the prophet's image of the waters of Siloe (Siloam) that flow in silence.<sup>1</sup> In this image, Merton extends a hand of hope to the center of each of our beings. Originally, Merton wrote *Waters* mainly for Cistercians. He hoped his fellow monks would see that they were not in a stagnant organization of rules and regulations. In a focused way, his interior sense of grace that study and conversion had brought him becomes the highlights. He cites four dimensions to convey this: grace, scripture, liturgy and community. First, grace was mentioned in relation to water around the twelfth century. "These valley monasteries developed within the Cistercian order a beautiful spiritual symbolism by their names alone . . . a simple mysticism in which the image of 'waters' and 'fountains' and 'springs' play a very important part" (*WS* 272). Some of the names were "Three Fountains"; "Beautiful Water"; "Clean Water"; "Good Water." Merton then continues by showing how St. Bernard used this water image when training his monks to read Scripture. He suggested that if they read with the eyes of faith, the scriptural events of Christ's life come to a new awareness. "Then, in the silence of deep and humble meditation they sought to penetrate the surface and slake their thirst at the springs of living water which only God could lay open to them" (*WS* 294). Third, liturgy is presented as a flowing reality through the life of the monks during the sequential season of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. This flow was both exterior and interior. Finally, in Merton's *The Waters of Siloe*, the hours of the Office along with community meals and work are presented. The early rising and the early bedtime on less than comfortable beds in community bedrooms, are also described. It is a poor, severe life style, but this has meaning in the interior for Merton. "[I]t was God's love that opened their eyes to new horizons in the interior life and replaced the gloom of the hardened ascetic with the serene, unbounded confidence of the mystic who dares to aspire to the possession of God . . . because God has first loved us more" (*WS* 289-90).

This Cistercian background is an important springboard for those of us who are in different vocations or walks of life, particularly as caregivers. In order to make this transitional application, I am going to use three water images: brook, waterfall, and well. I will use Merton's insights, as he had a "Holy Spirit Spark." This gift not only illumined the subject of prayer, but it inflamed people's hearts to act and to pray. If we are going to work for the Lord, he felt we must get close to Him, and let His Love inform our interior so that we can literally see, hear, taste and touch differently.

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**Joanne Flynn** is the director of the Siloam Institute of Prayer in Manchester, MO. She has two graduate theology degrees from St. Louis University and thirty years of prayer and research at Gethsemani and the Merton Center. Her caregiving experience includes retreats, directed Ignatian retreats, missionary experience in Bolivia, chaplaincy and newspaper editing for a prayer journal.



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### The Waters of Siloam: Brook

The first image, the brook, has been used to represent the graces of baptism that wash through our days, our hearts and our relationships. Merton expands these waters to everyone who searches in their heart for a silent union with their Supreme Being. These new waters are a prime concern to caregivers. We cannot equip ourselves professionally and forget the interior “aliveness” that sustains a caregiver over the years. We need to look at the service of care-giving as deeply as possible. It cannot exist without the “contemplative waters” that wrap around the crisis services we have chosen or are given. This work of care-giving calls for appropriate healing waters that will renew one after each unique crisis or service event. This renewal enables us to give more of a Divine Presence than an ego presence. Thus, we don’t just arrive to do a “job”; we really arrive and become a Presence.

All renewal waters have a common denominator: the Master Caregiver spends time with the “caregiver” so they can explore deeper and more sensitive ways to serve. This lifts the isolation one feels when difficult situations arise. The Lord’s presence literally teaches one to place love and tenderness in the midst of intense pain and suffering. Our abandonment is not that empty desert one used to picture; it is a close bonding with the Lord that addresses and opens up areas of concern that you could never know. The dying person, and the person in crisis’s best friend, the Lord, only knows these needs.

Merton never tries to indicate that this silence and solitude comes without pain and effort. In *Dancing in the Water of Life* he reveals: “Last night, before going to bed, [I] realized momentarily what solitude means: When the ropes are cast off and the skiff is no longer tied to land, but heads out to sea without ties, without restraints! . . . Through the cold and darkness, I hear the angelus ringing at the monastery.”<sup>2</sup> Merton calls us to a depth of interior abandonment that will bless our service gifts and our meetings with those who are in crisis. Aware caregivers have a graced sense within themselves about the needs of those they are serving. The caregivers are guided to actually become the Lord’s Presence for the person in crisis, and their own ego is set aside.

In this abandonment space, we can be present to others’ needs more vitally because we are more available to our own union with the Lord. In this deep stance Merton again says in *Dancing in the Waters of Life*: “One has to start over and receive (in meekness) a new awareness of work, time, prayer, oneself. A new tempo” (*DWL* 310). It is like finding an interior brook, a fledgling newness that bubbles out of these quiet times as an interior stream. This enlivening flow of “Spirit-Presence” brings to caregivers peace, focus and a humble sense of being called to a service truly run by the Lord. It is not always easy: “Sometimes prayer, meditation and contemplation are ‘death’ – a kind of descent into our own nothingness, a recognition of helplessness, frustration, infidelity, confusion, ignorance. . . . Then as we determine to face the hard realities of our inner life, as we recognize once again that we need to pray hard and humbly for faith, he draws us out of darkness into light.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the time when the desert of the interior finds new waters out of the hand of God. The trickle of water begins with that act of faith but it can be expanded with interior life activities such as regular, definite times of prayer, Scripture and quiet contemplative jobs that soak one in the Presence of the Lord. Adoration in silence before the Eucharist and regular mindful liturgy will also deepen our prayer. The Waters of Siloam are for all who have open hearts. If we as caregivers become abandoned at a deep, interior trust level, we will encourage those we serve who are in crisis to follow suit. We become the Word of our person. This is “eternal care-giving,” essentially needed to serve any person who is in crisis. Again, this empowers the person to go into their interior and use the suf-

fering point of their life as a task or a work. As their interior powers grow, they own their own pain. It then gives meaning to suffering, much as a brook restores new life to its bordering banks. These fledgling waters for most people are often unfelt. Merton demonstrates this in a poem he wrote, with hindsight, on his baptism – “On The Anniversary of My Baptism”:

The day You made the waters, . . .  
And made them spring with fish, . . .

When, with the sting of salt in my dry mouth, . . .  
You drowned me in the shallow font.

My eyes, swimming in unexpected infancy,  
Were far too frail for such a favor:  
They still close-kept the stone shell of their empty sepulchre:  
But, though they saw none, guessed the new-come Trinity  
That charged my sinews with His secret life. (ll. 31, 33, 37, 41-46)<sup>4</sup>

This experience of newness, freshness and flowing life within our person is truly the key hope we have to give. Once this has been realized, we no longer devalue or put down our own person or anyone else’s. As a vibrant new life has descended upon the dry desert of the interior, it washes away negativity, discouragement and most of all, hopelessness. Merton in the last days of his life puts it this way: “The contemplative life . . . should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap, stillness, but as ‘*temps vierge*’ . . . a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes – and its own presence to itself. One’s *own* time. But not dominated by one’s own ego . . . . Hence open to others – *compassionate* time.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Waters of Siloam: Waterfall**

The “decision door” of crisis is a door that we have confronted daily all of our lives. In times of difficulty, pain and frustration, we searched out in faith for the Lord’s hand. Of course, we didn’t have an apparition of him, but we attempted to turn our attention to this door with a look or a phrase, like “Lord help me!” Did we hear a voice from the clouds or see him walking towards us? No, but we created with our Creator a welcoming gesture, even though we did not feel like it. It has become a stance for many of us: “Lord, I unite at this difficult moment with the desire of your heart.” I asked Mother Theresa once, what her favorite short prayer was, and she answered me curtly and quickly: “Jesus, I love You, no matter what I am doing!” I had a few other questions for her but that answered all of them. She was saying to me, all is the Lord’s. She lived in a way that kept her focus on the Lord no matter what happened in her day, difficult or easy. Over the years I have used that approach and it has given me an almost continuous sense of a waterfall of immediate grace. These soothing waters pour through every one of our days much like an interior waterfall if we have the seeing heart to notice. Whether we have anger or anxiety or sorrow, this waterfall soothes any angst within. In our relationships and activities, we sense relief as our eyes are on the Lord first, instead of our problem. Then life seems to flow at a lighter pace, a “Spirit pace.”

Merton brings to our attention a sense of immediacy in each moment. He was aware of the “grace waterfall” wiping away falseness, giving rise to the person of Christ in our heart. This did

not happen in the spectacular, but in the ordinary roll of events and relationships in each day. If these daily realities included pain and sickness, Merton called for interior acts of acceptance. This will give us a way to transform pain into growth, and hopefully, in the process, we will see the road to our true self. In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, he wrote: “[T]o be awake, [one] has to accept vulnerability and death not for their own sake. Not out of stoicism or despair – only for the sake of the invulnerable inner reality which we cannot recognize (which we can only *be*) but to which we awaken only when we see the unreality of our vulnerable shell. The discovery of this inner self is an act and affirmation of solitude.”<sup>6</sup>

Union with the Lord is not an apparition. It is a wrestling, struggling, raw act of faith. When our gut wants to run for cover due to the pressure of pain or apprehension, we bring the temptation to the desert and to the only one that can deal with it – the Lord. On days like this, I often look over at actual water fountains. I pray that the healing waters flow over the situation and over my interior. And even if I feel nothing, I know the Lord’s Spirit has touched the situation. The fourteenth-century prayer called the “*Anima Christi*” (Soul of Christ) (loved by St. Ignatius and translated by Cardinal Newman), sets the believer below the cross saying: “Blood of Christ, inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Permit me never to be separated from you.”

Merton puts it this way: “I will give you my will for you to cleanse and rinse off all this clay. . . . I want to give myself to You without solicitude, without fear or desire, not seeking words or silence, work or rest, light or darkness, company or solitude. For I will know I possess all things if I am empty of all things, and only You can at once empty me of all things and fill me with Yourself, the Life of all that lives and the Being in Whom everything exists.”<sup>7</sup> Whether we are under the daily waterfall of events or picturing ourselves being washed and blessed by the water and blood flowing from the cross, hopefully we can say thank you with a deeper awareness. In a book edited by Czeslaw Milosz, the poet Kenneth Rexroth pictures through his memory a life waterfall like this:

I think of those who have loved me,  
Of all the mountains I have climbed.  
Of all the seas I have swam in,  
My own sin and trouble fall away,  
Like Christian’s bundle, and I watch  
My summers fall like falling  
Leaves and falling water held  
Eternally in summer air.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Waters of Siloam: Well**

Finally, in the image of the well, we see the deeper, broader dimensions. While studying Merton, I came across “reading notes” done by Merton while he was studying the work of Dr. Reza Arasteh. Arasteh had attended the University of Tehran and Louisiana State University and worked with Eric Fromm and C. G. Jung. Merton admired and corresponded with him about healing neurosis. Arasteh was not just interested in the healing of neurosis that results in a person finding a useful role in society. He wanted to go deeper. In Merton’s book, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, there is a chapter titled “Final Integration” that draws on Arasteh’s material. He talks about a cosmic dimension that uses seconds, minutes, hours, days, pains and illnesses as ways into dimensions of deep change: “‘to live with his illness rather than cure it,’ particularly if the general atmosphere of

the society is unhealthy because of its overemphasis on cerebral, acquisitive forms of ego-affirmation. . . . In fact, in many cases, psychoanalysis has become a technique for making people conform to a society that prevents them from growing and developing as they should. . . . The energies that might otherwise go into productive or even revolutionary change are driven into stagnant backwaters of frustration and self pity. People are not only made ill, but they prefer to be ill."<sup>9</sup>

We have a definition of a functioning human being that just does not fit the circumstances of serious illness or of dying. We have built up an ego pride in our activities that places us in the "useful" categories of mankind. Arasteh suggests that the most important periods of life could be dull moments or painful, suffering moments that occur in sickness and dying. The issue is not how insignificant a moment or how difficult a circumstance. The issue is clearly: how do we use whatever comes to us for change, deepening and refocusing? How do we welcome life experience as a direct door to the Lord? In a similar vein, Dr. Ira Progoff, in all of his worldwide journaling workshops, suggests that each of us has a deep well that we are invited to go down. It is much like the waters Christ talks about to the Samaritan women at the well. Drink of these waters, and your life will rise unto eternal life. At this quiet depth, we can see through to new ways of sensitive and loving service. *Contemplation in a World of Action* describes it this way: "This new being is entirely personal, original, creative, unique, and it transcends the limits imposed by social convention and prejudice. Birth on this higher level is an imperative necessity for man" (*CWA* 210).

The image of a well translates daily minutes, both pleasant and unpleasant, into "steps down" into deeper waters. There are moments of invitation that brings us to our true uniqueness and integrity. This is the stuff that saints are made of, or rather, it is the essential glue that brings a Christian caregiver together in their person. Again in *Contemplation in a World of Action* Merton says: "Final integration implies the void, poverty and nonaction which leave one entirely docile to the 'Spirit' and hence a potential instrument for unusual creativity" (*CWA* 212). So we are not talking about "no exit"; we are talking about service in an area in which new life is the key factor both for the caregiver and the person in crisis. "The process of disintegration and reintegration is one that involves a terrible interior solitude . . . a crisis and an anguish which cannot be analyzed or intellectualized. It also requires a solitary fortitude far beyond the ordinary, 'an act of courage related to the root of all existence'" (*CWA* 214). Moment by moment we go deeper into the mystery of life and uncreated light, yet we do not create uniqueness that separates. On the contrary, at these levels of human experience, we realize that there are common waters at the deepest points where we share common images, symbols and myths. It is a transcultural point in time that weeds out temptations to isolation. The simple minute opens doors to new dimensions into the present and new insights into Eternity. And most of all, "It is a darkness illuminated by joy and by the presence of the Lord, all the more joyous precisely because the night brings Him nearer and unites us to Him more intimately than any light."<sup>10</sup>

In a concluding word from Merton, we hear how to penetrate silence:

The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths

of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949) xxix; subsequent references will be cited as "WS" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 200; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 40.
4. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 157.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 262.
6. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 15.
7. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 49.
8. Kenneth Rexroth, "Signature of All Things," in Czeslaw Milosz, ed., *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996) 144.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 208-209; subsequent references will be cited as "CWA" parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 151.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 173.