

Providential in Word and in Deed

Review of
Providential:

A Memoir of Growing Up, Education, & Learning to Be What We Are

By Thomas Del Prete

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

The plethora of contemporary memoirs on the market today is not new. Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (50 BC) is considered the first in a long line of memoirs that includes St. Augustine's *Confessions* (397 AD), as well as the psychological self-revelations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's eighteenth-century *Confessions*. In the twentieth century, memoirs shift to accounts of private experiences of trauma or exploration of specific themes such as illness or spiritual journeys. Distinct from autobiography that covers a life linearly, the true memoir focuses on memory that is both subjective and interpretive.

Thomas Del Prete's readable *Providential* is a hybrid text that looks back on seventy years through four chronological chapters, along with a short poetic reflection and two-page epilogue. Nevertheless, throughout his storytelling, there is a driving sense of the power of literacy, an attraction to historical figures, and a delight with learning – a dynamic that flowers in his adult professional life. Chapter one, “Me, My Milieu, and Providence” (1-11), creates the context by identifying family members, current events in the '60s and a fascination with Roger Williams that ignites an ongoing commitment to history. The milieu of Providence, Rhode Island comes alive through the “intimacy of [his] Italian neighborhood” (7), sadly broken when the family moves and “all coherence was gone” (8). His lively writing style invites readers to recall similar moments of family and place and prepares them for chapter two, “Childhood” (12-46), in which we are introduced to the “unsettling moments” of reality such as the assassination of JFK and the changing cultural boundaries of the '60s. But always there is a love of reading. There are also the “perils, perks, and glory” (23-27) of learning to be an altar server, and the shenanigans of the schoolyard. Pitching and trading baseball cards that are housed in a Keds' shoe box, as well as references to the milkman, the ragman and the predictable food rhythm in an Italian home invite this reader to similar childhood memories.

Monica Weis, SSJ, emerita professor of English at Nazareth University, Rochester, New York and a former vice president of the ITMS, has been a Fulbright Visiting Professor at the University of Pannonia in Veszprém, Hungary. A frequent speaker at Merton conferences, she is the author of *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005), *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (University Press of Kentucky, 2011) and *Thomas Merton and the Celts* (Pickwick, 2016), as well as numerous articles and reviews.

Beyond chronology, however, Del Prete realizes, in retrospect, that his sense of morality is expanding and that life is offering pivotal moments of growth. Committed to discovering his place in the world, he expresses that evolution: “my monochrome vision was coming up against a more rugged and varied geography. . . . My thoughts ventured more and more beyond the binary notion of morality that directed some of my early learning, searching for something that made sense, something more like a center in a more rounded world” (46).

Using a John Dewey quotation as its epigraph (“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself”), chapter three, “Youth” (47-87), is central to Del Prete’s development as a critical thinker. At LaSalle Academy, he comes under the influence of Brother James, an unconventional teacher of English and religion, who exposes him to Aristotle, the art of persuasion and the dangers of rhetorical fallacies – critical thinking strategies usually relegated to college courses. He devours the literary challenges Brother James offers (Alan Watts, Victor Frankel, Emerson, Thoreau, Dostoevsky), delves into research on Daniel Ellsberg, begins questioning “the very idea of war,” and leaves behind the doctrinal approach of his pre-Vatican II religious training to embrace character development and the “spiritual and communal and social justice dimensions of the Catholic life of faith” (51-59).

Embedded in this chapter is a profoundly moving and significant section on Camp Yawgoog, an historic Rhode Island Boy Scout camp. During the course of fifteen summers – from camper to camp director – Del Prete cements life-long friendships; develops his love of nature, canoeing and outdoor adventure; discovers his administrative gifts; and reinforces his belief in the “transformative power of play” (70). The author minces no words: “As soon as I entered Yawgoog, it began to enter me; it was a love affair from the beginning” (69). Readers soon discover how true this statement is. Yawgoog becomes the not-so-hidden backdrop of his character development in subsequent memories. Readers with similar summer camp experience will resonate with both the highjinks and solemnity of deep relationships Del Prete describes, as well as the disequilibrium experienced when it is time to move on.

“Young Adulthood,” chapter four (88-141), reveals Del Prete as a “library nomad” (88) at Brown University, focusing on the habits of mind of historians. He admits to following a “watery path” (126), trying a course in advanced math and experiencing failures that result in “a sense of loss, mortification, self-admonishment, and even anger; but when you empathize with yourself and accept it, it can also be enormously edifying” (91). Del Prete is alert to those “moments of awakening” (93) and the importance of becoming oneself.

Graduate studies in education and pedagogy at Harvard University reinforce the skills he learned *in situ* at summer camp and further drive his commitment to creating a “Goldilocks zone for learning” that is “just right” to lead students toward their full humanity (96-99). Readers with teaching experience will resonate with Del Prete’s tales of his first years of teaching in which his background of creating skits at Yawgoog sparks the creativity needed to entice disengaged students into authentic learning – especially through his “Before School” program of team-building activities (106) and his participation as one of two adults living at ABC House (“A Better Chance”), a residence for urban students to qualify for entrance into a major university (114-18). And it is at ABC House that Del Prete is given a copy of Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the perfect complement to enhance his quest for a GUT: Grand Unified Theory (127). Merton’s own

discovery of the True Self and its imprint on Del Prete's spirituality become the focus of the final pages of that chapter.

To this reader, Del Prete's stumbling onto Thomas Merton signals a convergence of his philosophy of education and spirituality – significant paths that lead understandably to his 1991 doctoral dissertation on “Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person” and (joyfully for all of us) to involvement in the International Thomas Merton Society. A cursory look at early ITMS programs reveals Del Prete's participation as presenter, convener (1993, 1995); board member (1993-95, 1995-97); ITMS President (1999-2001) and reception of the inaugural “Louie” award for his published dissertation, as well as being a key voice in crafting the criteria for the inaugural and innovative Shannon Fellowships and the Daggy Scholarships (1995).

Readers might question why a review of such a personal memoir that ostensibly “ends” with Merton appears in *The Merton Seasonal*. I would counter that the pervasive influence of Thomas Merton in subtle and not-so-subtle ways in Del Prete's seventy years offers appropriate testimony to Del Prete's search for a meaningful life that blossomed into a productive professorship at Clark University, Director of the Hiatt Center for Urban Education, and eventual appointment as Director of the Adam Institute for Urban Teaching and School Practice. Just as Yawgoog entered into Del Prete, so did Merton's search for wholeness, offering us an interpretive and rewarding evening of reading and reflection.