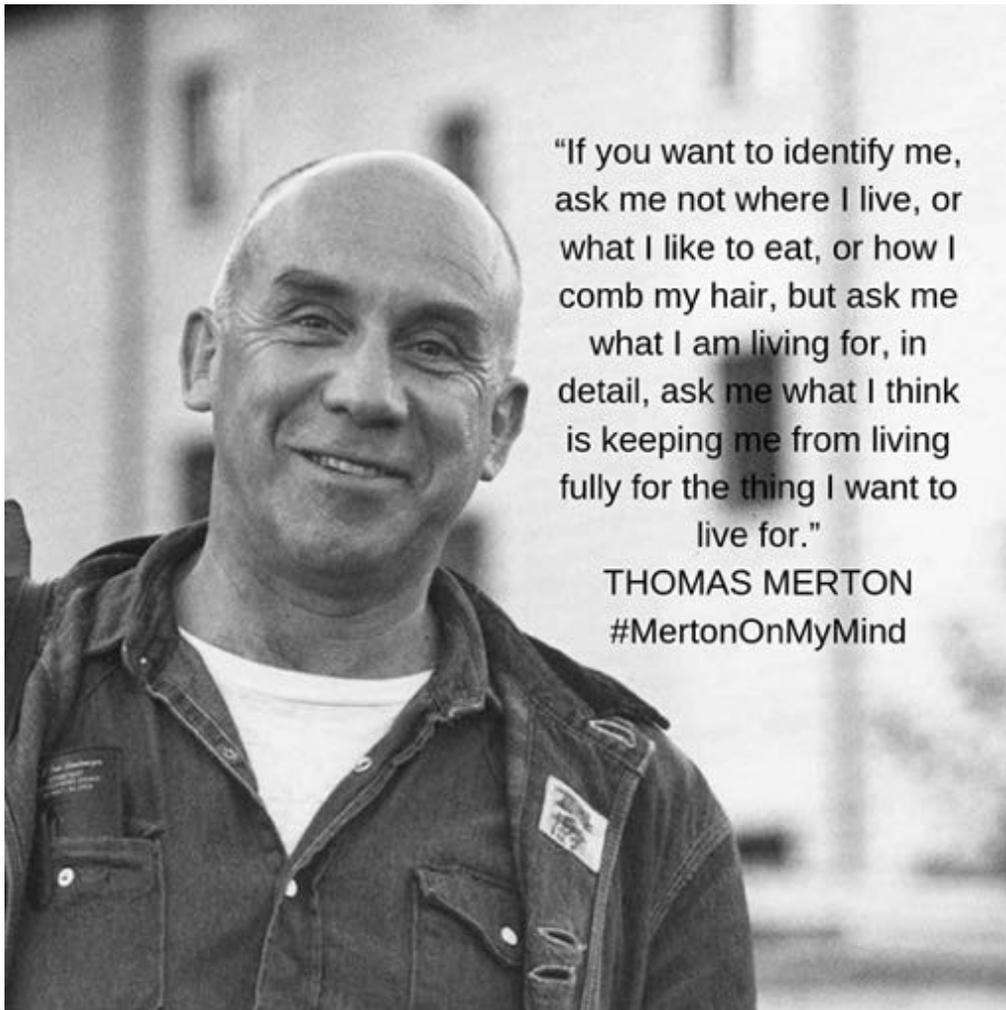

The Humanity of Thomas Merton

With Sophronia Scott

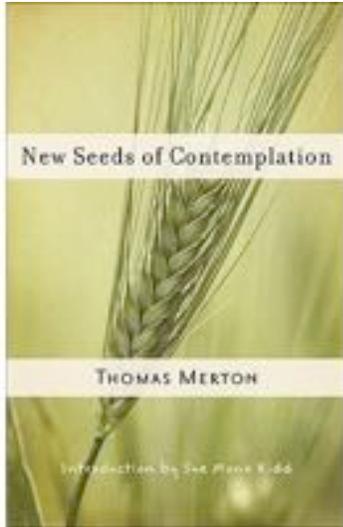


"If you want to identify me,
ask me not where I live, or
what I like to eat, or how I
comb my hair, but ask me
what I am living for, in
detail, ask me what I think
is keeping me from living
fully for the thing I want to
live for."

THOMAS MERTON
#MertonOnMyMind

Session 1: Pray for Your Discovery

“Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individual men. For us, holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but men, never anything but people, we will not be saints and will not be able to offer to God the worship of our imitation which is sanctity.



It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *your* self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours, except in the communism of charity and grace.” —Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 31.

“God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself.

A word will never be able to comprehend the voice that utters it.

But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself. I shall be ‘saved.’” —Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 37.

Does the self intrude?

“Fickleness and indecision are signs of self-love.

If you can never make up your mind what God wills for you, but are always veering from one opinion to another, from one practice to another, from one method to another, it may be an indication that you are trying to get around God’s will and do your own with a quiet conscience.

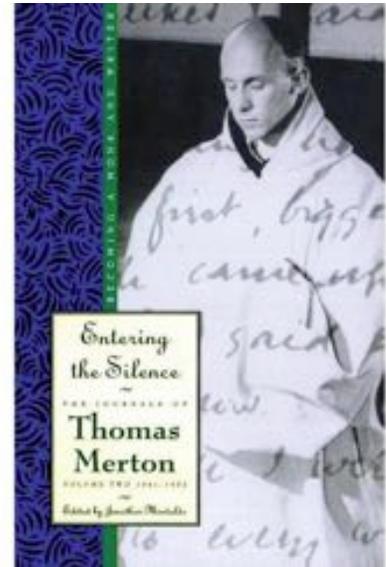
As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another.

As soon as you taste one way of prayer, you want to try another. You are always making resolutions and breaking them by counterresolutions...

So keep still, and let Him do some work.” —Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 260-261. (First published in 1961.)

“God’s love takes care of everything I do. He guides me in all my work and in my reading, at least until I get greedy and start rushing from page to page. It is really illogical that I should get temptations to run off to another monastery and to another Order of monks. God has put me in a place where I can spend hour after hour, each day, in occupations that are always on the borderline of prayer...And yet I am such a fool that I can consent to imagine that in some other situation I would quickly advance to a high degree of prayer. If I went anywhere else, I would almost certainly be much worse off than here. And, anyway, I did not come to Gethsemani for myself but for God. God is my order and my cell. He is my religious life and my rule. He has disposed everything in my life in order to draw me inward, where I can see Him and rest in Him. He has put me in this place because He wants me in this place, and if He ever wants to put me anywhere else, He will do so in a way that will leave no doubt as to who is doing it.”

—Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for January 14, 1947, *Entering the Silence*.



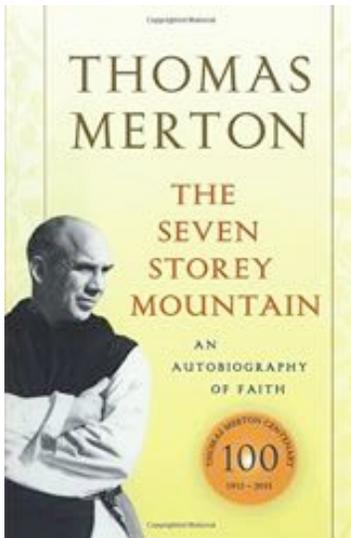
“I really want to do all I can to get *beyond* the static and meaningless situation in which I now find myself. There is no question that in some way I have to burst out of limitations and find a new level of spiritual existence and that conventional means are not going to be very useful. Whether the answer lies in another country or not is no matter. I really would like to start over again somewhere else—it would feel fresh and clean. No sense in just clinging to what I am accustomed to.” —Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for May 10, 1959, *A Search for Solitude*.

Questions to Consider

- *In what ways does your “self” seem to get in the way of your connection to Spirit?*
- *Can this interference be reconciled/accepted or do you have to change? What would acceptance look like?*
- *In what ways are you still learning about yourself?*

Session 2: Spiritual Friendships-Support for the Journey

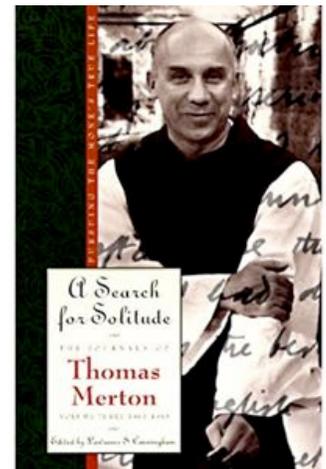
“I needed this support, this nearness of those who really loved Christ so much that they seemed to see Him...I needed to be with people whose every action told me something of the country that was my home: just as expatriates in every alien land keep together, if only to remind themselves, by their very faces and clothes and gait and accents and expressions, of the land they come from.” —Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.



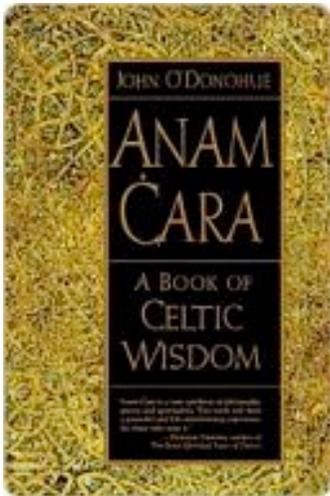
“With other writers I can share ideas, but you seem to communicate something deeper. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings...as if we were known to one another in God.” —Letter from Thomas Merton to Boris Pasternak, October 23, 1958, *The Courage for Truth*.

“[Pasternak’s correspondence] confirmed my intuition of the deep and fundamental understanding that exists between us.

And this is the thing I have been growing to see is most important: *Everything* hangs on the possibility of such understanding which forms our interior bond that is the only basis of true peace and true community. External juridical, doctrinal etc. bonds can never achieve this. And this bond exists between me and countless people like Pasternak everywhere in the world (genuine people like Pasternak are never ‘countless’) and my vocation is intimately bound up with this bond and this understanding for the sake of which also I have to be solitary and not waste my spirit in pretenses that do not come anywhere near the reality or have anything to do with it.” —Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for October 12, 1958 *The Search for Solitude*.



The concept of anam cara



“In the early Celtic church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*. It originally referred to someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the *anam cara* you could share your inner-most self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the ‘friend of your soul.’” —John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*

“[Father John of the Cross] is one of the few men in this monastery who have anything to say in a sermon...What he preaches is really the Gospel” —Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

“Father John of the Cross said I would have less resentment in me if I were more concentrated on doing whatever it is God wills for me and not considering the defects of this institution.” —Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for March 22, 1961, *Turning Toward the World*



Questions to Consider

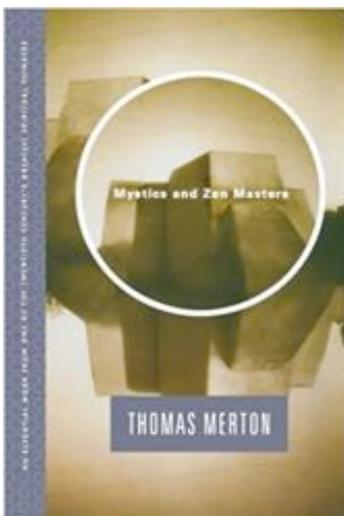
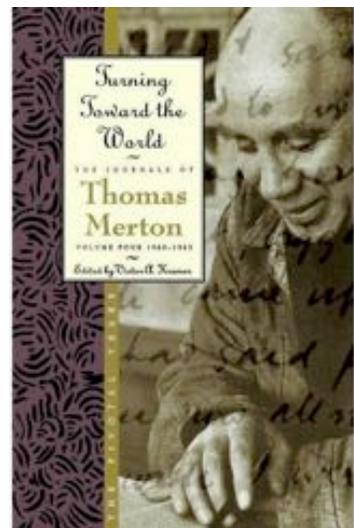
- What is your concept of friendship and how is it different from, or the same as, the concept of *anam cara*?
- What does it mean for you to have a deep friendship such as an *anam cara* in your life?
- In these busy days of social media and “unfriending” and “likes,” how does one go about finding a spiritual friend?

Session 3: Prayer and Connecting to God

“At the moment the writing is the one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude. Also I find that it helps me to pray because, when I pause at my work, I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clean and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found, without hunting, as if He had come close to me while I was writing and I had not observed His coming. And this I think should be the cause of great joy, and to me it is.” —Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for July 20, 1949, *Entering the Silence*.

“I realize how all around me are answers to prayers, as though I were living in the midst of a world that had been all made out of my prayers and needs, *in spite* of everything that went contrary to them. Yet I can live as if God were not living and praying in me! What a fool, what lack of faith! —Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry September 26, 1962, *Turning Toward the World*.

“As soon as I get away from people the Presence of God invades me. And when I am not divided by being with strangers (in a sense anyone I live with will always remain a stranger), I am with Christ.”— Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for June 27, 1949, *Entering the Silence*

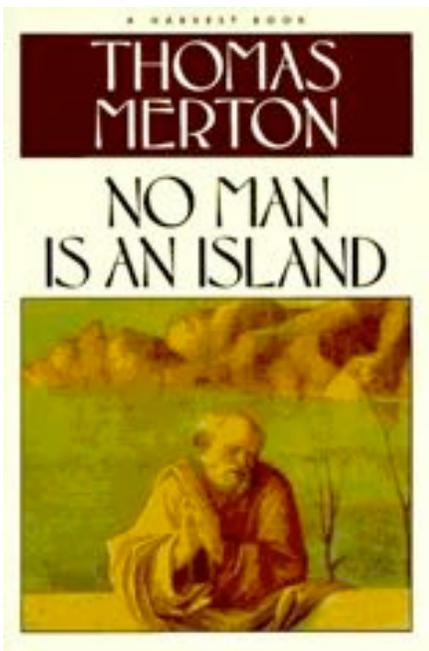


“If we instinctively seek a paradisiacal and special place on earth, it is because we know in our inmost hearts that the earth was given us in order that we might find meaning, order, truth, and salvation in it. The world is not only a vale of tears. There is joy in it somewhere. Joy is to be sought, for the glory of God.”—Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*

How does one strengthen a prayer life?

“I realize now how weak and confused I have become—most of the time I have simply played around and day dreamed and am sadly unequipped to take a real uprooting. Hence the need of prayer and thought and discipline and the self purification.”—Thomas Merton’s Journal Entry for May 7, 1959, *A Search for Solitude*.

“Solitude—when you get saturated with silence and landscape, then you need an interior work, psalms, Scripture, meditation.”—Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*.



“We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. But this is only a secondary end.

The only end that includes all others is the love of God. ... However, the truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul.” —Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 80.

“God our creator has given us a language in which He can be talked about, since faith cometh by hearing and our tongues are the keys that open Heaven to others.

But when the Lord comes as a Bridegroom there remains nothing to be said except that He is coming, and that we must go out to meet Him....

After that we go forth to find Him in solitude. There we communicate with Him alone, without words, without discursive thoughts, in the silence of our whole being.”—Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

Questions to Consider

- How does Centering Prayer deepen your connection to God?
- How do you know when your prayer life needs enlivening?
- Do you find connection with God in nature and if so, how?

Speaker Biography

Sophronia Scott grew up in Lorain, Ohio, a hometown she shares with author Toni Morrison. She holds a BA in English from Harvard and an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She began her career as an award-winning magazine journalist for *Time*, where she co-authored the groundbreaking cover story “Twentysomething,” the first study identifying the demographic group known as Generation X, and People. When her first novel, *All I Need to Get By*, was published by St. Martin’s Press in 2004 Sophronia was nominated for best new author at the African American Literary Awards and hailed by Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as “potentially one of the best writers of her generation.”

Her latest book is *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*. Sophronia’s other books include *Unforgivable Love, Love’s Long Line, Doing Business By the Book*, and *This Child of Faith: Raising a Spiritual Child in a Secular World*, co-written with her son Tain. Her essays, short stories, and articles have appeared in numerous publications including *Yankee Magazine, The Christian Century, North American Review, NewYorkTimes.com*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Her essays “Hope on Any Given Day,” “The Legs On Which I Move,” and “Why I Didn’t Go to the Firehouse” are listed among the Notables in the *Best American Essays* series.

Sophronia is the recipient of a 2020 Artist Fellowship Grant from the Connecticut Office of the Arts. She has taught at Regis University’s Mile High MFA and Bay Path University’s MFA in Creative Nonfiction. She’s also delivered craft talks and held workshops at the Yale Writers’ Workshop, Meacham Writers’ Workshop, and the Hobart Festival of Women Writers. Currently Sophronia is the founding director of Alma College’s MFA in Creative Writing, a low-residency graduate program based in Alma, Michigan. She lives in Sandy Hook, Connecticut where she continues to fight a losing battle against the weeds in her flower beds.