Keeping Merton Human

Presidential Address – ITMS Nineteenth General Meeting
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By **Judith Valente**

I am deeply honored to be with you today to offer this address. I stand here on the shoulders of so many distinguished scholars who have served in the role of ITMS president: William Shannon, Robert Daggy, Bonnie Thurston, Kathleen Deignan, Fr. James Conner, Paul Pearson, Jonathan Montaldo and my immediate predecessor, Christopher Pramuk, to name just a few – all of them superb people I admire and respect. I speak to you not as a scholar or an expert, but as an author, a journalist and a poet. Mainly I speak as a fellow traveler – at one with every person in this room who has ever read Merton's words and built for them a home in the heart.

Speaking recently about both Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry, Kathleen Deignan observed how the words of both men fall on us "like Dharma rain," nurturing us until eventually there is a saturation that prompts an awakening. "You don't grasp the words," Kathleen said. "Their words grasp you."[1] Each of us here can likely remember the period in our lives – perhaps even the precise moment – when some passage, some insight of Thomas Merton's caused us to snap awake. Once we hear Merton's voice speaking to us – from beyond the grave, from beyond time, from beyond the veil of our own illusions, it is as though he takes us by the hand and never leaves us to make our way alone.

For Douglas Hertler, who would eventually portray Merton with resounding authenticity in a play of his own creation, that moment came when he randomly opened the pages of *No Man Is an Island* in a New York City bookstore. "I didn't put the book down," Doug says. "It was as if this monk held a mirror up to my soul."[2] For Mike Brennan, our ITMS chapters coordinator, it happened when he was 19 years old and on a retreat, hearing for the first time Merton's famous prayer, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going." It was "like a lightning bolt," Mike recalls, "so different from the rote prayers I had learned."[3] Some forty year later, that same prayer would inspire Chicago attorney and ITMS member Steven Denny to write a book about the transformative effect this one prayer had on his life and his vocation as a lawyer.[4]

Not surprisingly, Merton's invisible hands extend far beyond the borders of the U.S. Sylvia Grevel, an ITMS international advisor from Australia, recalls her zigzagging relationship with Merton this way:

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Judith Valente

> More than 25 years ago, I bought *The Seven Storey Mountain*, read it and put it away with a deep sigh of disappointment. His spiritual journey felt completely disconnected from my life (reflecting) a theology that divided the "chosen" from lay people, a perspective that still makes me frown. The book felt overwhelmingly male-centered, which clashed with my recent studies in systematic feminist theology. In short, Merton was a definite no-go for me.

Then, Sylvia lost both her partner of 20 years and her mother in sudden succession. "My longing for God deepened," she says, "and I began reading Merton's intimate journals. These open and honest writings resonated deeply with me. . . . He revealed a path that felt like an invitation – the path of a monastic *in the world*." Sylvia would go on to become a Benedictine oblate, a lay associate of a monastery, and just this past year, she was ordained an Anglican priest. She says, "That I, a Dutch-Australian, ordained, Anglican, gay woman can relate to Merton – a Roman Catholic monk who died before I even started kindergarten – tells me that his writings speak universal truths."[5]

For Spanish scholar Fernando Beltrán Llavador, it was his doctoral research on the interplay between contemplation and action, solitude and community that led him to Merton.[6] And for ITMS board member Marcela Raggio of Argentina, her interest in Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal and the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo led her eventually to Merton's own poetry.[7] Her discovery of Merton's connections to Latin America sparked three Merton conferences in Argentina – so far. It led as well to Marcela writing a series of papers and books about Merton, not to mention the numerous theses written by students under her tutelage.

What was your first encounter with Merton, someone who continues to speak to us today, to challenge us, and dare I say, even chastise us?

What's clear is that we need Merton now as much as ever. There is no question that we are experiencing a pivotal moment in U.S. history when our institutions and values are under assault from the very leaders responsible for shoring up those institutions and safeguarding those values. We have traveled far from that transparent world Merton spoke of where one can envision God shining through all the time.

In words that seem eerily prescient Merton wrote in July 1965 to his friend, the peace activist Madame Camille Drevet: "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 that they have good intentions."[8] One could argue that every word Merton wrote in that letter of 60 years ago remains true today, except perhaps for the part about "good intentions." There no longer even seem to be good intentions.

History will judge those of us alive today. As a country, as a world, we seem to have forgotten "we are already one," as Merton once told an interfaith gathering of monks; "But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."[9] Rarely have such words been so urgent.

Witnessing what is happening in our government today can feel as though we are looking at America through a fun-house mirror that distorts just about every ideal upon which this country was founded. I thank God that Merton has been there for me – and perhaps for you too – as an anchor,

a compass, a spiritual guide through this last tumultuous decade – a time of deadly pandemic, political discord and distrust, racial unrest and radical changes in technology that affect every aspect of our daily lives.

Merton's own lifetime spanned the Great Depression, two World Wars, the holocaust, the unleashing of nuclear weapons, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the struggle for civil rights, radical changes in the church through the Second Vatican Council, and rapid advances in industry and commerce. Merton was well acquainted with radical change. He understood crisis. As he wrote in 1966, "[I am] simply the voice of a self-questioning human person who . . . struggles to cope with turbulent, mysterious, demanding, exciting, frustrating, confused existence . . . . in which almost everything public is patently phony."[10]

Those of us who have witnessed these past few years of so-called "alternative facts" and attempts to replace objective reality with false narratives know all too well what Merton is talking about there. When he says "almost everything public is patently phony," it speaks loudly to the lies and distortions to which we have been subjected in recent times, lies repeated so often that they have become lodged as a false form of truth in the public consciousness. Still, never one to glaze over or minimize, Merton sees through to society's own weaknesses and shows us our own complicity and responsibility to right what it is wrong. As he wrote in a letter to Dorothy Day back in August 1960, in words that sadly still resonate today: "We (society at large) have lost our sense of values and our vision. . . . We love fatness health bursting smiles the radiance of satisfied bodies all properly fed and rested and sated and washed and perfumed and sexually relieved. Anything else is a horror and a scandal to us. How sad. . . . for I am part of the society which has these values and I can't help sharing its guilt, its illusions."[11] Yes, we too share that guilt; we too are at least partly responsible for our society's illusions.

If Merton were alive today, I believe his hands would be exhausted from his fingers flying across a keyboard writing about so many urgent issues. Not the least of them is the constant state of war throughout our world – some 45 conflicts simultaneously occurring across the globe. Today, global military expenditures amount to $2.5 trillion. The U.S. alone will spend $820 billion on weapons and other defense outlays this year. Not long ago, the U.N.'s top humanitarian officer made the sad observation in a television interview that war is no longer a last resort for nations, but often the first response.[12]

Merton calls us to a much different set of values and way of being. Peace "is the great Christian task of our time," he said in his essay "The Root of War Is Fear," which appeared in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. "Everything else is secondary, for the survival of the human race itself depends on it."[13] And later, in a journal entry dated October 23, 1961, he wrote, "I am . . . for the abolition of war, for the use of non-violent means to settle international conflicts," he said; "against the bomb, against nuclear testing, against Polaris submarines . . . against all violence."[14]

Merton was also ahead of his time in decrying the pervasive power of corporations, the influence of advertising and mass media in cultivating unhealthy consumer appetites. "When we call ourselves the 'free world,'" he said, "we mean first of all the world in which *business* is free. And the freedom of the person comes only after that."[15] He added, "It is not the life of the spirit that is real to us, but the vitality of the *market*" (*SD* 24). We see this today in court rulings that favor corporations over individuals, in efforts to dismantle agencies such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and

other public watchdogs and advocates. We see it most blatantly in the recent passage of a spending bill that cuts taxes for corporations and the wealthiest individuals while simultaneously reducing health care and food aid for the nation's neediest people.

Decades before cell phones, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, email and all the other white noise that infiltrates our lives, Merton warned of the increasing encroachment of technology into daily living. He recognized that access to instantaneous forms of *communication* between human beings does not necessarily translate into greater *communion.*

He understood too that overwork is a form of violence – a violence we do to ourselves by running on a continuous mouse-wheel, as so many of us do. In *No Man Is an Island*, he writes: "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. And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. . . . [It is] the hardest and most courageous act he can perform: and often it is quite beyond his power."[16]

One of the most disheartening issues of our time for me, as the granddaughter of two sets of Italian immigrants, is how we have allowed a narrative to arise that labels all immigrants as threats, rather than signs of the vitality of our way of life. Merton understood well our human propensity to seek out "enemies" and create false narratives about "the other." We see this again, today, not only in the mass deportation of immigrants, but in how some of our fellow citizens as well are viewed: transgender individuals, members of the LGBTQ community, Muslims, Jews and anyone who perhaps doesn't subscribe to our own political or religious beliefs. In his Preface to the Vietnamese translation of *No Man Is an Island*, Merton writes: "Violence rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are entirely different: the enemy is evil and I am good. The enemy must be destroyed and I must be saved. But love sees things differently. It sees that even the enemy suffers from the same sorrows and limitations that I do. . . . death is the same for both of us. . . . war is both his enemy and mine."[17]

Last month marked the five-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis – a tragedy that sparked a national discussion about policing in minority communities, inspired the Black Lives Matter movement, and, yes, sometimes ignited violent protests against police. It was Merton's writings on race in "Letters to a White Liberal" (*SD* 3-71) that helped me make sense of that tumultuous summer in 2020 of dissension and discontent following George Floyd's death. Merton recognized some 60 years ago that racial injustice cannot be mitigated by laws alone. It is a collective evil that must be addressed in each individual heart. Racism, he said, is not a burden to be borne and eradicated solely by people of color. It is a cancer eating away at the souls of white people: "the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society," he said, "*is rooted in the heart of the white man himself*" (*SD* 46). If you can forgive the outmoded, masculine language Merton uses in these essays – it was, after all, the language of his times – he actually makes a number of relevant points. Here is a passage that helped me understand the occasional violent outbursts that accompanied some of the protests in 2020. "The [black person] finally gets tired of this treatment and becomes quite rightly convinced that the only way he is ever going to get his rights is by fighting for them himself. . . . [W]e warn him against the consequences of violence . . . . and even in some cases *provoke* it, in the hope that the whole . . . movement for freedom can be repressed by force" (*SD* 22). He adds, it is "Curious that the ones who repeatedly lecture [the black community] on law and order, themselves are in league with murderers and thugs" (*SD* 46).

These are powerful words. The thing to remember, though, is that Merton saw struggles with race as a potential moment of grace. The important question to ask ourselves, Merton says, is not what is going to happen in our country, but what are *we* going to do? "Otherwise," he said, "the moment of grace will pass without effect" (*SD* 69).

The important question to ask, is what are we going to do? In the final analysis, Merton saw this struggle as an opening for grace. He was, after all, steeped in the monastic *Rule of St. Benedict,* which urges us to never lose faith in the mercy of God. And, like his friend Dorothy Day, he never stopped believing in what she called, "the duty of hope."[18] I'm sure everyone here has his or her favorite Merton passages. Here is one of mine. I come back to these words time and again when I feel despair about the state of our world. It is a passage from *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "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."[19]

May I suggest that the writings of Merton, though not a cure-all, are at the very least an antidote to society's pathologies. I urge you to look upon Merton not merely as a topic for papers and workshops, as an academic exercise. I urge you to *keep Merton human*. He was prophetic, but not an oracle. He was a genius, but not a super-human. He was a mystic, but still a man – a man of challenging questions rather than pat answers, a man of contradictions who never deviated from the central mission of his life, seeking the truth of his identity, the truth of God, and the truth of our purpose in life, which is, as he put it, to be "another Christ" for one another.

As we gather over these next days at this exceptional Jesuit university, let us honor Merton not only through this conference, but as Jonathan Montaldo reminded us in a past presidential address, to pay him homage with the *book of our lives*.[20] Let us go forth from this time together as the people he would have us be: self-questioning human persons who struggle "to cope with turbulent, mysterious, demanding, exciting, frustrating, confused existence" **(***CWA* 144**)** and who strive to make of this world, a place of beauty, compassion and grace.T

Thank you for your kind attention. Thank you, Thomas Merton. And thanks be to God.

1. Kathleen Deignan, CND, online presentation May 15, 2025 on her book *A Thomas Berry Book of Hours*, sponsored by the Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit, Iona University.
2. From the text of Douglas Hertler's one-person play, *Merton and Me: A Living Trinity*; for further information, see www.mertonandme.com.
3. Personal interview with Michael Brennan.
4. See Steven A. Denny, *The Merton Prayer: An Exercise in Authenticity* (Chicago: ACTA, 2022).
5. Personal communication with Sylvia Grevel, January 2025.
6. Personal communication with Fernando Beltrán Llavador, January 2025.
7. Personal communication with Marcela Raggio, January 2025.
8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 99.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308.
10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 144 (subsequent references will be cited as "*CWA*" parenthetically in the text).
11. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 138.

12. Martin Griffiths, U.N. Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, January 23, 2024 interview on the PBS NewsHour, available at: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/uns-top-human-rights-official-discusses-humanitarian-crisis-in-gaza#:~:text=have%20spent.
13. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 13.
14. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 172.
15. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 22-23 (subsequent references will be cited as "*SD*" parenthetically in the text).
16. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 123.
17. Thomas Merton, "*Honorable Reader": Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 124-25.
18. See Jim Forest's essay "The Duty of Hope," at: https://jimandnancyforest.com/2021/02/the-duty-of-hope.
19. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 128.
20. See Jonathan Montaldo, "'Going Home to Where I Have Never Been': Thomas Merton's Flight toward Joy," *The Merton Seasonal* 28.3 (2003) 3-4: "I have only loved Merton's text as it held a mirror to my own life's text, as his personal struggles helped me to identify the good and bad angels that contend for my own heart. Merton's text is my life's 'elder.' I am always consulting it with the questions, 'Give me a word for my salvation' and 'What is it I should do?'"