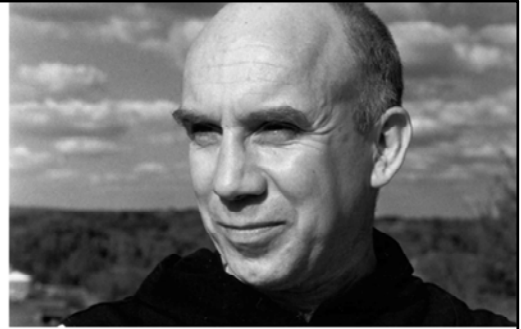


The Impact of Thomas Merton

A TRIBUTE TO ONE HUNDRED YEARS – JANUARY 31, 1915 - 2015



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Today I'm going to share with you a person that continues to have a profound impact on me.

Thomas Merton would have turned 100 at the end of January but died in 1968, just before I turned 6. I found Merton in my mid-30's but really began paying attention to him 10 years later.

Merton intimately shared his spiritual journey in writing with openness and honesty. He spoke about his insights as well as his doubts and struggles.

As I seek to find more purpose and meaning in my life, I continue to turn to Merton's writings for inspiration, courage and confidence. I find a deep solidarity with him as I relate to the experiences, insights and personal struggles he encountered along the way.

My experiences with groups show me how relevant to people his writing is today. The best way I find to share Merton's impact is through his own words - so I'll do that. When you listen to Merton's words, I encourage you NOT to engage intellectually, instead let them touch your heart and soul, like music. That's how they'll have their real impact.

Merton's search for meaning and purpose



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It seems to me that life set up Thomas Merton to seek meaning and purpose. He was born in France during World War I to expatriate artists. He was baptized in the Church of England but didn't practice any faith when he was young. In his youth, Thomas lived in France, the U.S., Bermuda, and England. Thomas's mother died when he was just 6. His father died when Thomas was 16.

He entered Cambridge University in London in 1933 at age 18. **Instead of studying he attended the school of life.** He frequented local pubs with friends and drank heavily. He was very free sexually and with his money. Thomas left Cambridge after that year and went to live with his grandparents in New York where he enrolled at Columbia University. At Columbia he studied harder, became editor of his Yearbook and art editor of the campus newspaper. In January 1938 Merton graduated with a B.A. in English and in 1939 received his M.A..

In November 1938, Merton became a member of the Roman Catholic church. He felt an intense calling to become a priest but was denied entry into the Franciscan order. He went on to teach English at St. Bonaventure University near Olean, NY in 1940. Finally on December 10, 1941, 26-year-old Thomas Merton boarded a train to rural Kentucky to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery where he spent the rest of his life.

Sharing his Spiritual Journey was an integral part of his monastic vocation

In 1948 published *The Seven Storey Mountain* at age 33

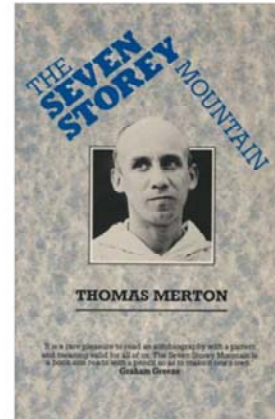
- An overnight best-seller, over 600,000 copies of the first hard copy edition plus millions of copies of the paperback

Published over 70 books, translated into 32 languages

- "Merton never had a thought that wasn't published"

A 3-fold vocation:

To be as good a monk as I can be, and to remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper... with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issue: this is very hard because I am all mixed up in illusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down. But without exaggeration, repetition, useless emphasis. To be frank without being boring ...



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Merton did become a priest at Gethsemani and his Abbot encouraged and supported Merton's talent for writing.

In 1948, when he was 33, he published his autobiography, "The Seven Storey Mountain," an overnight best-seller now considered a Christian classic. People recovering from World War II and the Great Depression, faced with Communism and the threat of world destruction from the atomic bomb found hope and confidence in Merton's words.

Merton became known world-wide. He continued to write, publishing over 70 books during his life that were translated into many languages.

Writing became a core part of his monastic vocation **which he saw as:**

- To be a good monk
- To remain himself
- To write with complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing. To be frank without being boring

Merton's Spiritual Journey

Personal Spirituality (1941 – 1958)

- ❖ True Self
- ❖ Centrality of Love

Engaged Spirituality (1958 – 1968)

- ❖ Non-Violence
- ❖ Peace
- ❖ Nuclear Arms
- ❖ Social Justice

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Though Merton wrote about many themes, like God, Contemplation, Solitude, and others, there are two in particular that I see as foundations of his personal spirituality:

- True Self
- Centrality of Love

His focus on personal spirituality lasted about 17 years until 1958, when he had a wonderful experience that “woke him up” to engage the issues of his time.

True Self

If I do not know who I am, it is because I think I am the sort of person everyone around me wants to be.

Perhaps I have never asked myself whether I really wanted to become what everybody else seems to want to become.

Perhaps if I only realized that I do not admire what everyone seems to admire, I would really begin to live after all. I would be liberated from the painful duty of saying what I really do not think and of acting in a way that betrays God's truth and the integrity of my own soul.

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, ... which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will.

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To me, the foremost contribution that Merton made to modern Spiritual thinking is naming the concept of True Self.

According to Merton, We are so caught up trying to fulfill illusions imposed on us by ourselves and others that we don't see who we are uniquely created to be, our True Self

As Merton says ...

I'm touched by these words to examine those beliefs about my life, what it means to be successful, that seem to run contrary to what I feel and know deeply.

We've changed the focus of the advice we're giving our kids about the type of career they pursue and how they think about it to be true to what they feel deeply inspired to do. See how these words touch you.

Centrality of Love

We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it with another.

We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated meditations.

The meaning of our life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, by the one we love. ...

We will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love – either with another human person or with God.

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Much of Merton's writings focus on the centrality of Love as the way to realize our True Self:

In Merton's words ...

His words really challenge me to see how I experience Love.

On an Ordinary Day in March 1958 ...



In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut,... I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers It was like waking from a dream ...

Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life... though “out of the world,” we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest...

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: “Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others.” ...

I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed

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Wow, deeply life changing realizations like these opened Merton to experience a life-changing event!

There is a sign in Louisville, KY commemorating a mystical experience that Thomas Merton had in March 1958.

The experience happened in the middle of an ordinary day, when Merton was running errands for the monastery in the Louisville shopping district.

Let’s see how Merton describes it...

What an inspiring vision!

Merton's Engaged Spirituality

- ❖ Merton increasingly became a Spiritual Voice of the times
 - ❖ Non-Violence, Peace and Nuclear Arms Race
 - ❖ Social Justice and Civil Rights
 - ❖ Not everyone approved of his involvement
- ❖ His personal contacts were a who's who list of the influential people of his time:

Dorothy Day	Louis Massignon	Ernesto Cardenal
Aldous Huxley	Boris Pasternak	Henry Miller
Pope John XXIII	Joan Baez	Jacques Maritain
Pope Paul VI	Czeslaw Milosz	Rosemary Radford Ruether
Rachel Carson	Erich Fromm	Bob Dylan ...

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During the 1960s Merton took his vision to heart, engaged in the issues of his time and became known as **the conscience of the 1960s**.

His social activism brought Merton severe criticism, from both Catholics and non-Catholics, who called his political writings unbecoming of a monk.

Despite criticism and resistance he continued to engage the world from the monastery, through books and articles but also through personal correspondences with important figures of the time who would often visit him.

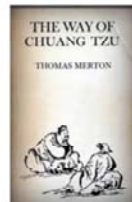
He recognizing race and peace as the two most urgent issues of the time, he strongly supported the nonviolent civil rights movement, which he called "certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States." He also brought his intensity to bear on the proliferation of nuclear arms.

This is a sample of his Social Justice writings from this period:

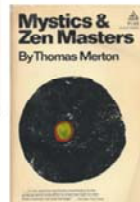
Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom

there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. For them there is no escape even in imagination.

Pioneering Interfaith dialogue and understanding



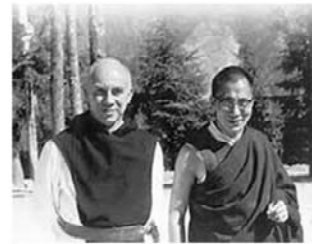
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Merton remained a devoted Catholic, Christian monk his entire life, but he actively worked for inter-faith understanding.

He was particularly taken by Zen Buddhism and published 3 books to bring his understanding of Eastern thought to the West.

In response to Vatican II he attended the first Asian East-West Intermonastic Conference in Bangkok in 1968. Prior to the conference he had a 3-day meeting with the Dalai Lama which deeply impacted them both. After speaking at that conference, Merton stepped out of his bath and was electrocuted by a poorly grounded electric fan. The fatal accident happened on December 10, 1968—exactly 27 years *to the day* after he entered Gethsemani, where his body now lies.

He wrote:

"The more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, by discovering them in myself, the more real I am... if I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it."

The Dalai Lama praised Merton's understanding of Buddhism as more profound than any

Christian he knew. In his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, the Dalai Lama described Merton's visit with him as one of his "happiest memories of this time" and said that it was Thomas Merton who "introduced [him] to the real meaning of the word 'Christian'."

Thomas Merton's Legacy – his lasting impact



Merton's legacy goes far beyond the few worldly things he left behind.

The influences of Merton on and around Louisville are profound. There are societies and numerous Thomas Merton Centers around the world all dedicated to either Spirituality or Social Justice.

He remains a spiritual master well into our time. His writings have continuously been gathered and published, new books and articles are being written on him to this day. There are Merton retreats, conferences and study groups.

Merton inspires countless to deepen their spirituality and insights regardless of whether they actively practice a faith or not. He provided common ground for those various faiths to dialogue.

Certain churches of the Anglican Communion dedicate December 10th as his Feast Day

Thank You Thomas Merton!

On an ordinary Thursday
afternoon in August 2013...



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As in all things spiritual, Thomas Merton's impact is most profoundly felt individually. Through words like I shared with you, Merton made his spiritual journey intimately accessible to all of his readers..

In the summer of 2013 I stopped at the Abbey of Gethsemani to pay tribute to Thomas Merton. As I walked around, I was immediately taken by the peaceful atmosphere of the place and I was moved by just being where Thomas Merton had lived and wrote the many things that inspired me. As I stood before his simple grave, indistinguishable from the other monks buried around him, I became aware of the numerous small personal tributes left by people whose lives he touched. On that ordinary Thursday afternoon in August, in the two hours I was there, I saw 5 other people, who like me, came to pay personal tribute to a man that profoundly touched their lives.

Wow, after nearly 50 years, people still traveling to the middle of nowhere for no other reason than to honor this man and perhaps absorb something of him from this place. Thank You Thomas Merton for the impact you've had on me and the countless others you've touched. We need your wisdom today as much as we ever did.

Extra Slides

Extra Material which didn't fit into my presentation.

Title: The Impact of Thomas Merton

Mike will pay Tribute to the Impact of Thomas Merton on the upcoming 100th date of his birth. Thomas Merton has been named one of the top 100 Spiritual figures of the 20th Century. Merton left a very secular life to become a Catholic monk whose vocation became openly sharing the insights and struggles of his spiritual journey. That journey evolved from personal spirituality to a spirituality engaged in social activism and interfaith outreach.

The Impact of Merton's writings was that they touched people's humanity and spoke intimately to everyone's personal struggle to find a place of depth, connection and of surrender to mystery greater than themselves regardless of their faith beliefs.

Merton's writings made lifelong impacts on millions of people's lives, including Mike. To share Thomas Merton's impact with others, Mike is engaged in his 3rd year of leading group discussions on Contemplative Living based on Merton's writings at the Spiritual Life Center in West Hartford.

Shortly before his untimely death in 1968 Merton spent 3 days with the Dali Lama as part of an interreligious tour of Asia. From the brief time spent together, the Dali Lama has reflected "I always consider myself as one of Thomas Merton's brothers... for the rest of my life the impact of meeting him will remain."

Thomas Merton

Intellectually brilliant with a naturally inquisitive mind

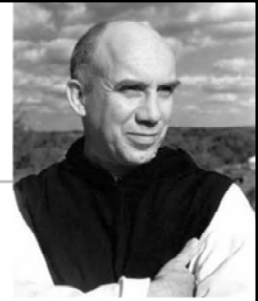
Catholic Monk and Priest

Contemplative, Mystic and Spiritual Master

Writer and Artist – Scores of books, collections of poetry, volumes of journals, plays and a novel, musician, painter, and photographer

- One of the most influential Spiritual writers of the 20th Century

Social Activist and pioneer in East-West Spiritual Dialogue



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How do I simply and succinctly characterize Thomas Merton?

- He had a keen intellect that was always curious.
- His calling to be a Catholic monk and priest provided purpose and structure to a chaotic life.
- His days in the monastery spent in prayer and reflection, simple work and solitude permitted him to struggle at the depths of his soul from which wisdom emerges.
- His search was to truly encounter himself, God and ultimately a connection with others following the way of mystics.
- Though he was an artist in many ways, his true gift was writing and he became one of the most influential Spiritual writers of the 20th Century touching millions of lives.
- His Spiritual Journey inspired him to become an advocate for Peace and Social Justice and he was a pioneer in creating a bridge to other faiths.

What drove Merton to seek a different life...

If what most people take for granted were really true—if all you needed to be happy was to grab everything and see everything and investigate every experience and then talk about it, I should have been a very happy person, a spiritual millionaire, from the cradle even until now...What a strange thing! In filling myself, I had emptied myself. In grasping things, I had lost everything. In devouring pleasures and joys, I had found distress and anguish and fear.

As he reflected on the experience of his first 27 years, Merton saw what drove him to seek a different life. One thing he wrote about was the emptiness he continually felt. He writes...

God (the Divine)

In all situations of life the “will of God” comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love.

Too often the conventional conception of “God’s will” as an arbitrary force bearing down up on us with implacable hostility, leads men to lose faith in a God they cannot find it possible to love... These arbitrary “dictates” of a domineering and insensible Father are more often seeds of hatred than of love.

If that is our concept of the will of God ... We will desire only to fly as far a possible away from Him and hide from His Face forever.

So much depends on our idea of God! Yet no idea of Him, however pure and perfect, is adequate to express Him as He really is. Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him’.

Merton’s encountered a loving God in his quest and realized that God was a Mystery beyond our ability to understand. He found that whatever image we use to describe God only serves to provides important insight into ourselves.

Merton writes ...

I’m personally reassured by his deep encounter with the source of all Reality and I challenge myself to get insights into myself as I come to understand my own images of God.

What does the image of the Divine that you hold tell you about yourself?

Accept reality

You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.

Finally I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. That I will never fulfill my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself, and if I accept myself fully in the right way, I will already have surpassed myself.

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Finally Merton saw life and ourselves as a sacred mystery that we need to openly accept.

How many times do we feel we need to control or predict every moment of our lives? And how often do we think we need to be perfect? If we are loved by God with all our imperfections, we can accept ourselves as well.

Merton writes...

I have found tremendous peace, freedom, presence and awareness when I surrender to the moment, knowing that I have done my part as I best can and open to whatever come in courage, faith and hope and that I can accept myself fully in the same manner, with my strengths and weaknesses.

I know I continually struggle with this, how about you?