

Sharing the Healing Spirit

Review of

In Search of the Healing Spirit

By Nass Cannon Jr.

Edited by Clare E. B. Cannon, Bryant Cannon and John Cannon

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Reviewed by **Deborah Pope Kehoe**

As many readers of *The Merton Seasonal* know, Nass Cannon was a medical professional – doctor, teacher and administrator – oath-bound to care for the health of his fellow human beings. Fittingly, the central theme of *In Search of the Healing Spirit* is wellness, a focus that widens in light of the fact that Cannon was also a Catholic contemplative with a vocation for serving the poor and marginalized, a calling that he continued to live out even as he himself was in the late stages of terminal illness.

This slender book contains thirteen essays written by Dr. Cannon over many years, with varying degrees of formality, some previously published in professional or academic journals, some identified only by their occasion, others with no reported provenance. The essays are bookended by a foreword (ix-xv), an introduction (xix-xxi) and an afterward (133-38), each a unique perspective on the essayist, each written by one of the three editors, Cannon’s two sons and one daughter: John Cannon, Bryant Cannon and Clare E. B. Cannon.

The collection opens with three articles in which the author guides medical professionals in navigating this wounded world. First, in “The Broken Healer” (1-7), originally published in *Educating the Christian Doctor*, Cannon identifies himself as a physician who has taken to heart the admonishing proverb “Heal thyself” and gently suggests that his fellow physicians do the same. Relating experiences from his practice, Cannon offers insights into how recognizing one’s own brokenness can serve the relationship between the healer and the patient.

Similarly, in the second essay, “A Quest for Health” (8-22), also addressed to other caregivers, Cannon cites encounters with patients that poignantly illustrate his awareness of his own fallibility as a professional healer in a disordered society. In a powerful section titled “Formation of Healers,” Cannon, writing in the first person, encourages his colleagues in healthcare to develop a “merciful heart” by means of “fasting, compunction, prayer, reconciliation, and a desire for inner healing” (13).

The third essay, “Concupiscence or Caritas: A Choice of Guiding Spirits” (23-30), rounds out the opening clutch of articles in which the author communicates with his fellow medics working

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in a culture of soul sickness. The article focuses on two opposing forces active in the human spirit, self-indulgence vs. charity, which Cannon specifies by their theological names, and in his opening statement, he makes clear their relevance: “Our healthcare system is driven by a spirit of concupiscence. It should be animated by a spirit of caritas” (23).

Thoughtfully placed, the fourth essay, “The Tears of Things: A Meditation on Grief” (31-37), takes the subject of humbling the healer to a new depth. Quoting often from C. S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed*, Cannon reflects on the one inescapable truth that members of his profession can never forget: “the limits of medicine are the limits of mortality, and we are all faced with the realization that we must die” (32). In some exquisitely moving prose, he writes of his own helplessness under the weight of that reality. Yet, in keeping with the book’s principal theme of healing, this meditation ends with the voice of faith calling for hope after sorrow, and, in a well-placed homage to Thomas Merton, urging all to “go forth in our love to shine like the sun” (37).

Six essays that demonstrate Nass Cannon’s firm grasp and dedicated application of certain core tenets of Thomas Merton’s teachings comprise the body of *In Search of the Healing Spirit*. The first, “No Mirror, No Light – Just This! Thomas Merton’s Discovery of Global Wisdom” (38-53), opens with a “Zen-like koan” written by Cannon thirty years earlier: “*A polished mirror reflects great light; / a broken mirror generates even more / the greatest light arises from no mirror, no light – just this!*” (38). In the essay, Cannon uses the imagery of his “koan” to outline his discussion of Merton’s gradual “path to global wisdom” (38) and the lessons available in that journey.

Next, in “Attending to the Presence of God: Thomas Merton and *le Point Vierge*” (54-63), Cannon, through ample quoting of primary sources (one prominent secondary source being, appropriately, James Finley’s *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*), addresses elements of mysticism in Merton’s life and writings, particularly as they relate to Merton’s concept of the true self. Once again, Cannon concludes with a call to follow Merton’s inspirational example and “aspire to become transparent bearers of God’s presence and radiate the flame of God’s love to enkindle the hearts of others” (62).

The third essay in which Cannon centers his attention on an aspect of the life and mind of Thomas Merton is “A Certain Victory: Thomas Merton and the Journey of Personhood” (64-73). Less formally arranged, the article tracks the gradual transformation of the human being toward a Christ-like existence. Referring frequently to Merton’s *The New Man* and *Love and Living*, specifically passages that speak to the “perfection of personhood . . . found in Christ” (71), Cannon echoes Merton’s recognition that humanity’s brokenness is restored to wholeness by divine mercy, thereby connecting the article to the book’s central theme: the healing spirit.

The author opens the following essay, “Thomas Merton and Saint John of the Cross: Lives on Fire” (74-84), by recounting a memory of a family vacation in Spain. The trip included an impromptu visit to the monastery where John of the Cross died, an excursion that reawakened Cannon to the saint’s writings and turned the trek into a pilgrimage. The experience inspired Cannon to combine his renewed interest in Saint John of the Cross with his established interest in Thomas Merton toward a vision of both contemplatives as “persons on fire with the love of God” (75). His essay explores the many ways the fire metaphor befits the two spiritual role models.

In the introduction to the next essay, “Stand on Your Own Feet! Thomas Merton and the Monk without Vows or Walls” (85-104), Cannon announces his intentions to focus “on the basic elements

of being a monk both for those in the monastery and for those in the world” (85). He does so by drawing upon Merton’s writings about the monastic life in general and his own in particular, as well as writings by others who were influenced by Merton but chose to live traditional monastic principles in non-traditional ways. The essay culminates in an impressive discourse on how Merton’s oft-quoted proclamation on the last day of his life, “from now on, Brother, everyone stands on his own feet,” reveals the essence of a truly monastic life accessible to anyone: the discovery of one’s “real but hidden identity in Christ” (103).

Next, “A Path to Peace: Thomas Merton, Final Integration, and Us” (105-107) confronts the universal and wrenching reality of human violence. With timely resonance for readers – those of the original publication and those of today – the opening sentence sums up the enduring message of the concise reflection that follows: “In times of global disunity, conflict, and war, like we now face, Thomas Merton reveals that our communal path to peace relies on our individual integrative growth” (105).

In “The Road to Joy: A Circle Dance of Love, Thomas Merton, and the Pursuit of the True Self” (108-18), Cannon again speaks on one of the foundational principles of Merton’s spiritual teachings, the true self. By centering on the image of “the circle dance,” a reference to Merton’s well-rehearsed “cosmic dance” at the conclusion of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the essay gracefully evokes unity and harmony, qualities synonymous with healing and wholeness.

In this reviewer’s opinion, the twelfth essay, “A Stranger No More” (119-28), serves up the richest offering in this bountiful sampler. Like other items in the collection, it situates first-person experiences as background against which to explore the human condition. In this instance, the doctor is literally the patient. Moreover, he is in a hospital bed in a foreign country, which becomes the setting for healing revelations of what it means to be “the stranger” in this world. By referring often to Albert Camus’ famous novel of the same name, Cannon demonstrates profound insights into the Christian significance of Camus’ philosophical fiction, Merton’s literary analysis and his own grievous fault of callous indifference to the misery of others.

The concluding essay, “Reflections: Grow Foolish in Love” (129-31), is another personal narrative, one in which Nass Cannon details a joyful visit with his brother. The essay celebrates the family’s Lebanese heritage as it also affirms the apparent absurdity of living in compassionate spontaneity – altogether, a brilliant finale for a book that extols the healing spirit of a man of overflowing generosity, who many years ago made a promise to “grow foolish in love” (131).

As I was considering how best to sum up this book’s contribution to Merton studies, Portia’s immortal “quality of mercy” speech from *The Merchant of Venice* kept coming to mind, prompting me to conclude that the readers of *In Search of the Healing Spirit* are “twice blest.” Not only do we hear within its pages the familiar, soft voice of Dr. Nass Cannon, now-deceased, long-time member of the International Thomas Merton Society, but we do so by way of his children, who, having received from their father a legacy of spiritual guidance, now pass it on to others. The book is a testament to Dr. Cannon’s life of mercy, nurtured in large part by his sustained engagement with the works of Thomas Merton.