

The Dynamics of Discernment in the Life of Thomas Merton

By Susan Rakoczy, IHM

There are many “Thomas Mertons”: poet, monk, spiritual writer, hermit, student of world religions, social critic, prophet of monastic renewal, literary essayist. For Merton, these many “selves” were often in conflict with one another. His entire life was a process of discernment – seeking God’s will for him – through reflection and prayer on his religious and psychological experience. In the broadest sense, discernment is an experience of faith and prayer in which a person or community seeks to understand and interpret the movements, feelings, desires and attractions within one’s heart in order to see where the Spirit of God is leading.¹ Merton’s life was a profound search for God, climaxing a few days before he died in December 1968 when as he gazed at some statues of the Buddha in Sri Lanka, he said he had found what he was looking for.²

This article traces the many pathways of discernment in Merton’s life, beginning with his youth and conversion and his discernment of his Trappist vocation which, while it gave him stability, did not end the continuing questions of his life. Can he be a monk and a writer? Where should he live his monastic vocation? How can his desire for solitude be realized? How can he relate to the “world” he thought he rejected when he became a Cistercian? His dynamic of the “true self” and the “false self” is the basis of Merton’s spirituality of discernment: to be his “true self” in God.

Early Life

In his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton asserts that he was born as “the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness” (*SSM* 3). He was baptized in the Anglican Church but this did not “loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul” (*SSM* 5). His mother Ruth died of stomach cancer when he was six, writing him a letter from the hospital saying that “she was about to die, and would never see me again. . . . And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me.” It had “something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief” (*SSM* 14). He carried this sorrow throughout his life. Robert E. Dagg comments that “he never forgave her for not telling him in person that she was dying. It left deep scars in young Tom, and the pain was to emerge in different ways for the rest of his life.”³

From his grandfather, “Pop” Jenkins, he received a “hatred and suspicion of Catholics” – “the deep, almost subconscious aversion from the vague and evil thing, which I called Catholicism” (*SSM* 26) and by the time he was nine he “was becoming more and more positively averse to the thought of any religion” (*SSM* 27). When he was ten he went to France with his father Owen, who “told me to pray, to ask God to help us, to help him paint, to help him have a

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successful exhibition, to find us a place to live” (SSM 33). Merton felt that his only valuable religious and moral training came from his father – “not systematically, but here and there . . . if something spiritual was on his mind, it came out more or less naturally” (SSM 53). Later in England he attended Anglican schools, Ripley Court, followed by Oakham. The Anglican ethos was not helpful to his religious development and he recalled that it “was strong enough in me to blur and naturalize all that might have been supernatural in my attraction to pray and to love God” (SSM 66). His father died of brain cancer when Tom was 15. Merton observed his father drawing icon figures when he visited him in the hospital; his father told him to pray. When his father died he said that “There was nothing I seemed to be able to grasp” (SSM 84).

With the money his father had left him and a generous allowance from his grandfather Merton explored Europe on his own. He travelled to Italy and in Rome he was attracted by the churches and moved by seeing people pray. But he felt very self-conscious when he tried to pray himself. Now Merton was free to do what he wanted but he later recognized that it was a false freedom since there was no room for God. He was a twentieth-century man who was “living on the doorsill of the Apocalypse, . . . full of poison, living in death” (SSM 85).

He won a scholarship to Clare College in Cambridge but it was a disastrous year of drinking and sex and he apparently fathered a child. His guardian sent him to the United States where he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English at Columbia University in New York and made very good friends, such as Robert Lax, who remained friends all his life. However, as he was developing into a gifted writer, religion and spiritual experience were not part of his life.

Conversion and Becoming a Catholic

In February 1937 Merton saw the book *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson in the window of Scribner’s Bookshop in Manhattan. He was attracted by the title but later disgusted by seeing that the book had an *imprimatur*, a sign that Church authorities had approved it, and he almost threw the book out the window of the train (see SSM 171). He had admired Catholic culture but had “always been afraid of the Catholic Church” (SSM 172). But Gilson’s book helped him to discover an entirely new concept of God: God is Being Itself. He had never had an adequate notion of what Christians meant by God; but now he “at once acquired an immense respect for Catholic philosophy and for the Catholic faith” (SSM 175). Merton now had a great desire to go to church and began to attend services at the Zion Episcopal Church, where his father had once played the organ. Oriental mysticism also interested him. He was attracted by the Quakers but “was drawn much more imperatively to the Catholic Church” (SSM 206). The Hindu monk Bramachari, who was visiting New York City, encouraged him to immerse himself in his own tradition and read Augustine’s *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ* (see SSM 198).

By August 1938 the urge to “Go to Mass! Go to Mass!” emerged as a “firm, growing interior conviction of what I needed to do” (SSM 206). One Sunday he went to the 11 a.m. Mass at Corpus Christi Parish near Columbia and was moved by the sermon, but he left at the Consecration with the sense that he didn’t belong there. But he later wrote that walking around New York that day he was happy and that “All I know is that I walked in a new world” (SSM 211). One evening in September 1938 he suddenly left his apartment and went to see Father George Barry Ford at Corpus Christi and told him that he wanted to become a Catholic. On November 16 of that year he was conditionally baptized and received his First Communion. He realized that God had found him: “And He called out to me

from His own immense depths” (*SSM* 225). Thus the first discernment experience for Merton was about faith: who was he, who was God, where was he to live this experience? Answer: as a Catholic.

Discernment as a New Catholic

Even before he was baptized, he was already wondering if he should become a priest. But what kind of priest? His initial plans to join the Franciscan Order were abortive. The Franciscan life which he observed at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, New York, the hometown of his closest friend Robert Lax, appealed to him: a scholarly life, teaching and writing, not too ascetic. But the priest he talked to said he could not be accepted, evidently because Merton told him about the child he had fathered in England. He was bitterly disappointed and decided to live as pious layman, getting a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure and buying and regularly reading the four Latin volumes of the breviary which priests prayed each day.

Dan Walsh, one of his professors at Columbia, had made a retreat at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky and suggested that Merton do likewise. He went to the abbey for a Holy Week retreat in 1941, and in his journal wrote of how profoundly he had been moved: “This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery – not only this one: there must be others. . . . This is the only real city in America – and it is by itself, in the wilderness.”⁴ He had found what he was looking for, but could he be a Trappist? On April 18 he wrote: “wished I were going to stay – wished I were able to do so” (*SJ* 204).

His discernment reflections included whether he “would be able to stand the discipline all my life” but said that the question doesn’t make sense because “you will be given strength to stand *anything* by the Holy Ghost and you have perfect hope in this” (*RM* 399). That summer he volunteered for two weeks at Friendship House in Harlem, which had been founded by Baroness Catherine de Hueck for direct service to the poor as a place of interracial justice. This led to more questions: should he live there? Could he be a writer there? She told him he could “write for the poor” but he was unsettled. At the beginning of November he wrote, “But why do I ask myself questions, all the time, about what I ought to be doing?” (*RM* 445). His discernment process was very complicated. He was a writer; could he – should he – write as a Trappist? A central theme of his attraction to the Trappists was that he would “give up *everything*” (*RM* 456). He realized that “Whatever this vocation is, it involves a whole different attitude to the future. A sense of calm. A sense that I am going to do something hard, murderous to my pride and my senses. That it doesn’t make much sense to fear it or love it, but that I must refer everything to God” (*RM* 447).

Merton weighed up the options: Harlem or the Trappists: “Going to Harlem doesn’t seem like anything special – it is good, and is a reasonable way to follow Christ: but going to the Trappists is exciting and fills me with awe, and desire: I return to the idea ‘Give up *everything* – *everything*!’ and that means something” (*RM* 456). He spoke with Father Philotheus Boehner, one of the Franciscan priests at St. Bonaventure, who said he did not see any canonical impediment to entering the Trappists and advised him to go to Gethsemani and talk to the abbot. He asked Merton about his vocation as a writer and Merton replied, “That one has absolutely no meaning any more, as soon as he has said what he has said” (*RM* 458). Given the trajectory of his Trappist life as a writer this is a statement of great irony. As he reflected on his discernment process he realized that “I am most impressed with the fact that here I have been praying to find out His will and stopping myself from finding it out

mostly by my own stupidity and stubbornness, which are both connected with this absurd idea of self-reliance and self-dependence which was going to be my greatest strength and turned out to be my biggest handicap” (RM 458).

At this point World War II intruded on his determination to go to Gethsemani. He had been given a lower draft status because of dental problems and had applied to be classified as a non-combatant conscientious objector.⁵ On December 2 he received a second notice from the draft board to present himself for another physical. Now Merton felt the urgency of going to the monastery immediately, and he wrote that after the notice he had “*confidence* in the vocation!” (RM 467) since he desired “to belong *entirely* to Thee!” (RM 469). Merton entered Gethsemani on December 10, 1941 and died exactly twenty-seven years later in Bangkok, Thailand.

Trappist Life: The Questions Continue

Merton had no real problems with the demanding ascetic penitential life at Gethsemani: fasting, disturbed sleep, hard manual labour, silence except when speaking to superiors or confessors. Perhaps he was doing both conscious and unconscious penance for his past life. The outward signs of his Cistercian vocation and commitment were at first like those of anyone entering monastic life. After his novitiate he made his simple vows on March 19, 1944 and his solemn vows three years later in 1947. He was ordained a priest on May 26, 1949. But Merton’s monastic life was to be anything but ordinary.

Merton’s search for God’s will was never-ending, and one of the first questions he confronted was how to reconcile his monastic vocation with his writer self. When she heard that Merton was entering Gethsemani, Naomi Burton, his literary agent, lamented: “What a terrible thing. He will never write again.”⁶ An untrue prophecy indeed! His superiors recognized his gifts and set him to work writing biographies of Trappist saints.⁷ He complied out of obedience but felt the interior conflict acutely: who is he? Trappist? writer? a Trappist writer? In *Seven Storey Mountain* he describes this dilemma:

By this time I should have been delivered of any problems about my true identity. I had already made my simple profession. And my vows should have divested me of the last shreds of any special identity. But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister. . . . I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. . . . He is supposed to be dead. . . . I can’t get rid of him. . . . And the worst of it is, he has my superiors on his side. . . . Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die. . . . There are the days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation – my contemplative vocation – but a few ashes. And everybody calmly tells me: “Writing is your vocation.” (SSM 410)

Paradoxically, he discovered that his writing and his desire for solitude were not actually in conflict. In his journal entry of July 20, 1949 he admits:

At the same time I am finding myself forced to admit that my lamentations about my writing job have been foolish. At the moment the writing is the one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude. Also I find that it helps me to pray because, when I pause at my work, I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clean and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found, without hunting, as if He had come close to me while I was writing and I

had not observed His coming. And this I think should be the cause of great joy, and to me it is. The thing that upsets me is answering letters. There God is *not* found.⁸

Thus Merton gradually realized that he was not two persons: monk and writer – or writer and monk – but one: a monk who writes, a writer who is a monk. To deny either vocation was to try to split his call to respond to God’s summons to be his true self.

Where to Live His Vocation?

While Merton was certain about his contemplative monastic vocation, from the late 1940s through 1959, when he was definitively told he should not leave Gethsemani, he writes often in his journals about other possibilities. Should he become a member of the Carthusians, hermits with limited community life? or a Camaldolese, a Benedictine order of hermits? Should he leave Gethsemani and live a hermit life in Mexico or in Tortola in the British West Indies? How was he to resolve this question which seemed never to leave him? His inner vocation was the call to solitude. Throughout his writings there are many reflections on this sense of call.

On February 17, 1947, while he was preparing to make his solemn vows on March 19, he wrote: it seemed to me that these vows will mean the renunciation of the pure contemplative life. If Jesus wants me to be here at Gethsemani, as my Superiors insist He does . . . then perhaps He does not want me to be a pure contemplative after all. . . . Perhaps this is not the most perfect vocation in the Church, *per se*. Well, what about it? It seems to be my vocation. . . . But how can it be my vocation if I have such a strong desire for some other vocation? (*ES* 39)

On February 20 the abbot tells him “that this was where I belonged” (*ES* 40). But in his journal on August 15 of the same year, five months after he taken solemn vows, he writes about a novice who leaves to become a Carthusian: “It is like having something stuck into my heart. . . . What am I waiting for? Is it that I just haven’t the courage to do it or what? Am I afraid of having to argue about it? What is the matter anyway?” He prays to Mary: “Lead me into solitude. Take me wherever I belong” (*ES* 98-99). Merton begins to recognize the depth of his own vocation: “To me contemplation means solitude and the need to be alone and in silence burns me up from day to day” (*ES* 99). Michael Mott, Merton’s biographer, comments that “When Merton speaks of solitude in the 1940s, he often means privacy. When he speaks of contemplation, he often means concentration.”⁹

Writing on July 20, 1949, Merton regrets his desire to withdraw from Gethsemani. It was a poor monastery at that time and had few priests: “And the thought that I have wanted to withdraw myself from all this by my own choice began to appall me” (*ES* 337). He recognized that “I do not belong to myself. . . . If I went from here to the Carthusians *merely* because it was my own choice, merely because I preferred to be there rather than here I don’t think it would be the way to please God” (*ES* 338).

The Questions Continue

But the questions continued. In October 1952 he was considering transferring to the Camaldolese,¹⁰ who at that time did not have a foundation in the United States so he would have had to move to Italy: “What am I certain of? If it was merely a question of satisfying my own desires and aspirations,

I would leave for Camaldoli in ten minutes. Yet it is *not* merely a question of satisfying my own desires. On the contrary: there is one thing holding me at Gethsemani. And that is the Cross.”¹¹ In 1959 there were the possibilities to go to Cuernavaca in Mexico and later to Tortola, a small island in the British Virgin Islands. He described the decision in discernment language: “to act and pray as if it were the Will of God for me . . . to think in those terms, to pray earnestly for the grace and the guidance I need” (SS 279). Reflecting on his life at Gethsemani, where he had already been given permission for periods of solitude at “St. Anne’s,” an old tool shed, he wrote on June 21: “If I am asked the question – what do I really want to do?” the answer is what he has been doing: “The long hours of quiet in the woods, reading a little, meditating a lot, walking up and down in the pine needles in bare feet. If what I am looking for is more of that – why not just ask for ‘more of that’?” (SS 296).

The invitation to Tortola led to more dramatic statements as he wrote on June 30: “The thing that strikes me is the *reality* of the whole thing. It is *not* a dream, but sober, practical truth. . . . This is something that *really* sounds like the Gospel, and at the same time solitude and *real* ‘separation from the world’” (SS 299). A few days later he is ready to leave Gethsemani for Tortola: “It became clear to me that, as far as I can now see, God wants me to throw everything overboard, forget doubts and anxieties and, trusting in Him, go to Tortola. Or at least ask for the exclaustation to go there” (SS 300). But the question of moving elsewhere is resolved in December of that year when he received a letter from two cardinals in Rome who state categorically that he must not leave. Merton’s response is compliant obedience: “The letter is obviously an indication of God’s Will and I accept it fully. So then what? Nothing. . . . Actually, what it comes down to is that I shall certainly have solitude but only by miracle and not at all by my own contriving” (SS 359). But what Merton wanted was not only the interior solitude that the letter told him he would find, but also a life of external solitude.

Desire for Solitude

The central discernment question of Merton’s monastic life was how to respond to his call to both interior and exterior solitude and to find practical ways to realize this vocation. The call to solitude emerged early in his monastic life. In 1947 he understood God saying to him:

I will give you what you desire, I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot possibly understand, because I want it to be the quickest way. . . . And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you will begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. . . . Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be You will not know until you are in it. (SSM 422)

In December 1952 he writes that he needs solitude “for the salvation of my soul” but “Not solitude for the sake of something special, something exalted: solitude as the climate in which I can simply be what I am meant to be, and living in the presence of the living God” (SS 27). A few years later, in 1958, after he realized that the invitations to Cuernavaca and Tortola were not his call, he wrote that he was not ready for solitude: “I was not ready for it in 1955 when I agitated for it so wildly. I am not ready for it now” (SS 242). He was clear about the meaning of his call to solitude: “The big reasons

for solitude: the true perspectives – leaving the ‘world’ – even the monastic world with its business, vanities, superficiality. . . . Solitude – witness to Christ – emptiness” (*SS* 350). In 1961 it was for him “not as a luxury but as a necessity.”¹² As he began to respond to the problems of the world of the 1960s he also realized that he was not called to “solitude for its own sake, as a withdrawal, a refuge: but for the sake of understanding, wisdom, widening necessarily a certain commitment” (*TTW* 8).

Call to the Hermit Life

Merton’s desire for a life of solitude was clear. He became the first hermit at Gethsemani and is credited with reviving the “vocation within a vocation” of hermits within the Trappist Order. Becoming a hermit took a number of years until he became a “full-time” hermit in August 1965. Step by step small periods of solitude became possible. On June 27, 1949 Merton unexpectedly received permission to go out of the enclosure into the woods by himself. He wandered around the area past the enclosure. He wrote, “As soon as I get away from people the Presence of God invades me. And when I am not divided by being with strangers (in a sense anyone I live with will always remain a stranger), I am with Christ” (*ES* 328). On December 29, 1952 he decided to ask the abbot to be allowed to live as a hermit, there or elsewhere, at the end of three years. Joy and consolation surged within him: “The new decision makes me feel the way I felt when I finally made up my mind to become a Catholic” (*SS* 27). In January 1953 he was given permission to spend time at a tool shed which he named “St. Anne’s” (see *SS* 29).

Over the next few years a hermit life evolved. By December 1960 he was spending afternoons in “St. Mary of Carmel” – a cement-block bungalow build as a retreat center about a mile from the monastery. He wrote on December 10: “Real silence. Real solitude. Peace. . . . After having thought for ten years of building a hermitage, and thought of the ten places where one might be built, now *having built* one in the best place, I cannot believe it. It is nevertheless real – if anything is real. In it everything becomes unreal. Just silence, sky, trees” (*TTW* 73). Gradually he spent more time there, and as of October 13, 1964¹³ was allowed to sleep overnight occasionally, until August 20, 1965 when the hermitage became his permanent residence. Here he found himself, his true self, and many journal entries clearly reflect his sense of wholeness. On July 28, 1965 he writes that he is “intended” for solitude (*DWL* 276). In June 1966 he muses: “Why do I live alone? I don’t know. . . . I cannot have enough of the hours of silence when nothing happens. When the clouds go by. When the trees say nothing. When the birds sing.”¹⁴ However, even though Merton delighted in the solitude he was also very famous and so a steady stream of visitors – friends, ecumenical guests, social activists such as Daniel Berrigan – came for discussions and retreats. Merton was a “social hermit.”

Merton, Solitude and the World

Merton had been happy to leave “the world” in December 1941: New York, jazz, drink, sex, his friends. Gradually he realized that what he despised in the world were his own feelings that he had projected on it.¹⁵ On August 14, 1948 he made his first trip outside the monastery since he entered: “Going into Louisville the other day I wasn’t struck by anything particular. Although I felt completely alienated from everything in the world and all its activity, I did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people who were walking around. On the whole they seemed to me more real than they ever had before, and more worth sympathizing with” (*ES* 223). In 1951 he wrote of a new sense of perspective of his relationship to the world:

Actually, I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place, I will be wasting my time in the monastery. . . . Coming to the monastery has been, for me, exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. (*ES* 451)

In March, 1958, while standing on a street corner in Louisville waiting for the light to change, Merton experienced a powerful grace of experiencing his unity with people:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: “Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others. (*CGB* 140-41)¹⁶

This profound sense of solidarity with humanity became the foundation of his writing as a contemplative critic on the social issues of his day. In the 1960s, Merton had begun to write on racism.¹⁷ Throughout that decade, he added his voice in opposition to the war in Vietnam and wrote on peace and non-violence,¹⁸ seeking through his writings to give his solitude a social meaning for the world. Some devoted Merton readers were upset and scandalized that he was writing about issues that they thought had no connection with the “spiritual life.” But many more people welcomed Merton’s voice which gave activists courage to protest U.S. policies. Merton wrote of the link he was living between his cherished solitude and his sense of engagement with the world. In December 1960 he wrote, “My solitude belongs to society and to God” (*TTW* 74).

Merton also read widely in the sacred texts of world religions, particularly Buddhism. A Buddhist insight reflects his growing sense of the unity of solitude and compassion for the world. In June 1968 he wrote, “What impresses me most at this reading of Santideva is not only the emphasis on solitude but the idea of solitude as part of the clarification which includes living for others: dissolution of the self in ‘belonging to everyone’ and regarding everyone’s suffering as one’s own.”¹⁹

A Discernment Crossroads: Falling in Love

In March, 1966 Merton had a back operation and was cared for by a young student nurse, who is referred to as M. in his published journal. They fell in love and in the next few months exchanged many letters, talked on the phone and had a few visits which they treasured. They both had commitments: she was engaged (her fiancé was a soldier in Vietnam) and he was a monk. They discussed marriage. This experience was his first truly adult love experience with a woman; as a young man he had used women sexually although he had a few close women friends such as Ginny Burton. But for him this

was real love. After striving for years to shape his monastic life into one of solitude, he was confronted with a stark choice: solitude or marriage? During a few weeks in the summer of 1966 their relationship deepened and his discernment questions became every more painful. He reflected on his solitude in relation to M.: “The great question, the baffling one now, is in what way my solitude is still ‘open’ and ‘available’ to M. . . . If God has brought her into my life and if God has willed our love, then it is more His affair than ours” (*LL* 312). On the one hand he wrote, “I love her completely, as I have never loved anyone in my life” but he also said, “I don’t really want married life anyway. I want the life I have vowed” (*LL* 81). He feared losing his solitude and though it was so painful, ended the relationship under the orders of his abbot. On June 17 he was forbidden to contact her, although the leave-taking took a while longer.

In retrospect later in the year he describes his relationship with M. in terms of his vocation:

How evident it becomes now that this whole thing with M. was, in fact, an attempt to escape the demands of my vocation. Not conscious, certainly. But a substitution of human love (and erotic love after all) for a special covenant of loneliness and solitude which is the very heart of my vocation. I did not stand the test at all – but allowed that whole essence to be questioned and tried to change it. And could not see I was doing this. Fortunately God’s grace protected me from the worst errors. (*LL* 155)

In July, 1967 he wrote, “Now I no longer look back on it with longing and desire, but just with embarrassment.” But he also said, “I recognize that it had a lot of good points because it brought out the things that had to come out and be recognized. . . . Keeping to the woods was what saved me” (*LL* 260).

Sri Lanka Experience: Completion

Throughout his monastic life Merton received many invitations to give talks and attend conferences. His abbot limited him to attending a meeting on psychiatry and religious life in Minnesota in 1956 and visiting the Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki in New York in 1964. But in 1968, under a new abbot, he was finally able to travel to Asia and immerse himself for a short while in the cultures of the religions he had studied for so many years. On December 1 he was in Sri Lanka (then named Ceylon) and he visited the shrine at Polonnaruwa to view immense statues of the Buddha. As he walked around them he had a profound experience of awakening:

Looking at these figures, I was suddenly, almost forcibly jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. . . . I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise (*OSM* 323; *AJ* 233-36)

What did he mean? Had he found what he was searching for in Buddhism? Or was this a deeper awakening to reality, to things as they really are? He had now gone beyond the surface, the disguises

which tantalize but do not fulfill. We will never know for certain because he died of an accidental electrocution a few days later, on December 10, at a monastic conference outside Bangkok.

Merton's Experience in Relation to Discernment

Merton spent his whole life searching for his true self – and discovered that solitude was the place where it could grow. Merton does not present a set of principles or a process or guidelines for discernment. Instead, he invites persons to ponder the question: who is my true self, and how does my false self limit my response to God's grace so that my true self can grow? In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton describes the true self. The language is evocative and paradoxical:

A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It "consents," so to speak, to His creative love. . . . But what about you? What about me? Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be individual men. For us, holiness is more than humanity. . . . For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please.²⁰

Merton was aware that this is a very complicated process since becoming one's true self is intertwined by the reality of the "false self . . . who wants to exist . . . outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion" (*NSC* 34). Merton struggled with becoming his true self, always with the assistance of his abbots, especially James Fox, who was able to help Merton disentangle his complicated desires: monk, writer, solitary – or solitary monastic writer. His false self basked in the praise for his writing, his fame, his high status in the monastery since he held important positions, his unique solitary vocation. Living into our true self demands work, hard work:

Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. . . . To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity. . . . *The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God's will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity.* (*NSC* 32-33)

Merton's life was a tangled process of discernment of how to live his monastic vocation in solitude. His own experience is very clear when he writes: "A man knows when he has found his vocation when he stops thinking about how to live and begins to live. Thus, if one is called to be a solitary, he will stop wondering how he is to live and start living peacefully only when he is in solitude."²¹ He had already learned this in theory in April 1942, only a few months after entering Gethsemani: "it meant going by the way you know not, to get what you can't know. Every time you forget that, and every time you think you know where you are going, you are no longer living for God alone, for we only go to Him in darkness of self-denial, by the way we do not know" (*ES* 11).

For Merton, discernment was an apophatic experience, of going by a path he didn't know, even as his desire for solitude grew ever clearer. His "Prayer of Discernment" is the clearest articulation in his writings of this dark path:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (*TS* 83)

Robert Waldron notes that in *Seeds of Contemplation*, as well as the later revised *New Seeds*, “Merton is preoccupied with the idea of false and true self because in the early stages of his career as monk/writer there was a tendency among his readers to canonize the young monk.”²²

Merton’s Lived Interpretation of Discernment

The Christian tradition of discernment places great emphasis on being aware of one’s desires. This is especially seen in the writings of Teresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola. Teresa encourages persons to have “great desires”²³ and in the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius instructs the person to “ask God our Lord for what I want and desire”²⁴ in the second prelude of each meditation. The life of Thomas Merton, lived in the Benedictine monastic tradition, demonstrates how his awareness of his desires, especially his desire for solitude, was the dynamic of his discernment experience. Merton teaches that discernment begins with the awareness of what one wants and challenges the person to distinguish whether these desires emanate from the true or false self. The true self lives in the peace of Christ; the false self allures but does not satisfy the deepest desires of the heart. It is in seeking and finding the peace of Christ, which is the bedrock of all discernment processes, that persons find their true self in God. Merton’s compassionate engagement with the problems of his time also demonstrates that the true self is an engaged self who acts for the good of others and that of the world. Merton’s life in its unique trajectory from his birth in France during World War I to twenty-seven years of monastic life to his early death in 1968 presents us with a valuable contribution to the Christian tradition of discernment. Going by a path that emerged year by year he discovered that his true self was found only in God. Nothing else mattered.

1. The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola present the clearest interpretation of discernment in the Christian tradition. As a Cistercian Merton was formed in Benedictine monastic spirituality, although before he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani he tried to make the *Exercises* on his own. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 268-73; subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233-36; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Robert E. Daggy, “Thomas Merton and the Search for Owen Merton,” *The Vision of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003) 30.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959) 183; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text. See also Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 333; subsequent references will be cited as “*RM*” parenthetically in the text.

5. See Thomas Merton, "Application for Conscientious Objector Status – March 1941," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 24-29; *SSM* 311-13; *RM* 316-17.
6. Personal conversation with Naomi Burton Stone, late 1970s; see also Paul Wilkes, "Remembering Naomi Remembering Tom: An Interview with Naomi Burton Stone," *The Merton Seasonal* 30.1 (Spring 2005) 13.
7. The collection of early biographical sketches was finally published some seven decades later as Thomas Merton, *In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2013).
8. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 338; subsequent references will be cited as "ES" parenthetically in the text.
9. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 216.
10. On this struggle see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).
11. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 20; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.
12. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 86; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
13. See 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) 153; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
14. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 341; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.
15. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 47-48; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.
16. For the original journal entry of this life-changing experience of March 18, 1958, see *Search for Solitude* 181-82.
17. See the essays on this topic collected in Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-90 and in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 119-86.
18. In early 1962 Merton was forbidden to publish on war and peace and much of his important work in this area was only published many years after his death: see Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) and Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); Merton circulated mimeographed copies of both these volumes, thus circumventing the ban on publishing. Materials on war and peace published during his lifetime are found in *Seeds of Destruction* 93-183 and *Faith and Violence* 1-118.
19. 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) 135; subsequent references will be cited as "OSM" parenthetically in the text.
20. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 29, 31; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" in the text.
21. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 87; subsequent references will be cited as "TS" parenthetically in the text.
22. Robert G. Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1994) 73.
23. See Teresa of Avila, *Life* 8.5, 13.2, 19.2, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976) 67, 112-13, 122.
24. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elisabeth Meier Tetlow (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) #48; this is repeated in various phrasings throughout the meditations.