

Fifteenth Class
University Essays

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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE

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The Nonviolent Alternative

By Thomas Merton

Nonviolence is not simply a way of proving one's point and getting what one wants without being involved in behavior that one considers ugly and evil. Nor is it, for that matter, a means which anyone can legitimately make use of according to his fancy for any purpose whatever. To practice nonviolence for a purely selfish or arbitrary end would, in fact, discredit and distort the truth of nonviolent resistance.

Nonviolence is perhaps the most exacting of all forms of struggle, not only because it demands first of all that one be ready to suffer evil and even face the threat of death without violent retaliation, but because it excludes mere transient self-interest from its considerations. In a very real sense, he who practices nonviolent resistance must commit himself not to the defense of his own interests or even those of a particular group: he must commit himself to the defense of objective truth and right and, above all, of man. His aim is then not simply to "prevail" or to prove that he is right and the adversary wrong, or to make the adversary give in and yield what is demanded of him.

Nor should the nonviolent resister be content to prove to himself that he is virtuous and right, and that his hands and heart are pure even though the adversary's may be evil and defiled. Still less should he seek for himself the psychological gratification of upsetting the adversary's conscience and perhaps driving him to an act of bad faith and refusal of the truth. We know that our unconscious motives may, at times, make our nonviolence a form of moral aggression and even a subtle provocation designed (without our awareness) to bring out the evil we hope to find in the adversary, and thus to justify ourselves in our own eyes and in

the eyes of "decent people." Wherever there is a high moral ideal, there is an attendant risk of pharisaism, and nonviolence is no exception. The basis of pharisaism is division: on one hand this morally or socially privileged self and the elite to which it belongs. On the other hand, the "others," the wicked, the unenlightened, whoever they may be, Communists, capitalists, colonialists, traitors, international Jewry, racists, etc.

A test of our sincerity in the practice of nonviolence is this: are we willing to learn something from the adversary! If a new truth is made known to us by him or through him, will we accept it? Are we willing to admit that he is not totally inhumane, wrong, unreasonable, cruel, etc.? This is important. If he sees that we are completely incapable of listening to him with an open mind, our nonviolence will have nothing to say to him except that we distrust him and seek to outwit him. Our readiness to see some good in him and to agree with some of his ideas (though tactically this might look like a weakness on our part) actually gives us power: the power of sincerity and of truth. On the other hand, if we are obviously unwilling to accept any truth that we have not first discovered and declared ourselves, we show by that very fact that we are interested not in the truth so much as in "being right." Since the adversary is presumably interested in being right also, and in proving himself right by what he considers the superior argument of force, we end up where we started. Nonviolence has great power, provided that it really witnesses to truth and not just to self-righteousness.

The dread of being open to the ideas of others generally comes from our hidden

insecurity about our own convictions. We fear that we may be “converted”—or perverted—by a pernicious doctrine. On the other hand, if we are mature and objective in our open-mindedness, we may find that viewing things from a basically different perspective—that of our adversary—we discover our own truth in a new light and are able to understand our own ideal more realistically.

Our willingness to take an alternative approach to a problem will perhaps relax the obsessive fixation of the adversary on his view, which he believes is the only reasonable possibility and which he is determined to impose on everyone else by coercion.

The key to nonviolence is the willingness of the nonviolent resister to suffer a certain amount of accidental evil in order to bring about a change of mind in the oppressor and awaken him to personal openness and to dialogue. A nonviolent protest that merely seeks to gain publicity and to show up the oppressor for what he is, without opening his eyes to new values, can be said to be in large part a failure. At the same time, a nonviolence which does not rise to the level of the personal, and remains confined to the consideration of nature and natural necessity may perhaps make a deal but it cannot really make sense.

Conflict will never be abolished but a new way of solving it can become habitual. Man can then act according to the dignity of that adulthood which he is now said to have reached—and which yet remains, perhaps, to be conclusively proved. One of the ways in which it can, without doubt, be proved is precisely this: man’s ability to settle conflicts by reason and arbitration instead of by slaughter and destruction.

The distinction suggested here, between two types of thought—one oriented to

nature and necessity, the other to person and freedom—calls for further study at another time. It seems to be helpful. The “nature-oriented” mind treats other human beings as objects to be manipulated in order to control the course of events and make the future for the whole human species conform to certain rather rigidly determined expectations. “Person-oriented” thinking does not lay down these draconian demands, does not seek so much to control as to respond, and to awaken response. It is not set on determining anyone or anything, and does not insistently demand that persons and events correspond to our own abstract ideal. All it seeks is the openness of free exchange in which reason and love have freedom of action. In such a situation the future will take care of itself.

Nonviolence must be aimed, above all, at the transformation of the present state of the world, and it must, therefore, be free from all occult, unconscious connivance with an unjust use of power. This poses enormous problems—for if nonviolence is too political, it becomes drawn into the power struggle and identified with one side or another in that struggle, while, if it is totally apolitical, it runs the risk of being ineffective or, at best, merely symbolic.

Here the human dignity of nonviolence must manifest itself clearly in terms of a freedom and a nobility which are able to resist political manipulation and brute force and show them up as arbitrary, barbarous and irrational. This will not be easy. The temptation to get publicity and quick results by spectacular tricks, or by forms of protest that are merely odd and provocative but whose human meaning is not clear, may defeat this purpose.

The realism of nonviolence must be made evident by humility and self-restraint which clearly show frankness and open-mindedness and invite the adversary to serious

and reasonable discussion.

Instead of trying to use the adversary as leverage for one's own effort to realize an ideal, nonviolence seeks only to enter into a dialogue with him in order to attain, together with him, the common good of man. Nonviolence must be realistic and concrete. Like ordinary political action, it is no more than the "art of the possible." But precisely the advantage of nonviolence is that it has a more humane notion of what is possible. Where the powerful believe that only power is efficacious, the nonviolent resister is persuaded of the superior efficacy of love, openness, peaceful negotiation and, above all, of truth. For power can guarantee the interests of some men but it can never foster the good of man. Power always protects the good of some at the expense of all the others. Only love can attain and preserve the good of all. Any claim to build the security of all on force is a manifest imposture.

It is here that genuine humility is of the greatest importance.

Message to Poets

By Thomas Merton

We who are poets know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists. The reason for a living act is realized only in the act itself. This meeting is a spontaneous explosion of hopes. That is why it is a venture in prophetic poverty, supported and financed by no foundation, organized and publicized by no official group, but a living expression of the belief that there are now in our world new people, new poets who are not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures—whether communist or capitalist—but who dare to hope in their own vision of reality and of the future. This meeting is united in a flame of hope whose temperature has not yet been taken and whose effects have not yet been estimated, because it is a new fire. The reason for the fire cannot be apparent to one who is not warmed by it. The reason for being here will not be found until all have walked together, without afterthought, into contradictions and possibilities.

We believe that our future will be made by love and hope, not by violence or calculation. The Spirit of Life that has brought us together, whether in space or only in agreement, will make our encounter an epiphany of certainties we could not know in isolation.

The solidarity of poets is not planned and welded together with tactical convictions or matters of policy, since these are affairs of prejudice, cunning and design. Whatever his failures, the poet is not a cunning man. His art depends on an ingrained innocence which he would lose in business, in politics or in too organized a form of academic life. The hope that rests on calculation has lost its innocence. We are banding together to defend our innocence.

All innocence is a matter of belief. I

do not speak now of organized agreement, but of interior personal convictions “in the spirit.” These convictions are as strong and undeniable as life itself. They are rooted in fidelity to life rather than to artificial systems. The solidarity of poets is an elemental fact like sunlight, like the seasons, like the rain. It is something that cannot be organized, it can only happen. It can only be “received.” It is a gift to which we must remain open. No man can plan to make the sun rise or the rain fall. The sea is still wet in spite of all formal and abstract programs. Solidarity is not collectivity. The organizers of collective life will deride the seriousness or the reality of our hope. If they infect us with their doubt we shall lose our innocence and our solidarity along with it.

Collective life is often organized on the basis of cunning, doubt and guilt. True solidarity is destroyed by the political art of pitting one man against another and the commercial art of estimating all men at a price. On these illusory measurements, men build a world of arbitrary values without life and meaning, full of sterile agitation. To set one man against another, one life against another, one work against another, and to express the measurement in terms of cost or of economic privilege and moral honor is to infect everybody with the deepest metaphysical doubt. Divided and set up against one another for the purpose of evaluation, men immediately acquire the mentality of objects for sale in a slave market. They despair of themselves because they know they have been unfaithful to life and to being, and they no longer find anyone to forgive the infidelity.

Yet their despair condemns them to further infidelity: alienated from their own spiritual

roots, they contrive to break, to humiliate and to destroy the spirit of others. In such a situation there is no joy, only rage. Each man feels the deepest root of his being poisoned by suspicion, unbelief and hate. Each man experiences his very existence as guilt and betrayal, and as a possibility of death: nothing more.

We stand together to denounce the shame and the imposture of all such calculations.

If we are to remain united against these falsehoods, against all power that poisons man and subjects him to the mystifications of bureaucracy, commerce and the police state, we must refuse the price tag. We must refuse academic classification. We must reject the seductions of publicity. We must not allow ourselves to be pitted one against another in mystical comparisons—political, literary or cultural orthodoxies. We must not be made to devour and dismember one another for the amusement of their press. We must not let ourselves be eaten by them to assuage their own insatiable doubt. We must not merely be for something and against something else, even if we are for “ourselves” and against “them.” Who are “they?” Let us not give them support by becoming an “opposition,” which assumes they are definitively real.

Let us remain outside “their” categories. It is in this sense that we are all monks: for we remain innocent and invisible to publicists and bureaucrats. They cannot imagine what we are doing unless we betray ourselves to them, and even then they will never be able.

They understand nothing except what they themselves have decreed. They are crafty ones who weave words about life and then make life conform to what they themselves have declared. How can they trust anyone when they make life itself tell lies? It is the businessman, the propagandist, the politician, not the poet,

who devoutly believes in “the magic of words.”

For the poet, there is precisely no magic. There is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom. All magic is a ruthless venture in manipulation, a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Word-magic is an impurity of language and of spirit in which words, deliberately reduced to unintelligibility, appeal mindlessly to the vulnerable will. Let us deride and parody this magic with other variants of the unintelligible, if we want to. But it is better to prophesy than to deride. To prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new.

This tension is discovered not in hypnotic elation but in the light of everyday existence. Poetry is innocent of prediction because it is itself the fulfillment of all the momentous predictions hidden in everyday life.

Poetry is the flowering of ordinary possibilities. It is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice. This is its innocence and dignity.

Let us not be like those who wish to make the tree bear its fruit first and the flower afterward—a conjuring trick and an advertisement. We are content if the flower comes first and the fruit afterward, in due time. Such is the poetic spirit.

Let us obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers—fruits of hope that have never been seen before. With these fruits, we shall calm the resentments and the rage of man.

Let us be proud that we are not witch doctors, only ordinary men.

Let us be proud that we are not experts in any thing.

Let us be proud of the words that are

given to us for nothing, not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.

We are not persuaders. We are the children of the Unknown. We are the ministers of silence that is needed to cure all victims of absurdity who lie dying in a contrived joy. Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything.

We are stronger than the bomb.

Let us then say “yes” to our own nobility by embracing the insecurity and abjection that a dervish existence entails.

In the *Republic of Plato* there was already no place for poets and musicians, still less for dervishes and monks. As for the technological Platos, who think they now run the world we live in, they imagine they can tempt us with banalities and abstractions. But we can elude them merely by stepping into the Heraklitan River which is never crossed twice.

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.

No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.

No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.

Come, dervishes: Here is the water of life. Dance in it.

Excerpts of this essay first: appeared in Americas, April 16, 1964. The essay was subsequently published in toto in Raids on the Unspeakable (New York: New Directions, 1966)

Education and Success

By Thomas Merton

The danger of education, I have found, is that it so easily confuses means with ends. Worse than that, it quite easily forgets both and devotes itself merely to the mass production of uneducated graduates- people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade which they and their contemporaries have conspired to call "life."

A few years ago, a man who was compiling a book entitled *Success* wrote and asked me to contribute a statement on how I got to be a success. I replied indignantly that I was not able to consider myself a success in any terms that had a meaning to me. I swore I had spent my life strenuously avoiding success. If it so happened that I had once written a best seller, this was a pure accident, due to inattention and naiveté, and I would take very good care never to do the same again. If I had a message to my contemporaries, I said, it was surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success. I heard no more from him and I am not aware that my reply was published with the other testimonials.

Thus, I have undercut all hope of claiming that Columbia made me a success. On the contrary, I believe I can thank Columbia, among so many other things, for having helped me learn the value of unsuccess. Columbia was for me a microcosm, a little world, where I exhausted myself in time. Had I waited until after graduation, it would have been too late. During the few years in which I was there, I managed to do so many wrong things that I was ready to blow my mind. But fortunately I learned, in so

doing, that this was good. I might have ended up on Madison Avenue if I hadn't. Instead of preparing me for one of those splendid jobs, Columbia cured me forever of wanting one. Instead of adapting me to the world downtown, Columbia did me the favor of lobbing me half-conscious into the Village, where I occasionally came to my senses and where I continued to learn. I think I have sufficiently explained, elsewhere, how much I owed, in this regard, to people like Mark Van Doren (who lived around the corner from me in the Village) and Joseph Wood Krutch (who became, as I have become, a hermit). Such people taught me to imitate not Rockefeller but Thoreau. Of course, I am not trying to say that one has to be Thoreau rather than Rockefeller, nor am I slyly intimating that I have discovered a superior form of resentment, an off-beat way of scoring on everybody by refusing to keep score.

What I am saying is this: The score is not what matters. Life does not have to be regarded as a game in which scores are kept and somebody wins. If you are too intent on winning, you will never enjoy playing. If you are too obsessed with success, you will forget to live. If you have learned only how to be a success, your life has probably been wasted. If a university concentrates on producing successful people, it is lamentably failing in its obligation to society and to the students themselves.

Now I know that even in the thirties, at Columbia, the business of wanting to be a success was very much in the air. There was, in fact, a scandal about the yearbook senior poll. The man who was voted "most likely to succeed" was accused of having doctored the

results in his own favor after a surreptitious deal with the yearbook staff member who was voted “best dressed.” Incidentally, I was voted best writer. I was not accused of trickery, but everyone understood that the vote, which had been between me and Hank Liebermann, had been decided by my fraternity brothers. (Incidentally, whatever became of the man “most likely to succeed”?)

In any case, no one really cared. Since that time many of my classmates have attained to eminence with all its joys and all its sorrows, and the ones I have seen since then are marked by the signature of anguish. So am I. I do not claim exemption. Yet I never had the feeling that our *alma mater* just wanted us to become well-paid operators, or to break our necks to keep on the front pages of the Times. On the contrary — maybe this is a delusion, but if it is a delusion it is a salutary one—I always felt at Columbia that people around me, half amused and perhaps at times half incredulous, were happy to let me be myself.

from Collected Essays

Rediscovering Thomas Merton

by Colman McCarthy

Who was Thomas Merton?

The commonplace answer, the one most of us would give, is that he was a man who renounced his worldly ways in the early 1940s and entered a Trappist monastery, there to serve God until he died in 1968.

How handily a life can be summed up! In Merton's instance, it is even easier because, we assume, once a person commits himself to the intense spiritual life of Trappist monasteries, that's it. What more can be said?

In 1941, when Merton entered Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance had been changeless for centuries. To take on its rigors was to become changeless yourself, the only growth being spiritual growth. Everything else went. To become a Trappist was to put a final paragraph on your life story.

None of that holds for Thomas Merton, and that is surely an understatement. The 54 years of his life — 27 out of the monastery and 27 in — were an astonishing flurry of activity that produced an amazing outflow of changes and contradictions. In his later years, it was as though Merton sensed that he had become a symbol of stability to the millions of his readers. But he wanted no part of the symbolism because it meant he would have to become lifeless.

If people wanted to romanticize Father Louis (his Trappist name) as a holy monk on a mountaintop or as a professional prayer man who was undistracted by worldly pursuits, well, that was their choice. But for Merton, the image was phony. As he wrote in his journal, *The Sign of Jonas*: "People are starving to death and freezing and here I sit with a silver spoon in my mouth and write books and everybody sends

me fan mail telling me how wonderful I am for giving up so much."

The monk's appreciation for the irony of things was a quality bound to be dominant in a person whose mind and heart were constantly bouncing off walls of contradiction.

A few of the obvious ones:

To many of the readers of his 50 books and 250 articles, Merton was the last word on authentic spirituality. Yet he wrote to ask for guidance from Rosemary Radford Ruether, the American theologian who currently teaches in Chicago: "Do you think you could help me once in a while? I do not intend to be very demanding on your time, but I would like to feel that I can resort to you for suggestions and advice. Not so much for my work, as just to help me think."

Merton celebrated his turning from secular pleasures in his best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but in a well-hushed trip to New York City in 1964, he was not only overjoyed to be sprung from the monastery for a few days, but he discovered that the world wasn't so wicked after all. "The people walking on Fifth Avenue were beautiful," he wrote. New York "is a stately and grown up city, a true city, life-size, anything but soulless. New York is feminine. It is she, the city. I am faithful to her. I have not ceased to love her to the last gasp of this ball-point pen."

Merton relished his solitude; he finally moved out of the community to live alone in a hermitage on a lonely part of the monastery property. But he was often as busy as a trainmaster routing visitors in and out of his life. Along with friends from the

publishing world and Columbia University, where he had studied, he welcomed people as diverse as Jacques Maritain and Joan Baez, Daniel Berrigan, and John Howard Griffin. His correspondents were all over the globe: oriental mystics, South American poets, Henry Miller, Cardinal Montini, poets, pacifists, and strangers who wrote to him because he seemed to be a person who would understand their troubles.

Sometimes the strain of correspondence became too much, as he confessed in a letter to Henry Miller: "People going down for the third time think a letter will keep them afloat. But often what they are going in is itself an illusion. Sometimes I answer, sometimes I can't, and I mean not to worry about it. There is a destiny involved there too. But there is no question that we spend our lives battling mountains of crap, and this is no mean exercise."

If those quotes and correspondence suggest a "different" Merton, it is because some serious biographers lately have been digging out new material. The latest is Monica Furlong, a British writer who had access to Merton's papers at Bellarmine College in Louisville and St. Bonaventure University in New York.

In *Merton: A Biography*. Furlong writes that much of Merton's "struggle on the long road to becoming a contemplative had to do with the problem of identity. The hermit, or just the man who tries to explore solitude, finds himself no longer reassured by the affirmation of others, and may suffer deeply from the emptiness caused by loneliness, feeling that he has ceased to exist. On the far side of this emptiness, Merton believed, there is an identity scarcely dreamed, an identity to be found only in the religious search, and one that sets the contemplative free to love his or her fellow human beings."

Other biographers have said the same.

In *Man Before God*, Frederic Kelly said that "no social commentator in modern times has combined such a deeply contemplative view of reality on such a broad range of topics over such a long period as has Thomas Merton."

What the biographers are telling us is something that readers of Merton will understand for themselves soon after they get into his work: however creative and compassionate he was, he was still struggling to make sense out of the same problems that hound the rest of us.

For someone who had radically changed the ways of his own life—from an oat-sowing student who fathered a child (later killed, with his mother, in a London air raid in World War II) to a recognized spiritual master—Merton overflowed with soft empathy for others who found the going rough.

In 1966, in a Christmas letter to friends, Merton counseled that the "heart can be filled with much pain even when things are exteriorly 'all right.' It becomes all the more difficult because today we are used to thinking that there are explanations for everything. But there is no explanation of most of what goes on in our own hearts, and we cannot account for it all. No use resorting to the kind of mental tranquilizers that even religious explanations sometimes offer. Faith must be deeper than that, rooted in the unknown and in the abyss of darkness that is the ground of our being. No use teasing the darkness to try to make answers grow out of it. But if we learn to have a deep inner patience, things solve themselves, or God solves them, if you prefer. But do not expect to see how. Just learn to wait, and do what you can to help other people, Often in helping someone else we find the best way to bear with our own trouble."

This wasn't a Holy Joe sermon. Merton himself had waited through years of hard pain, much of it coming from the superiors of his own order. His abbot, a wily and conservative character who guarded Merton's image as shrewdly as he marketed the monastery's cheese and fruitcake, kept him under special wraps. Dom James Fox took it as all but a holy cause to restrain Merton when in the mid-1950s he began seriously considering changing to another, more reclusive, order. He put out the word: good Father Louis is a bit neurotic and is having emotional problems.

A few years later, when Merton sought permission to attend outside conferences or to visit other monasteries (routine activities for others in the order), Dom James said no. It was already questionable enough that Merton was writing about civil rights, war and social justice, all of it prompting *The National Catholic Reporter* to call Merton "the public monk." But how would it look if Merton were turned loose? Wouldn't the public delight in following the city capers of the monk whose image was largely built on solitude and silence? And what, the abbot wondered, would become of holy Gethsemani and its reputation for piety? The prospects were frightening. It would take Merton about a week to write his first life-in-the-city book, *The Seven Storey Tenement*, and another week for every Trappist to read it. The same crowd who piled in to Gethsemani on a Merton book would now be flocking out on a Merton book. And who would be left to bake the fruitcakes?

The subterfuge and snideness by which his abbot controlled Merton became unofficial penances. But however much he grumbled about the shabby treatment he received, he did not let the unfairness embitter him.

Rather than withdraw, Merton followed

his own advice. He expanded and became concerned with the suffering of others.

Part of that meant being available to the members of his own community. Among the fathers and brothers of Gethsemani, Merton was revered for the sharing of his gifts. A priest and psychiatrist at Gethsemani wrote that Merton "was a true brother. In our community, he was surely one of the best loved of people. His whole manner was open and outgoing and so constantly enthusiastic that he quickly formed community."

Perhaps Merton formed community in another way, by writing *Seven Storey Mountain* and seeing the book become, for many people, a recruiting pamphlet for the Trappist life. Twenty years after it came out, when Merton was seasoned and well beyond the first fervor in which he wrote of his conversion, he told an interviewer: I left the book behind many years ago... It is a youthful book, too simple, in many ways, too crude. Everything is laid out in black and white ... [it deals in] a clean-cut division between the natural and the supernatural, God and the world, sacred and secular, with boundary lines that were supposed to be quite evident. Since those days, I have acquired a little experience, I think, and have read a few things and tried to help other people with their problems. Life is not as simple as it once looked in *Seven Storey Mountain*. Unfortunately, the book was a best seller, and has become a kind of edifying legend or something. This is a dreadful fate. I am doing my best to live it down."

Part of that living down drew Merton into social issues, helping him to fulfill "my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against, the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny." In a searing essay, which took as a departure the fact that a psychiatrist had examined Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi mass

killer, and pronounced him sane, Merton wrote that “the sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous ... Those who have invented and developed atomic bombs, thermonuclear bombs, missiles; who have planned the strategy for the next war, who have evaluated the various possibilities of using bacterial and chemical agents; these are not the crazy people, they are the sane people. The ones who coolly estimate how many millions of victims can be considered expendable in a nuclear way, I presume they do all right with the Rorschach ink blots too. On the other hand, you will probably find that the pacifists and the ban-the-bomb people are, quite seriously, just as we read in *Time* magazine, a little crazy.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, when the power of Merton’s writing was a trusted force, one of the intellectual comforts was in believing that not only was this gentle and knowledgeable man on the scene but that he would probably be with us for a long time. Living in a rural monastery, where he sometimes chopped wood and spread manure over the fields for physical exercise, Merton was one person in whom the blows and crashes of modern life would bring on no mid-life coronary. He seemed as safe for old age as the prophets. For decades to come, he would be talking to us — exhorting, stirring and blessing—like a patriarch seeking a covenant.

If we knew better the way things go in this world, Merton’s death at 53 would have been less a disquieting event. The manner of his dying was beyond imagining: by electrocution in a Bangkok hotel room after touching the

faulty wiring of a fan.

He had gone to Asia to visit some authorities on Oriental mysticism with whom he had been corresponding for years. The trip was no lark; Merton had spent several years, for example, meditating on the sayings and parables of Chuang Tzu, the Taoist sage who lived in Plato’s time. Merton’s interest in Zen was not the coffeehouse mysticism fashionable in America in the late 1960s (and lingering well into the 1970s). For a start, he understood that the spiritual discipline of Zen is impossible without a matching of moral discipline.

It may well have been that Merton’s trip to the East was a moment of rejuvenation, after a stroke of good luck that saw his old abbot resign and be replaced by a man more sympathetic to Merton’s travel requests. But it is impossible to read *The Asian Journal* without sensing that his understanding of the East was that of someone looking for what Merton called “a new language of prayer.” He wrote as a visitor who was intent on taking something home with him that would be lasting: “I think we have now reached a state of long overdue religious maturity at which it may be possible to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western church.”

As with many persons who did most things well, time is still needed on judgments on what Merton did best. He was a spiritual seeker who, in the tradition of St. John of the Cross and Ruysbroek, elevated religion well beyond the merely pious. He could write strong poetry, as Mark Van Doren said, in which “all the

senses work together to one end, the letting of things declare themselves.” His social criticism was grounded in pacifism. He suspected the idea that a return to paradise is imminent if only the world would get out of America’s way.

However the judgments turn out, evidence exists that Merton saw himself as fragmented by having several vocations within a vocation. A self existed and a God existed, and the point of living is to increase the closeness of the two.

In an essay, “*Is the Contemplative Life Finished?*” Merton wrote that what must happen in the monasteries is much the same that must happen everywhere else, in our homes, schools and worksites: “What each of us has to do and what I have to do is to buckle down and really start investigating new possibilities in our own life; and if new possibilities mean radical changes, all right. Maybe we need radical changes for which we have to struggle and sweat some blood. . . . But on the other hand, let these be real changes and not just neurotic upheaval.”

Thomas Merton currently has two of kinds of readers. One group has been with him all along, friends and followers who put up with the mediocrity of many of his books – the little ground-out devotionals—but who cherish such fecund works as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *The Behavior of Titans*. The other group includes those for whom Merton is a new voice recently discovered, perhaps having heard him for the first time in school or in early adulthood when the need for authenticity and guidance runs deep.

Merton, whatever his role in an individual’s life, was not a man apart. He saw himself simply, as a “self-questioning human person who, like all his brothers, struggles to cope with a turbulent, mysterious, demanding, frustrating, confused existence.”

That is the starting point for everyone—and the ending point, too. The quality of the movement in between measures the worthiness of the struggle.

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