

## A Portrait of Providence

Review of

*Life Abundant: A Memoir*

By Paul R. Dekar

Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2025

xiii + 163 pages / \$ 18.00 paper

Reviewed by **Joseph Q. Raab**

The name Paul R. Dekar has been familiar to Merton enthusiasts for many years. He has been a regular contributor of articles and book reviews to both *The Merton Seasonal* and *The Merton Annual* as well as author of two lengthier studies on Merton's continuing relevance. His book *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Cascade, 2011), hailed by Donald Grayston as "a manifesto for the future Christian community," already gave glimpses into Dekar's own personal life and wisdom as it expounded on Merton's. His more recent work *Thomas Merton: God's Messenger on the Road towards a New World* (Cascade, 2021) was almost as much autobiography as it was an homage to Merton's perennial importance. Now, in his brief memoir entitled *Life Abundant* (Resource, 2025), Merton steps off-stage to join a chorus of many other voices as Dekar celebrates and generously shares the richness of his own fascinating life.

*Life Abundant* begins with a series of seven short chapters, each an homage to a family member, and each ending as a prayer of gratitude. The first four chapters introduce those who populate Dekar's earliest memories. In "Father" (5-11) we meet Paul Dekarhonoff, who was orphaned as a young child when his parents were killed in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. As a young refugee, Dekar's father arrived in the Bay Area with some relatives who came eastward across the Pacific. In the next chapter, "Mother" (11-17), we meet Ada, a Ukrainian with religious roots in Russian Orthodoxy through her father, and in Judaism through her mother. She and her parents were also refugees who had fled the same revolution to settle in San Francisco. The next two chapters in the initial series, titled "Sister" (18-21) and "Brother" (22-24), are tenderly rendered sketches of his siblings Peg and George. Chapters five through seven feature the family members who now center the author's life. The fifth, "Nancy Jean Rose" (25-32) introduces the amazing woman who is Dekar's beloved wife, and to whom the book is dedicated, while their sons, Nathaniel and Matthew, as well as their families, are the subjects of chapters six (33-36) and seven (37-39).

Dekar follows the chapters introducing his closest kin with 27 more – also short vignettes – that cover his life in ways more topical than chronological. The material detailing his coming of

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age in the nineteen sixties will likely absorb readers of *The Merton Seasonal*. His days as a student at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) proved pivotal. It was at UCB that Dekar joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an event initiating his life's work as a peacemaker. "As an FOR member," he writes, "I received a copy of *Fellowship*, through which I learned about the Trappist monk Thomas Merton" (63). Though his tutelage under Merton seems to wane then wax again, it really intensifies over the ensuing decades. In the memoir, Merton appears again when Dekar recalls a sabbatical semester spent at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota (110), and once more in the chapter entitled "Monastic Journey" (119-22), where he remembers retreats at Gethsemani, courses taught on Merton, and working with FOR to bring Thich Nhat Hanh to Memphis in 2002.

Occasional appearances of Merton aside, Dekar's memoir is an absorbing story of continual vocational discernment and adventure. For example, having been "radicalized" by his involvement with the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s, Dekar planned to attend law school after graduating from UCB. After a serendipitous encounter and a funding offer, however, his plans changed and he landed at Colgate Rochester Divinity School (CRDS) for seminary studies. His studies at CRDS, a place associated with the "so-called 'death of God' movement" as well as the social gospel movement, would deepen Dekar's intuitive sense of social justice and ground it in the gospel of Jesus (85).

We learn that as a young man Dekar worked with Operation Crossroads Africa (OCA) in Chad (81-84) and then served as a United States Department of State foreign service officer in Cameroon, along with Nancy (92-95). These forays into evangelization on the one hand and foreign service on the other raised further and deeper questions for Dekar. Doctoral studies, then, at the University of Chicago connected Dekar to giants like David Tracy, Bernard McGinn and Martin Marty, and set the peacemaker on his way to a long career in teaching and research, one that spans several institutions in both Canada and the U.S.

While the memoir's style avoids adornment, the directness of the prose does not inhibit the author's profound gratitude from shining on every page. I imagine that readers will resonate with Dekar's compassion for siblings, sense of indebtedness to parents and exuberance over Nancy and their progeny. Indeed, reading about his mother fleeing war-torn Ukraine and arriving in a land eager to welcome those "yearning to be free" can surprise with shock and shame. Such heroism and hope feel insulted and assaulted today as Ukraine is under siege and the U.S. shuts out refugees and asylum seekers.

In short, Dekar's memoir is both engaging and relatable. It reminded me of what Pope Francis claimed in his autobiography to be a "dogmatic certainty"; namely, that "God is in the life of every person" (*Hope* 114). *Life Abundant* reveals that universal truth in the fascinating particulars of a peacemaker's personal journey. This humble little treasure has the power to awaken in readers a deep sense of communion and draw them into seeing life, even their own, as unfolding within the marvelous designs of providence.