The Exterior Silence of the Forest – Merton's Guidance for Environmentalists

By **Carol Lenox**

It has been almost sixty years since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*,[1] a book widely credited with starting the modern environmental movement. In December 1962, three months after its release, Thomas Merton noted in his journal: "I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Carson, on what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons."[2] In the years since the release of *Silent Spring*, great strides have been made in understanding the detrimental effects that human activity is having on natural systems. But despite all that has been accomplished, we seem to have made little progress in establishing a beneficial, less destructive relationship between humans and the natural world.

In 2017, as the United States started the process of pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, our local ITMS chapter began reading *The Hidden Ground of Love*, a collection of letters that Merton exchanged with a wide variety of friends.[3] In many of those letters he addressed current issues of his day, becoming very vocal in speaking out for nonviolence and peace. As I read through his letters, I found that his words, especially as he pondered his place in the peace movement, could offer guidance to those discouraged and angered by the situation we find ourselves in with respect to the environmental problems of today.

Writing about his response to Carson's book, Merton stated, "Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about *both* birds and people. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together" (*TTW* 274). In a subsequent letter to Rachel Carson, Merton spoke of a consistent pattern in the way an affluent society such as ours mentally processes things which inevitably leads "to despair in the midst of 'plenty' and 'happiness.'"[4] The same societal problems that Merton addresses in his letters still exist today. We are inundated by "the pressures and prejudices" speaking to us through the media (*WF* 6). We have leaders who "waste time and create confusion" over issues that are not what are most important in building a just and peaceful society (*HGL* 175). And in our fast-paced lives, we get caught up in protests and resistance campaigns where we have no time to do much more than "echo one another's noise" (*WF* 52). We don't have time to formulate our own ideas or listen respectfully to others. As Merton saw it even back then, both conservatives and progressives exhibit intolerance and arrogance in their approach to people with different views.[5] He wrote to W. H. Ferry that the thing that most blocks effective thinking and discussion is when we

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get caught up in being identified with a particular set of opinions (see *HGL* 209). It can cause us to lose a willingness to engage those with whom we do not agree. Merton told Daniel Berrigan, "When the communication by word and reason stops entirely, then we're in trouble" (*HGL* 90). When we are unable to have meaningful dialogue, we are unable to address critical issues.

The monetary and technological success of our society is another area of concern. In effect, we are replacing the wisdom that comes from a deep interior connection to God with a false wisdom based on the knowledge gained from technological progress. In our quest for affluence, our increased abilities end up serving the profit system, which has profound negative effects on the natural world. Merton pointed out that when a choice has to be made between profit and the common good, "it is almost invariably made in the way that brings a quick return on somebody's investment – and a permanent disaster for everybody else."[6] This obsession with profit has led us to view nature in terms of resources for use, whether for our energy, our food or simply our recreation activities. As a result, we no longer pay attention to the damage that our lifestyle inflicts.

So I found in Merton's letters constant reminders that our society is very adept at distracting us from the things that really matter, keeping us in conflict with those with whom we disagree, and driving us towards the relentless pursuit of progress. And in this state, as Merton says, we are destroying everything. In one of his Cold War Letters, Merton counsels us: "One of our great problems is to see clearly what we have to resist" (*HGL* 325). More importantly, though, Merton's writings indicate that it is not enough just to understand what we must resist. We need to find a path to a more interior life in intimate connection with all created reality. In Merton's letter to Rachel Carson, he points to our inability to see that we exist in a web of interconnectedness:

> The whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a "paradise" of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them. Man's vocation was to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye in the body. . . . But man has lost his "sight" and is blundering around aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God. (*WF* 71)

There is a need for a recovery of sight, a new consciousness of our being part of the greater community of created beings in which we are the eyes through which creation knows itself and celebrates itself. Pope Francis tells us that the ecological crisis is "a summons to profound interior conversion."[7] We are called to a change in consciousness in which we move from a "use" relationship with the natural world to one of communion. Thomas Berry wrote that efforts to fix our environmental problems through technology are ultimately futile as long as we view the natural world as primarily for human use. He says that a "deep psychic change" is needed, and that ultimately "only our sense of the sacred will save us."[8]

Merton's writings offer us the witness of his own journey into the sense of the sacred through his time in the woods of Kentucky, where the trees, the deer and the birds became part of his worship. In a letter to Miguel Grinberg, Merton offers an example of the effect the natural world had on him: "Sun rises in mist with thousands of very soft explosions and I am entirely

splashed with designs coming through the holes in the lace wall of trees. Everything in the world is transparent. The ferocities of mankind mean nothing to the hope of light. . . . The new consciousness will keep awakening. I know it."[9] He wrote that letter in October 1966, over a year after he moved permanently to his hermitage on the property at Gethsemani. Is it possible that he was moved to such profound hope in the development of human consciousness by his immersion in the woods? His quiet presence to the natural world intensified the Presence of God within him, and he sensed ever greater the Presence in everything around him. In a letter to Susan Chapulis, Merton commented that when one is quiet "you suddenly realize that everything is extremely beautiful and that just by being quiet you can almost sense that God is right there not only with you but even in you."[10] Merton's combination of silence and nature was the starting point for his worship. He came to a deeper sense of inner peace. He writes: "when you get saturated with silence and landscape, then you need an interior work, psalms, scripture, meditation. But first the saturation. How much of this is simply a restoration of one's normal human balance?" (*TTW* 327).

For Merton, this "saturation" was not just a means for maintaining balance, but it also was a necessary part of his work in the peace movement. In December 1965, in the midst of conflict over the actions of a young member of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, Merton wrote in a letter to Sergius Bolshakoff:

> Too many people think that the Christian conscience in social affairs needs to be expressing itself by all kinds of active demonstrations, and an infinite number of petitions and declarations. . . . But I am at peace in the forest here in any case, and I see more and more that there is but one thing necessary. The exterior silence of the forest makes interior silence at once imperative and easy. (*HGL* 106)

In the depths of silence in the natural world, we enter more deeply into the sacredness of all things, and as we nurture interior silence, we are able to sustain our sense of being one with God and with all of creation, and our own work in the world is transformed.

We are dependent on the earth, on its beauty, its awe and wonder, for this transformation. In his journal, Merton speaks of paying attention to the sacredness of the sunrise. He says, "Clear realization that I must begin with these first elements. That it is absurd to inquire after my function in the world, or whether I have one, as long as I am not first of all alive and awake" (*TTW* 123). Primatologist and environmental champion Dr. Jane Goodall stated in her spiritual memoir: "Time spent in the forest, following and watching and simply being with the chimpanzees, has always sustained the inner core of my being";[11] and she further reflects: "When I was away from Gombe and plunged into the developed world I found it harder to sense the presence of God. I had not learned, then, to keep the peace of the forest within" (85). Thomas Berry wanted us to realize that "the devastation we are bringing on our outer world is devastating our inner world."[12] He reminded us that "if we lose the birds we lose our souls in a sense. We lose one of the most wonderful experiences in our imagination that gives us a sense of flight, a sense of song, and a sense of mystery."[13] Relationship with the earth expands the mind, restores the soul and develops the imagination. Out of this, creativity and meaningful action arises.

Merton had his own particular landscape in which his contemplative life could flourish. The

living world around him nurtured his inner life. It allowed him to see in ways he had never seen what it means to live as a part of creation. He wrote that the freedom he found in his hermitage was available to everyone. He said: "It is not limited to places. Yet solitude, these pines, this mist, are the chosen locus of freedom in my own life."[14] He might ask us: "Do you truly know the particular place in which you live? Do you recognize the songs of the birds or notice when the first flowers bloom in the spring?"

We don't all have the woods of Kentucky to enter into solitude, but we can find our own place of connection with the natural world. How can we truly experience the landscape in which we live so we can deepen our connectedness to all that surrounds us? Merton's writings suggest that before we find our own unique action in the world, we must first immerse ourselves in the silence of our own landscape. But Merton also tells us that life is "meant to be at the same time profoundly contemplative and rich in active work."[15] He would not ask us to abandon effective actions and simply go live in the woods. Yes, one should write letters to your congressman, and one should participate in peaceful protest, but do these things from a place of being profoundly connected to the natural world. He would ask us to enter into a state of receptivity to what our own "place" offers, and from that place of connection we will know how we are meant to engage in work on the part of protecting the earth and all its living beings.

On April 22, 2017, as we were just beginning to read through Merton's letters, the first March for Science took place in Washington, DC and around the country. A friend and colleague traveled with her two young sons to participate in the march. On the train ride up, her son Marco made a sign showing a meteor headed towards the earth that read: "The dinosaurs never saw it coming. What's our excuse?" Marco is particularly sensitive to what is happening to the world around us. He sees and grieves the devastating effects that we are having on the natural world. Reading Merton's letters and journal entries, I began to envision a letter that he might have sent to Marco to offer him guidance. Pulling sentences (with some slight adjustments here and there) from various letters and a few journal entries, this is what I imagine Merton might say:

> Dear Marco,
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> I, too, am growing more and more disturbed by the events and the psychology of the United States. The mentality of this country and its blindness grow more and more disturbing [*HGL* 182]. People are fed on myths, they are stuffed up to the eyes with illusions. They *can't* think straight. They have a modicum of good will, and some of them have a whole lot of it, but with the mental bombardment everybody lives under, it is just not possible to see straight, no matter where you are looking [*HGL* 295].
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> The world we live in has become an awful void, a desecrated sanctuary, reflecting outwardly the emptiness and blindness of the hearts of men who have gone crazy with their love for money and power and with pride in their technology [*HGL* 45]. I believe that we are facing the consequences of several centuries of more and more abstract thinking, more and more unreality in our grasp of values. We have reached such a condition that now we are unable to

appreciate the meaning of being alive, of being able to think, to make decisions, to love. And the logical consequence is to destroy everything [*HGL* 311]. Unless we realize the moral and spiritual roots of the problem, our best efforts to solve it in a positive and human way are bound to be meaningless [*WF* 41].

There are everywhere movements which more and more seem to be simply evasions. Collective evasions, with an enormous amount of publicity and false front, with great numbers of speeches and conferences and publications and no one knows what else. And little or no interior fruit, simply a multiplication of addicts and proselytes [*HGL* 128]. The great problem we need to address is inner change. We must not be so obsessed with details of policy that we block the deeper development in other people and in ourselves [*HGL* 262].

For your own part, you must find out where you stand and what you can do in the world [*HGL* 396]. Certainly there must be some provocative witness [*HGL* 292]. You ought certainly to write your congressman, and in order to do this intelligibly you have the obligation to form your conscience by intelligent reading and even some study of the questions [*WF* 63]. For we have an obligation to speak out insofar as we are able, and to speak as clearly, as forthrightly and as uncompromisingly as we can [*HGL* 347].

But do not underestimate the power of quiet time spent in the exterior silence of the natural world. This is just another way of saying that there are many, many unexplored aspects of resistance and of witness [*WF* 48-49]. We are perhaps too talkative, too activistic. Our service of God does not consist only in talking and doing. It can also consist in periods of silence, listening and waiting. Perhaps it is very important, in our era of violence and unrest, to rediscover meditation and silent inner prayer [*LL* 39]. For example, this morning on the hermitage grounds I took time to feel the brilliancy of the rising sun getting into my own blood. This is man's mission! The earth cannot *feel* all this. We must. By living away from the earth and the trees, we fail them. We are absent from the wedding feast.[16]

I can tell you that in reality life is good and a wonderful gift, and that the more you put into it the better it is. You must grow up to be free, and truth loving, and sincere all the way with yourself and others. Don't live on illusions. You don't have to, reality is right there in front of you, and it is better than any illusion. Learn to love the land, the forests, the plains, and you will naturally do everything you can to preserve it in its richness and beauty. We need young men and women like you to dedicate themselves to this [*RJ* 330]. Make a better world than we have handed on to you [*RJ* 349].

1. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
2. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274; subsequent references will be cited as "*TTW*" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985); subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 71; subsequent references will be cited as "*WF*" parenthetically in the text.
5. See 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) 137.
6. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 105.
7. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015) 217.
8. Thomas Berry, Foreword to Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003) 18-19.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 204.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 350; subsequent references will be cited as "*RJ*" parenthetically in the text.
11. Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Warner Books, 1999) 169.
12. Thomas Berry, "The Emergent Universe: Our Sacred Story" (Lecture, Loyola University New Orleans, 20 January 1996).
13. Thomas Berry, "Ministry Context Interview with Kathleen O'Gorman" (Interview, Loyola University New Orleans, Spring 1998).
14. 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) 276.
15. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 177; subsequent references will be cited as "*LL*" parenthetically in the text.
16. See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 19.