Journeying with Merton in the "New Normal"

By **Judith Valente**

During the 2020 months of restricted travel and social distancing, I went on a literary voyage. It was a journey I shared with Thomas Merton – re-reading writings of his with which I was familiar and discovering others that were new to me. Though I had read before this passage from the Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton now seemed to be speaking to me personally from beyond time and the grave and addressing the struggles so many of us were experiencing:

> Therefore, most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to the One who lives and speaks in both.[1]

Who can say what the many crises we faced in 2020 ultimately might mean, I found myself asking. How are they speaking to me, to all of us?

A few months into the pandemic, Dr. Laura Weber, associate director of the Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center in Iowa, wrote that she had started referring to the crisis not as a pandemic, but as a *pan-deepening*, an opportunity for interior reflection.[2] The phrase resonated with something Merton had expressed in the Fifties in a passage from *The Search for Solitude*: expect "the deepening of this life we already possess," he wrote. "Be content."[3] When I had to cut back on my social interactions – going to the gym, to the theater, museums, traveling, eating out – Merton reminded me to consider being alone with myself as neither a burden nor a luxury, but a necessity. "There are times, then, when in order to keep ourselves in existence at all we simply have to sit back for a while and do nothing," he writes in *No Man Is an Island*. "And for a man who has let himself be drowned completely out of himself by activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform: and often it is quite beyond his power."[4]

For someone like myself who is usually running around trying to complete five things at once, the time of "sitting back for a while" offered an opportunity to take a hard look at my life, to ask, who am I really? What have I become? Where is God leading me? Questions Merton grappled with his entire life. He had

Judith Valente

Judith Valente is a former on-air correspondent for PBS-TV and former staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal*. She is the author of several spirituality titles including *How to Be: A Monk & A Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer, Forgiveness & Friendship* and *The Art of Pausing*, both co-written with Paul Quenon, OCSO, as well as *How to Live: What The Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us about Happiness, Meaning and Community*, the memoir *Atchison Blue* and two collections of poetry. She is a lay associate of Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchison, KS. She lives with her husband, retired Illinois Judge Charles Reynard, in Normal, Illinois.

warned many times that we can become trapped in a false self – the image we create for ourselves or that others have created for us. We start walking in the shoes of the self we think we should be without ever getting to know who we really are. I found these words of his from *The Seven Storey Mountain* particularly piercing: "The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of other men! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in somebody else's imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real."[5]

For many of us, the "pan-deepening" became not only a time to take a hard look at our individual lives, but also to reexamine the society we live in. The crisis laid bare longstanding cracks in our social structure, such as income inequality, a health care system that favors the wealthy (as seen by the disproportionate number of deaths from Covid-19 in our African American, Latino and Native American communities) and a banking structure that left many small-business owners shut out in the first round of government loans. We continue even now to hear about the need to "keep the economy moving," "to get students back into the classroom," "to bring life back to normal." But what kind of economy do we want? What kind of "normal" do we desire? Or is it something new we need to seek?

In his time, Merton was appalled by our American fixation with creature comforts. He targeted for criticism three pillars of American culture: marketing, consumerism and technology. "We live in a society," he wrote, "whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest" (*SSM* 133). Such a criticism seems particularly apt at a time when many of us have had to distinguish to a much greater degree our needs versus our wants. Merton describes walking into a drug store and being stupefied to find a dozen different kinds of toothpaste.[6] He said it was as though each different package contained a secret ingredient. What would he think of the 40 or 50 different kinds of toothpaste he'd find on the shelves today? What would he make of our Walmarts, Costcos and Sam's Clubs?

This spring, there was buying hysteria when meat-processing plants started to shut down because so many workers were becoming sick from COVID-19. Former President Donald Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to force the plants to stay open. The Trappists forgo meat every day, but God forbid the rest of us should go without our hamburgers, fried chicken and steak. I contrast this mindset with Merton's memorable description of preparing a simple bowl of oatmeal on a camping stove, and toasting a piece of bread in a log fire at his hermitage:

> I came up here from the monastery last night, sloshing through the cornfield, said Vespers, and put some oatmeal on the Coleman stove for supper. It boiled over while I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread at the log fire. . . . The rain surrounded the whole cabin . . . . Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody . . . . the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself.[7]

Merton wrote that he only ate one full meal a day at the monastery, and then made a bowl

of oatmeal or a sandwich at the hermitage in the evening.[8] It wasn't totally an austerity measure on his part. He also confessed to hating to do dishes, which was at least one reason why he ate so modestly.

Still, Merton, in his hermitage, was onto something. I often think someone could enter my house and steal the majority of gadgets I own or some of the food from the refrigerator, or cans from the kitchen cabinets and I probably wouldn't miss the half of them. That is the sad reality of our abundant consumer lives.

It wasn't only consumerism that Merton felt had a stranglehold on our society. He considered the dehumanizing potential of technology a threat as well. He never learned to drive a car[9] and claimed he had never watched television,[10] so what would Merton think of our 445 basic cable channels, or Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, email and cell phones that keep us "on call" anywhere in the world at any moment? Certainly, social media and other means of communications technology are not inherently evil. I don't believe Merton would argue that either. During the pandemic, Skype, Zoom and Facetime have provided lifelines for families and friends unable to meet in person. It is the *amount* of time we spend with this technology – binge-watching Netflix, reading the news on cell phones and typing on our computers – that is the issue. How many hours do we spend on devices? How many Zoom meetings and Skype calls do we have in a week? Merton would ask: is it all necessary?

What disturbed Merton was the potential for technology to reduce the individual to a nameless cog in a vast impersonal system. His words in a 1964 letter to the moral theologian Bernard Häring are even more relevant today:

> the whole massive complex of technology, which reaches into every aspect of social life today, implies a huge organization of which no one is really in control, and which dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even of reason. Technology now has reasons entirely its own which do not necessarily take into account the needs of man . . . . I am not of course saying that technology is "bad" and that progress is something to be feared. But I am saying that behind the cloak of specious myths about technology and progress, there seems to be at work a vast uncontrolled power which is leading man where he does not want to go in spite of himself. (*HGL* 383-84)

The critical reckoning on race we are facing as a nation is yet another area where Merton's words resonate. The more I read Merton on race, the more I see how prescient those writings are. The unrest didn't begin last May with the suffocation death of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. Before George Floyd, there was Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, an unarmed 25-year-old black man who was chased and shot by white men while he was jogging in a residential neighborhood. There was Breonna Taylor, gunned down in her Louisville apartment less than an hour's drive from Merton's abbey in a police raid that probably should never have occurred in the first place.

We know the rest of story – the protests that erupted across the country and the world that harken back to those that Merton witnessed during the civil rights struggles of the sixties. As in Merton's time, some of those marches devolved into violence and destruction. Merton understood

this reaction. In a 1964 letter to Robert Lawrence Williams, an African-American tenor who wanted to put to music some of Merton's poems, he wrote: "The big problem you run into in dealing with white people is that . . . they aren't black, and because they aren't, they don't know what it feels like and they are not able to enter into the experience except abstractly. Hence they may have good intentions, but these will lead nowhere or will peter out. There is nothing to back them" (*HGL* 590).

That is still the crux of the problem. One of the most moving passages Merton wrote on race does not come from one of his essays, but a letter he sent to Chris McNair, whose daughter Carol Denise was one of four little girls killed in the 1963 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Merton was so moved by a photo he saw of Carol Denise in *Look* magazine holding a white doll that he cut it out and kept it. He later wrote the poem, "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll," which begins:

> Your dark eyes will never need to understand
> Our sadness who see you
> Hold that plastic glass-eyed
> Merchandise as if our empty-headed race
> Worthless full of fury
> Twanging and drooling in the southern night
> With guns and phantoms
> Needed to know love.[11]

In his letter to Carol Denise's father, Merton was at his most heartfelt: she is not "forgotten on the earth," he wrote. "She remains as a witness to innocence and to love, and an inspiration to all of us who remain to face the labor, the difficulty and the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity."[12]

Merton's writings on race form the basis of a Statement on Racial Justice that the Board of the International Thomas Merton Society issued last year.[13] The statement begins with a quotation from Merton's 1964 essay "Religion & Race in America": "Many Christians, who have confused 'Americanism' with 'Christianity' are in fact contributing to the painful contradictions and even injustices of the racial crisis."[14] Another passage, from a 1965 letter to non-violence advocate Camille Drevet, drives home a similar idea and also seems eerily prescient: "I think the most dangerous thing in the world is the stupidity and moral blindness of the American leaders today. They are blindly and absurdly convinced of their moral rightness, and they think that anything they do is in some way perfectly justified merely because they feel they have good intentions."[15] These are challenging words from Merton, but something well worth reflecting on.

Even with all that Merton found to criticize in American society, in the final analysis he always opted for hope. He was, after all, steeped in the Trappist tradition and in the monastic *Rule* of St. Benedict, which encourages us never to lose faith in the mercy of God. What he wrote in the Forties in *The Seven Storey Mountain* still holds:

> It is only the infinite mercy and love of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying His entire creation long ago. People seem to think that it is in some way a proof that no merciful God exists, if we have

> so many wars. On the contrary, consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men, the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. (*SSM* 128)

In this extraordinary time, Merton's words call us to be men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity and cruelty with sanctity. We owe him immense gratitude for showing us the way.

1. Thomas Merton, "*Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 67.
2. See her blog posts for July 5 and 12, 2020, at prairiewoods.org.
3. 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) 70.
4. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 123.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 330; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.
6. See Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 155.
7. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-10.
8. See his August 15, 1965 letter to Ernesto Cardenal (Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993] 151) and his January 2, 1966 letter to Abdul Aziz (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 63; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text).
9. Merton comments on his lack of driving experience in his well-known journal entry from December 1949 about being allowed to take out the monastery jeep and, after bringing it back in less than pristine condition, being told he was never to drive it again (see Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996] 387).
10. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 86.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 626.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends,* ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 333.
13. See "The Struggle for Racial Justice in the United States: A Statement of Commitment from the International Thomas Merton Society" (July 4, 2020); available at: http://merton.org/ITMS.
14. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 132.
15. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 99.