''LOVE FOR THE PARADISE MYSTERY''
Thomas Merton: Contemplative Ecologist

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''Love for the paradise mystery''[1] is a dominant motif woven through all the writings of Thomas Merton—a gossamer thread of mystical insight and prophetic urgency that fastens together the assemblage of his multi-focused literary legacy. Now, forty years after his death, a pentimento pattern of ecological consciousness becomes evident throughout his corpus as its complexity and unity become more transparent with time. As the contemporary ecological crisis deepens, we urgently require more than instrumental remedies to stem the life-loss of our ecosphere suffered at human hands. We need a penetrating understanding of the more troubling and mysterious pathology underlying it: why, indeed, have we plundered paradise? This was the difficult ''koan'' Merton carried to fruition over a half-century ago, as he explored the congenital disorientation of spirit that exiles us from our Edenic home in the community of creation. Having suffered such exile, he recovered from it, and taught a holistic therapy of contemplative living that can restore our paradisal consciousness, conscience, and practice. ''Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open …. 'Wisdom,' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.''[2]

The wisdom that focused Merton's attention on the encompassing mystery of paradise was a wisdom based on love: ''love for the wilderness and for its secret laws.''[3] The biblical mythologem of ''paradise'' served as the foundational archetype grounding his wide-ranging discourse on matters of the sacred, providing a metaphorical way to

speak of metaphysical truth: ''the world … made as a temple, a paradise, into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed there to tend it for Him.''[4] Employing a Cistercian hermeneutic, he interpreted the biblical narrative as a perennial meditation on the gift and loss and recovery of paradise.

> The early chapters of Genesis … are precisely a poetic and symbolic revelation of God's view of the universe and of His intentions for man. The point of these beautiful chapters is that God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight. He made man and gave to man the task of sharing in His own divine care for created things. He made man in His own image and likeness, as an artist, a worker, homo faber, as the gardener of paradise.[5]

Entrusted with the earthly paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve—our mythological progenitors—would not simply be another species among the ''innocent nations'' of the biosphere, but collaborators with God in ''governing paradise.''[6] Their partnership was so intimate that the Creator entrusted to these earthlings the naming and knowing of all living things.[7] Such confidential governance implied a dimension of primordial familiarity with the Edenic tribes—an acquaintance at once simple, primitive, religious, and non-violent—which sustained a clear vision of the singular vestige of God in the great multiplicity of creatures.[8] Paradise, then, is a dialectical or bi-valent mystery arising in at least two dimensions simultaneously: at once manifesting in the physical sphere of inexhaustive cosmogenesis; and then emerging *within* the noosphere of human consciousness.[9] In Merton's mind, ''paradise'' is an ontological truth which has an epistemological challenge; it is our vocation, our existential labor, to awaken to ''paradise all around us.''

Awakening to paradise

Merton spent his whole monastic life teaching ways to awaken the paradise mind by the practice of contemplation, a process of deepening subjectivity to access the wellsprings of inherent wisdom. For him, contemplation is the pinnacle of human realization: ''It is life itself fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive … It is gratitude for life, for

awareness, for being.''[10] In contemplative therapy, the psyche researches its own depths in solitude and silence; the senses rest in a cloister of habitual containment and contentment, purified for the work of beholding and befriending the wonders of embodiment. By experientially touching the source of Being ceaselessly breathing within us, we begin to recognize its sweetness and purity conspiring with all forms of life. Trading breath for breath, the work of recovering paradise unfolds in a mutual sense of indwelling: creature within the Creator; Creator within the creature. Biophilic respect for incarnate divinity reawakens with this Edenic restoration, as the contemplative learns to see in ''all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.''[11] Contemplation, then, is the sacred therapeutic practice which evokes and nurtures paradise mind, a cultivated wisdom that rises up in wordless gentleness and flows to all creation: ''… at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.''[12]

Merton's joy in the vivid experience of an encompassing Eden, however, suffered the cross beam of anguish at humankind's capacity to miss it, run from it, refuse it, wreck it. ''The creative love of God was met, at first, by the destructive and self-centered refusal of man: an act of such incalculable consequences that it would have amounted to the destruction of God's plan, if that were possible.''[13] Throughout his literary corpus one hears a profound lamentation for humanity's refusal to be with God the governors and gardeners of paradise, choosing instead a vocation of desecration and de-creation.[14] In stark language he speaks of the inversion of human consciousness—the loss of paradise mind—which constitutes our fall into amnesia of our edenic neighborhood, giving rise to a sense of separation and isolation from the community of creation. The fruit of this alienation is wholesale death by way of murder—murder of the eco-sphere, and even the murder of God, not so much by willful malice as by a new code of perverse consciousness.

> The specific characteristic of this new consciousness, which if not the scientific consciousness is nonetheless a scientific consciousness, is that it excludes the kind of wisdom and initiation we have discovered…by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a

> communion in cosmic awareness and in nature…a wisdom based on love … apprehended almost unconsciously in the forest; love for the ''spirits'' of the wilderness and of the cosmic parent (both Mother and Father)….[15]

Our species has forgotten our true name and nature, our true home and vocation. Centering ourselves on ourselves we have lost our center in Being Itself; therefore we do not know who and what and where we really are. Like Prometheus and the Prodigal—two other recurring themes in Merton's work—we resort to stealing from God the inheritance of vital being that is freely and unfailingly given.[16] This confusion, a self-inversion, constitutes our existential crisis, our deepest disorientation as we run from the source of life to our own productions and generations of fictitious existence. Squandering ourselves in a fragmenting disbursement of consciousness, we fall into dysfunctional unconsciousness—a mindless, trustless, fearful, and rapacious pursuit of life, destructive of our own and Earth's well-being. Like a voice in the wilderness of our self-wrought desolation, Merton cries out for the recovery of our paradise mind and home-ground through the work of contemplative conversion.

> Take thought … Take thought … Take thought of the game you have forgotten. You are the child of a great and peaceful race … an unutterable fable. You were discovered on a mild mountain. You have come up out of the godlike ocean. You are holy, disarmed, signed with a chaste emblem. You are also marked with forgetfulness. Deep inside your breast you wear the number of loss. Take thought … Do this. Do this. Recover your original name.[17]

Recovering paradise

The Christian tradition finds in Thomas Merton both a narrator and a narrative of ways to recover paradise. He spent his life listening with his whole sensorium to the voice of the Word Incarnate spelling itself out in the inexhaustive creativity of an unfolding universe. What he heard with the ear of his heart was the song of a cosmos reverberating the glory

and wonder of Being, inviting us into experiential communion by thanksgiving and praise. Merton's attendance to the mystery of paradise began early in life, fostered by the aesthetic instruction of his parents, Owen Merton and Ruth Jenkins, both landscape artists. His mother records in her baby book of Tom's development, that he had from infancy a near ecstatic response to the natural world, singing pagan hymns of praise to sun and river and cloud,[18] a form of ecstatic utterance that would become a signature of his nature writing: ''For my part my name is that sky, those fence-posts, and those cedar trees ….''[19]

His father Owen mentored Tom's childhood practice of natural contemplation by modeling a vivid, intense, and reverent way of looking at the world, and a disciplined capacity to observe the natural environment with patience and discrimination.[20] This inherently sacramental way of beholding reality was also conditioned by his Welch Celtic temperament, the acknowledgement of which in later life helped him understand his passion for words, woods, and wilderness. It inspired his openness to a hierophanic cosmos where the radiant Spirit was palpably perceived as animating and manifesting throughout creation. It accounted for his parallax vision of spiritual and bodily realities interweaving and interlacing themselves ''like manuscript illuminations in the Book of Kells.''[21] It inspired his own quest for the earthly paradise sought by his Celtic monastic ancestors who set themselves adrift in skin boats on wild seas in search of their place of resurrection.[22]

Such naturalist sensibilities were made more explicit by his encounter with the Franciscan tradition during his time at Columbia University in the late 1930s, particularly in his academic *lectio* of the great Franciscan theologians Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. Their elucidation of the vestiges or footprints of divinity patterning the natural world gave metaphysical depth to Merton's experience of physical allurement. He heard Francis's canticle of creation resonating in Blake and Hopkins who sharpened his capacity to see the inscape and essential sanctity of creatures, as he later celebrated in one of his countless nature poems:

> For like a grain of fire
> smoldering in the heart of every living essence
> God plants His undivided power –
> Buries His though too vast for worlds

> In seed and roots and blade
> and flowers.[23]

Merton was learning to see that God shines not on creation but from within it, gently speaking in ten thousand things one divine wisdom. And it was such wisdom articulated by Catholic authors that led him to seek baptism in the Church, and soon after to ask admission to the Franciscan Order. But the Franciscans were not ready for Merton, and their refusal sent him to the Trappists whose hospitality was hospice for his wounded and disoriented soul.

When Merton arrived at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941 he was deeply contaminated by ''the world'' virus that had left him nearly crazy, in need of healing and recovery—in need of rebirth. He would later describe the soul-sickness he shared with his contemporaries to be an auto-immune disease of the spirit infecting the whole planet: ''we destroy everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, in every way.''[24] He sensed our violence to be symptomatic of a collective self-loathing, especially in the affluent world where we have numbed and drugged, with the artificial stuff of things, our deepest hungers for communion with creatures, the cosmos, and divinity. Once inside the monastic cloister, Merton found a safe haven in which to heal the deep afflictions of his alienated, fragmented soul. In this new environment of monastic silence and solitude, song and study, manual labor and meditation, Merton revived. He began to gather the self he had squandered in the disorienting ego-projects of his early life. Gethsemani felt like coming home to this wounded orphan man; it felt at last like the prodigal's reunion with the longed for Father, Adam's return to paradise. And the Earth itself—the beautiful expanse of the monastic enclosure—was powerful medicine for his anemic soul.

> I have not written what a paradise this place is, on purpose. I think it is more beautiful than any place I ever went to for its beauty—anyway it is the most beautiful place in America. I never saw anything like the country. A very wide valley—full of rolling and dipping land, woods, cedars, dark green fields—maybe young wheat. The monastery barns—vineyards … And in the window comes the good smell of full fields.[25]

Paradise mystic

In Gethsemani Merton learned that the quest for paradise was an explicitly Cistercian habit of heart, practiced in place by a vow of stability. The more his spirit settled in its new pastoral environment the easier it was to do the opening of soul and sensorium which Cistercian life invited. He was carried toward Eden by the rounds of daily prayer in choir, chanting hymns of the new creation with over a hundred monks who likewise were seeking paradise. In the company of ''the innocent nations'' of living beings he worked in the fields and the forest; they became his greater community, teaching him their sanity and simplicity. ''Forest and field, sun and wind and sky, earth and water'' all spoke the same silent language, reminding him that he had come to the monastery to develop like the things that grew all around him.[26] When Merton asked for greater solitude in the wilderness, his abbot named him forester, a job he relished because it allowed him to speak more freely and intimately with the sylvan world around him: ''My brother and sister, the light and the water. The stump and the stone. The tables of rock. The blue, naked sky. Tractor tracks, a little waterfall … solitude.''[27] Eden was luring him on. The hermit bug had bitten him and he was swollen with the yearning for greater contemplative depth. Finally in 1965 he moved to a cinderblock cabin in the woods, a hermitage of his own where his practice of natural contemplation could deepen.

> There is no question for me that my one job as a monk is to live this hermit life in simple and direct contact with nature, primitively, quietly, doing some writing, maintaining such contacts as are willed by God and bearing witness to the value and goodness of simple things and ways, loving God in all of it. I am more convinced of this than of anything else in my life and I am sure it is what He asks of me.[28]

The hermitage became his re-birth chamber, and in the final years of life the labor pangs could be hard. He was sometimes infirm, lonely and at times depressed. He was conscious of living not just under the moon but under the bomb—SAC planes regularly skimmed the sky above his hermitage, so close that he could look up into the belly of the apocalyptic cherub and see its cargo. Yet he was in his Eden and he knew all the

trees in his ecosphere, could name all the birds in his choir: ''I know the birds in fact very well, for there are exactly fifteen pairs of birds living in the immediate area of my cabin and I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance.''[29] There was a mental ecology too, a psychic commune of immortal poets, sages, philosophers, psalmists and prophets with whom he shared the deep vegetation of a forest more ancient than his: ''…the deep forest in which the great birds Isaias and Jeremias sing. When I am most sickened by the things that are done by the country that surrounds this place I will take out the prophets and sing them in loud Latin across the hills and send their fiery words sailing south over the mountains to the place where they split atoms for the bombs in Tennessee.''[30]

Merton's world also contained the non-ecology, ''the destructive unbalance of nature, poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the waters contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged with machinery, the houses of farmers falling apart because everybody goes to the city and stays there ….''[31] But Merton stayed in place, his vow of stability rooting him to his sylvan paradise. In some mysterious way he felt condemned to it, yet he could not have enough of the hours of silence when nothing happens: ''When the clouds go by. When the trees say nothing.''[32] But one tree ever spoke to him in silence: ''the most beautiful of all the trees in the garden, at once the primordial paradise tree, the axis mundi, the cosmic axle, and the Cross.[33]

> I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and, with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone, in the silence of the night. It is necessary for me to live here alone without a woman, for the silence of the forest is my bride and the sweet dark warmth of the whole world is my love, and out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world ….[34]

Unexpectedly, in 1966, a woman did appear to breach the cloister of his heart and fill his woods with her presence. He had encountered her symbolically years before in premonitory waking and sleeping dreams. In

her psychic form she was a young Jewess whom he called ''Proverb''; when she visited poetically under the aspect of a nurse, he called her ''Sophia.''[35]

> Let us suppose that I am a man lying asleep in a hospital … a soft voice awakens me from my dream. I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world … like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the Earth … into a unity of love. It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia … Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in a hospital. Awakening out of languor and darkness, out of helplessness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness. It is like being awakened by Eve … in Paradise. In the cool hand of the nurse is the touch of all life, the touch of the Spirit.[36]

Two years before his death, Proverb, Sophia, Eve came to Merton incarnately. She was indeed a beautiful young student nurse assigned to care for him during his hospitalization for back surgery. Her own name was Margie. Merton was startled by the mysterious destiny of their encounter that offered him a rare experience of human communion. She became his sacrament of Eden, the beloved soul-mate he had never known before, and he celebrates their impossible relationship in paradisal metaphors throughout his *Midsummer's Journal*,[37] a collection of meditations written for her during their brief romance. But however redolent of paradise, their love was not to be consummated in this world, and Merton expressed the primacy of his espousal to the forest in a farewell letter to M.:

> Why do I live alone? I don't know … it would be much more wonderful to be all tied up in someone … and I know inexorably that this is not for me … Freedom, darling. This is what the woods mean to me. I am free, free, a wild being, and that is all that I ever can

> really be …. I am telling you: this life in the woods is IT. It is the only way. It is the way that everybody has lost … it is life, this thing in the woods …. All I can say is that it is the life that has chosen itself for me.[38]

The two remaining years of Merton's life afforded an opportunity to travel to Alaska, California, and New Mexico in search of a new hermitage site that would allow deeper penetration into the sacred mysteries of the natural world. His joyous explorations of the numinous Earth accelerated his soul's journey into nature. Merton's paradise mind was expanding, and his journals from this period read like the geo-logues of an edenic poet.[39] ''The new consciousness. Reading the calligraphy of snow and rock from the air. A sign of snow on a mountainside as if my own ancestors were hailing me. We bump. We burst into secrets.''[40]

At last, in 1968, there was the journey to Asia, a lengthy pilgrimage that awakened him to the revelation of mountains as much as to the masters of the several Buddhist traditions he had gone to encounter. ''O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin Yang place of opposites in unity! … The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until … nothing more needs to be said ….''[41] Soon nothing more would be said; he was coming to his final illuminating station, wordless, empty, ready. He called it the most significant religious experience of his life, and, as it was in the beginning, it happened in a paradisal garden, the Buddhist cloister of Polonnaruwa, where trees, rocks, statues and sky all made evocations of Eden, just days before his death in Bangkok. On the other side of the world, Merton's paradise mind opened in ''a beautiful and holy vision,'' tripped by a monumental image of the Buddha reclining in his deathless passing, radiating the truth of things: all is emptiness and compassion. ''I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.''[42] Within days of that edenic experience Merton was himself in the repose of deathless sleep, having solved the great mystery.

Prophet of paradise

The legacy that Merton leaves is not simply a rapturous poetics about creation but also a disturbing challenge to humankind's unconscionable

irresponsibly regarding our stewardship of even the most humble elements of Earth: ''the life that moves without being seen and cannot be understood.''[43] What the creation mystic celebrated in exquisite verse, the steely eco-prophet voiced with thunder: that the cause and the cure for Earth's degradation lay in the structures of human consciousness. He challenged us to come to our senses again, and cultivate the contemplative affluence that knows how useless it is ''to look for what is everywhere,'' how ''hopeless to hope for what cannot be gained because you already have it.''[44]

Over fifty years ago Thomas Merton, the ecological prophet, knew what most of us are just waking up to: ours is a moment of supreme crisis presenting an almost incomprehensible emergency, and now, for the sake of planetary survival, ecological thinking has to become the hallmark of the new millennium.[45] Environmentalist Bill McKibbon calls our moment the end of nature;[46] geographer Jared Diamond calls it a civilizational collapse.[47] More ambivalently, geologian Thomas Berry calls it the end of the Cenozoic Age of planetary flourishing and the precipitous dawn of the Ecological Age when humankind, for the sake of survival, is challenged to learn a new mode of being on and with and as the Earth.[48] Our planet, our mother Gaia, which from her awesome beginnings has bountifully and mysteriously sustained the life of incalculable species, has been so violated and exhausted by her most recent offspring that her own survival is now in the hands of that youngest, reckless child.

While preparing this essay I spent a day in Merton's hermitage and found there *The Rule of Benedict*, patriarch of Western monasticism, which was the foundation of Merton's life as a Trappist monk. In reading again the manifesto of one of the great religious transformers of all time, I realized how formative that vision was for Merton, and how deeply he had imbibed and transmitted its restorative wisdom. Benedict offered not just a teaching of sane and wholesome human life within the greater biosphere, but possessed the genius and skill to encode it in a rule, incarnate it in a social body, fathering a family and a cultural tradition that in turn midwifed a new civilization. During his twenty-six year tenure under its suasion, Merton sensed himself to be a custodian and evolver of the Benedictine charism in Trappist form, reminding us that ''in the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees

which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air.''[49]

A feature of Benedict's greatness is that he instinctively sensed the end of the world as he knew it, and he allowed that knowing to inform a radical response—a survival response in utopian form. He and his disciples imagined another way to construct a human society, other values, other configurations of just and non-violent life and development, a harmonious integration of the human within the great commune of creation, in light of the mystery of Christ and under the inspiration of the Gospel. One might argue that Benedict's world was not all that unlike our own, since we too are witnessing the collapse of a civilization built on our cherished and ubiquitously operative ideologies, and the technologies that underwrite them.

Benedict's apocalypse was the climax of a thousand year reign of Imperial Rome with its order, stability, complexity, and glorious achievements undone by spiritual and moral vacuity, its over extension, its militarization, its enslavement of weaker peoples and of the Earth itself; its oppression of both human and other-kind in its insatiable quest for power, pleasure, possession. Likewise, Merton and others would argue, we are suffering the climax of modern civilization—our petro-chemical age—and the technological and economic infrastructures that sustain it.[50] Our world-dream, under construction since the Enlightenment and fueled by the Industrial Revolution, peaked in the mid-twentieth century, just around the time Merton began his prophetic writing on the crises of our world. Built on both religious and secular millennial visions of unlimited progress, modernity was driven by materialist ideologies of human salvation and an uncritical faith in science and technology. And now, powered by a universally extractive economy, a triumphant capitalist ethos has wrapped the industrial/technological bubble around the globe, and at great cost in its progress.[51]

> There is no … wretchedness so dismal as affluence. Wealth is poison. There is no misery to compare with that which exists where technology has been a total success. I know these are hard saying …. But do you imagine that if you become as prosperous as the United States you will no longer have needs? Here the needs are even greater. Full bellies have not brought peace and satisfaction

> but dementia, and in any case not all the bellies are full either. But the dementia is the same for all.[52]

This modern *imperium* has required the carnage of countless beings to secure its hegemony over land, peoples, and resources. It has invented an arsenal of lethal weaponry capable of incinerating the whole planet. Although Merton did not have our statistical grids to map the dimensions of systemic destruction, he intuitively understood how our capitalist imperium has enslaved, impoverished or trafficked 70 percent of the human world, and left the whole biota—indeed even our geologic foundations—in trauma.

> The population of the affluent world is nourished on a steady diet of brutal mythology and hallucination, kept at a constant pitch of high tension by a life that is intrinsically violent in that it forces a large part of the population to an existence which is humanly intolerable … the problem of violence then is … the problem of a whole structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable, and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions …. Violence today is white-collar violence, the systematically organized bureaucratic and technological destruction of man … massively organized … murder machine which threatens the world with destruction.[53]

As Rome fell from its classical form of hubris, we are falling by a modern variety all our own (as the current economic crisis portends). Even in the early 1960s Merton sensed the tectonic plates of unsustainable commerce and insatiable consumption dangerously shifting beneath us. He realized in horror that it was not just an empire falling, but the platform of creation itself, falling under the weight of our wants, our greed, our ignorance and arrogance, our waste, our need, our mechanization, our militarization, our exponentially increasing population that stands at the top of a food chain on the verge of depletion. Our planet, once the support of all life, now herself needs life-support, and for the most part, until this moment, the generational cohorts of modernity—particularly our captains of industry and government—have been clueless. Now we face ecocide and find ourselves bereft of even the moral and legal categories to address it.

If ever a world needed Merton's ecological wisdom and prophecy, it is ours: because half the world's tropical and temperate forests are now gone, half the wetlands, a third of the mangroves, twenty percent of the corals, ninety percent of the large predator fish, and seventy-five percent of the oceans are fished to capacity; because deforestation of the tropics continues at about an acre a second, and there are over two-hundred dead zones in the seas; because forty percent of U.S. fish species are threatened with extinction, a third of plants and amphibians, twenty percent of birds and mammals, and everywhere Earth's ice fields are melting; because species are disappearing a thousand times faster than ever. We are in an extinction spasm and the world of nature is disappearing by our own hand.[54]

> Almighty and merciful God, Father of all, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, Lord of History, whose designs are inscrutable, whose glory is without blemish, whose compassion is inexhaustible, in your will is our peace … In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient architecture of peace [and sustainability] we may also take the last step across the rim of chaos. Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate confusions, teach us to understand ourselves.[55]

Eco-monasticism and eco-spirituality

As Benedict and his disciples inspired the emergence of a new civilization by awakening and disciplining the spiritual energies of *his* generation, Merton believed that it is given to us to do the same for ours. Indeed, as Merton demonstrated time after time and taught the young monks in his care, the Benedictine ethos carries over with uncanny congruence to our own age with our need for the very vision, values and virtues Benedict proposed. Aware that in every generation, the human being must learn how to be ''earthling'' in Christian form, Benedict convened his first monastic school for the Lord's service, fashioning a holding environment for the rehabilitation and renewal of the human person. In this school, the highest merit goes to those who have mastered the creaturely way of humility, recovering their real status as members of the planetary community of living beings. His transformative curriculum of *lectio divina, ora et labora, conversatio morem, opus dei*,[56] a

radical hospitality to all forms of life, and profound obedience to the voice of the Logos, was intended to cultivate the true self of the disciple. In such a school, as Merton the monk would discover, one's conscious center would in time become ''the teeming heart of natural families.''[57] For such education one is awarded no diploma: ''one graduates by rising from the dead.''[58]

The wisdom of Benedictine teaching and practice in our time of planetary crisis may be evolving into its most mature and necessary expression, and Merton remains its most prophetic interpreter. It holds out to the rest of the Christian community and the world at large, a model and method for reinventing the human being for an ecological age.[59] Its fundamental values and virtues, so eloquently elaborated by Merton, still beg embodiment: simplicity, frugality, fairness in distribution of resources, mindfulness in our habits of living. It is no coincidence, then, that the first pope of this new millennium should take Benedict for his namesake and patron. Modeling a response to the ecological mandates that spring from Saint Benedict's ecological values, the new Pope has reforested the Hungarian landscape with Vatican energy-offsets, rendering Catholic headquarters carbon neutral—the first nation state to do so. He has identified ecological sins for repentance in our disordered relation to creation, a list that could have been written by Merton.[60] Sounding many of Merton's themes, Benedict XVI's recent statements reiterate Benedict's call to blessed simplicity, to a sense of limits in order to transcend the anthrocentric egoism that is threatening the community of Earth by reducing everything to an object for human use, abuse, consumption, contamination, entertainment, adornment. Like Merton, the Pope also calls us to comprehend our environmental crisis as a spiritual crisis at root, and sets the practice of obedience on an ecological horizon: ''obedience to the voice of the Earth,'' the most important voice for our future happiness.[61] ''Existence itself, our Earth, speaks to us. We have to learn to listen,'' warns the Pope.[62] But Merton takes the work of obedience even further:

> Obedient unto death … Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian, in a technological society, toward … God's creation and God's will for creation. Obedience to God's will for nature and

> for man—respect for nature and love for man—in the awareness of our power to frustrate God's designs for nature and for man—to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste.[63]

Thomas Merton rehearsed his obedience to the voice of the Earth in conversation with countless dialogue partners. Three letters to women, in particular, offer insight into his prophetic sense of urgency regarding our ecological crisis. The first letter was written on January 12, 1963, to the mother of the environmental movement, Rachel Carson. He had just read her ground-shifting book, *Silent Spring*, her exposé of the catastrophic consequences of DDT use for pest control. Merton saw in this one instance the ubiquitous pathology of our technological civilization: the industrial-chemical assault on nature.

> The awful responsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself. The same mental processing—I almost said mental illness—seems to be at work in both cases, and your book makes it clear to me that there is a consistent pattern running through everything we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life.[64]

Though Merton could not name this pathology explicitly, he insisted that the most urgent work of his moment was to diagnose its roots and try to find a cure for its cause. His own suspicion, echoed throughout his writings, was stark and stunning: ''I would dare to say the sickness is perhaps a very real and very dreadful hatred of life as such, of course subconscious, buried under our pitiful and superficial optimism about ourselves and our affluent society.''[65]

Because the dis-ease was at root a malady of soul, the healing therapy must address the soul: ''The evil in the world is all our own making, and it proceeds entirely from our ruthless, senseless, wasteful, destructive, and suicidal neglect of our own being. This moral and spiritual disease is manifesting itself daily in symptoms that are more and more critical.''[66]

''The neglect of being'' is a familiar theme in Merton's work, the root cause of all our violence.[67] Failing to cultivate an inner affluence though contemplative living, we turn outward in an addictive pursuit of material affluence by embezzling the abundant planet. In order to survive in the style we want, we instinctively destroy everything on which our survival depends.[68] As with all addiction, the frustration of dissatisfied desire generates despair and a kind of self loathing. The awful fruit of that despair is an indiscriminate destructiveness. Beware says Merton: one cannot steal heaven or its vitality, as he often reminds us in his discourses on the pathos of Prometheus, the anxious thief of the primordial gift of existence itself.[69] Then Merton does what he will do in each of these three letters: he rehearses with Carson his understanding of the fall and original sin—an impulse to turn against life itself.[70] In every instance he reveals the depth of his life-long *lectio* of the Book of Genesis, and the consistency of his commentary in verdant themes of biophilic rapture and regret, awe and alarm. [71]

> The whole world itself … has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a ''paradise'' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and the most wonderful interrelationship between ….
> Man's vocation was to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye of the body … But man has lost his ''sight'' and is blundering about aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God. It is in thinking that he sees, in gaining his power and technical know-how, that he has lost his wisdom and his cosmic perspective.[72]

Against the tapestry of the paradise tradition Merton laments our lost ability to read the scripture of nature and find our joy in it. He tells us that the duty of modern persons is to recover this ecological sight and insight, that we might see again the footprints of the Creator as signs of divine presence walking with us in the garden of Earth. Faithful to the spirit of Benedict, he tells Carson that it is the ''vocation'' of the modern person to unite our technics and wisdom in a supreme humility. Only humility can heal the hubris of the technologized psyche that

perverts natural perspectives and denies our embeddedness in nature: ''Denial of this only results in madness and cruelties.''[73]

But can we recover, and how can we recover? The question, unanswered in 1963, is passed on to us, nearly a half-century later, nearly too late. And then, this postscript of hope: ''A dangerous situation after all has certain spiritual advantages.''[74]

The second letter, written nearly five years later, is a reply to Barbara Marx Hubbard, the nascent futurist scholar and founder of the Foundation for Conscious Evolution. Merton was one of a number of creative thinkers she invited to dialogue about how to awaken ''the spiritual, social, and scientific potential of humanity, in harmony with nature for the highest good of all life.''[75] Merton's response reveals his mounting sense of urgency regarding our planetary crisis: ''There can be no question whatever that mankind now stands at one of the crucial thresholds of his existence. In some sense it is the most crucial, since the entire future is to a great extent in his own hands … he can decide not just for himself … but for the whole … He can commit the future to a certain quality of life or no life at all.''[76]

Now the human plays God with life in earnest. The edenic themes that ever fascinated Merton are writ large across a progressively ravaged earthscape. His hurried letters to Hubbard summarize much of his thinking: the roots of our crises lay in our structures of consciousness; the only way forward is in the reformation of human habits. *Conversatio morem* meets the noosphere as the moment by moment means of evolving human nature. Reaching toward hope once again he says salvation is still possible if we commit to new imperatives—a radical non-violence and non-exploitation of the living world. Biophilia is the only way forward—the recovery of our love and respect for life. Moreso, we must come into such intimacy with the life process that we instinctively, intuitively reverse the anxious habits of egoic self-survival with a trust ''not in our own chances in a crap shoot,'' but in the inner dynamism of life itself.[77]

Perhaps most instructive are his final remarks to Hubbard distinguishing between the two conflicting mind-states of our post-modern cohort: millennial consciousness and ecological consciousness.[78] Millennial thinking sees the world as a provisional staging ground for some future religious, political or economic utopia arrived at by *metanoia*,

conversion, or revolution. Its focus is human benefit, and in its secular forms is driven by Promethean hubris, a careless and stupid exploitation of the planet for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreparable loss in living species and natural resources. But ecological thinking says this: ''Look out! … you run the risk of forgetting something. We are not alone in this thing. We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them. If we are to enter into a new era, well and good, but let's bring the rest of the living along with us.''[79]

Merton closes his letter to Hubbard by invoking Albert Schweitzer and conservationist Aldo Leopold who give Merton language to summarize his understanding of ecological consciousness: a profound sense of the sacrality of all forms of life, requiring an ecological conscience to sustain it that expands the ethic of the Golden Rule. ''A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.''[80]

The last illuminating conversation is from Merton's correspondence with feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, also written in 1967. Though the volley of letters goes on for two years and covers many subjects in a range of emotional valences, most interesting are Merton's seminal thoughts on eco-monasticism. The letters between them are contentious. Ruether is leveling a fierce challenge to Merton's monastic choice as archaic, anomalous, institution bound, in service of its own mythology. The struggle for the realm of God is in the world, she insists, against the principalities and powers that hold it captive. In great detail the liberation theologian recounts for the Trappist hermit the creation-denying ethos and praxis of monasticism, its history of flight from the real world of conflict to the romantic refuge of nature. There is only one validating posture for contemporary monasticism, she insists: become a ministry to the world for the world. ''If monasticism could view itself as a ministry, as a place to which the whole church could have recourse as a place of contemplation, but contemplation for the sake of the main arena of salvation which takes place precisely in the sphere of historical action, then it could take on a new relevance for modern persons.''[81]

Merton's answer to her is immediate and visceral, sounding the fundamental ecological import of monastic structures and sensibility:

> … monastic life is in closer contact with God's good creation and is simpler, saner more human than life in the supposedly pleasurable world. One of the things I love about my life … is the fact that I live in the woods and according to a tempo of sun and moon and season in which it is naturally easy to walk in God's light … through his creation. I seldom have to fuss with … ''recollecting myself'' … All you do is breathe and look around ….[82]

Merton reminds Ruether again of the root monastic charism: freedom from those very same powers and principalities that enslave the blind, disoriented millions who so destructively thrash about in an unrecognized paradise.[83] Hardly creation denying, it is the monastic person, entrained by the rhythms of the day and the round of the seasons, grounded by the vow of stability, who really knows the land which supports his or her existence. No, he says, monastics are the remnant of desperate conservationists. ''You ought to know what hundreds of pine saplings I have planted myself and with the novices only to see them bulldozed by some ass a year later.''[84]

In the late 1950s, tree planting and reforestation were not sentimental gestures in a region ravaged by coal and lumber companies. In fact Merton considered it a monastic responsibility to aid in reforesting the eroding woods. Could he ever have imagined what mountain top removal would do to the beloved bioregion which he had come to know so intimately and with which he lived so responsively? And on what front-line would this tree-hugging ''hermit'' position himself today in the devastating global wars of deforestation? One might hear him cheer the eco-monks of Thailand in their protective ordinations of vulnerable trees in the threatened forests of Asia.[85] Today these Buddhist monks play out more courageously and prophetically his own facetious offer to Rosemary Reuther forty years ago, that American monks should protect and administer our national forests.[86]

> In a word, to my mind the monk is one who not only saves the world in a theological sense, but saves it literally, protecting it

> against the destructiveness of the rampaging city of greed, war … And this loving care for natural creatures becomes in some sense, a warrant of (the monk's) theological mission and ministry as a (person) of contemplation.[87]

In defense of Merton, forty years on, let us acknowledge that he did in fact meet Ruether's challenge to make monasticism a ministry to the world. No other monk in history—save perhaps the Buddha—has had the extraordinary influence of Thomas Merton, the most well read monk of all time. His monastic ministry has been global in scope and perhaps more effective beyond the monastic world than within it. In the twentieth century, no other Christian master has awakened such hunger for prayer and prophetic practice, beginning with the report of his own soul quest, *The Seven Storey Mountain.* Since then, countless generations of his disciples have pursued the contemplative life in the anonymity of a virtual novitiate under his direction, their *lectio*, Merton's enormous library of spiritual wisdom written in a contemporary idiom, which proscribes a contemplative curriculum for the recovery of paradise mind: ''living the life of the new creation in which right relation to all the rest of God's creatures is fully restored.''[88]

In Merton's vision, the theological mission of these worldly contemplatives interfaces with an ecological mission: to embody a mode of Christian life that can restore the human person in Christ, to our original state, conscious of paradise all around. In this broader appeal we hear him say that it is ''the job of the worldly contemplative'' to render iconoclastic criticism of the religion of human progress and planetary hegemony. It is ''the job of the worldly contemplative'' to embody Edenic sanity and cultivate gardens of paradise at the heart of the Church for the sake of the world. It is ''the job of worldly contemplatives'' to become an Edenic cohort again, a new race of Christic beings who in this night of our technological barbarism, are as trees ''which … by their vital presence purify the air.''[89]

> It is not easy to try and say what I know I cannot say … The reality that is present to us and in us: Call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma … or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to

> listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything that is hidden in the ground of Love for which there can be no explanations. I suppose what makes me most glad is that we recognize each other in this metaphysical space of silence and happiness, and get some sense, for a moment, that we are ''full of paradise without knowing it.[90]

Notes

1. Merton, Thomas, "'Baptism in the Forest': Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner,'' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton,* ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 108.
2. Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 132.
3. Merton, Thomas, ''Baptism in the Forest,'' p. 108.
4. Merton, Thomas, ''The General Dance,'' in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 290.
5. Merton, Thomas, ''The General Dance,'' pp. 290-91.
6. Merton, Thomas, ''Theology of Creativity,'' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton,* ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 368.
7. Merton, Thomas, ''Theology of Creativity,'' p. 368.
8. Merton, Thomas, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 3, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1966), pp. 189-90.
9. In this, Merton reiterates the insights of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry who perceive the human as the emergent consciousness of the evolutionary process of creation, the Earth's way of understanding itself.
10. Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 5.
11. Merton, Thomas, ''Hagia Sophia,'' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 363.
12. Merton, Thomas, ''Hagia Sophia,'' p. 363.
13. Merton, Thomas, ''Theology of Creativity,'' p. 369.
14. Merton, Thomas, ''Theology of Creativity,'' pp. 355 ff.
15. Merton, Thomas, ''Baptism in the Forest,'' p. 108.
16. See Merton, Thomas, ''Prometheus: A Meditation,'' in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974).
17. Merton, Thomas, ''The Early Legend,'' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 757-8.
18. ''Tom's Book,'' an unpublished journal by Ruth Jenkins Merton. See *The Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, Patrick O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), p. 489.
19. Merton, Thomas, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.,1953), p. 253.

20. Merton, Thomas, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 11.
21. Merton, Thomas, ''From Pilgrimage to Crusade,'' in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 97.
22. Merton, Thomas, ''From Pilgrimage to Crusade,'' p. 97.
23. Merton, Thomas, ''The Sowing of Meanings'' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 187.
24. Merton, Thomas, *Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 4, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 274.
25. Merton, Thomas, *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 1, ed. Patrick Hart, OSCO (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 347.
26. Merton, Thomas, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), pp. 273-74.
27. Merton, Thomas, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 412.
28. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 5, ed. Robert Daggy (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 229.
29. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 239.
30. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240.
31. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240.
32. Merton, Thomas, ''*A Midsummer Diary for M.*'' in *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 6, ed. Christine Bochen (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 341.
33. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240.
34. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240.
35. For a synopsis of Merton's mystical relationship to ''Proverb'' and ''Sophia'' see *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, pp. 374-45; 191-93.
36. Merton, Thomas, ''Hagia Sophia,'' p. 363.
37. Merton, Thomas, ''*A Midsummer Diary for M.*,'' pp. 301-48.
38. Merton, Thomas, ''*A Midsummer Diary for M.*,'' p. 342.
39. See ''The Edenic Office of the Poet,'' *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 29.
40. Merton, Thomas, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 7, ed. Patrick Hart, OSCO (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 94.
41. Merton, Thomas, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 286.
42. Merton, Thomas, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton,* ed. Naomi Burton Stone, James Laughlin, Patrick Hart, OSCO (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 236.
43. Merton, Thomas, ''Atlas and the Fat Man'' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 691.
44. Merton, Thomas, ''Atlas and the Fat Man,'' p. 691.
45. See below Merton's correspondence with Rachel Carson, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Time of Crisis*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 70 ff.
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49. Merton, Thomas, *The Monastic Journey*, (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), p. 38.
50. See Berry, Thomas, ''The Extractive Economy,'' and ''The Petroleum Interval,'' in *The Great Work*, pp. 136-66.
51. For a comprehensive analysis of the progress of ''the age of human devastation,'' see Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*.
52. Merton, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240.
53. Merton, Thomas, ''Toward a Theology of Resistance,'' in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 3.
54. Litany created from statistics in Speth, Gustav, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (Yale Press, 2008).
55. Merton, Thomas, *Passion for Peace*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 327-29.
56. *Lectio divina, ora et labora, conversatio morem, opus dei,* comprise the spiritual structure of the Benedictine life. *Lectio divina* is the daily practice of reading the sacred scriptures; *ora et labora* are the pillars of Benedictine life composed in prayer and work; *conversatio morem* is the root vow of the monk, a commitment to a life-long transformation of one's habits of life; and *opus dei* the primary work of the monk—the ceaseless sung praise of God in the liturgy of the hours prayed in choir with the community.
57. ''Cables to the Ace,'' *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Dimensions, 1977), p. 443.
58. Merton, Thomas, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam Edition, 1980), p. 4.
59. This is the fundamental theme of Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*.
60. Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, Regent of the Penitentiary in *L'Oservatore Romano* March, 2008 spoke of new forms of social sin: genetic manipulation, environmental pollution, social inequality, excessive wealth.
61. Benedict XVI, quoted in ''For Benedict Environmental Movement Promises Recovery of Natural Law Tradition, by John Allen. The National Catholic Reporter, ''All Things Catholic,'' Friday July 27, 2007, Vd. 6, No 47. (http://ncrcafe.org/node/1241).
62. Pope Benedict XVI.
63. Merton, Thomas, *The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 5, ed. Robert Daggy, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 227.
64. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Time of Crisis*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 70.
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66. Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 222.
67. See Deignan, Kathleen, CND, ''Thomas Merton: Soul of the Age,'' in *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 74, April 2005.
68. Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 222.
69. Merton, Thomas, ''Promethean Theology,'' in *The New Man* (New York: Mentor-Omega Book, 1961), pp. 21-35.
70. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 70.

71. For a consideration of Merton's creation centered spirituality see Merton, Thomas, *When the Trees Say Nothing—Writings on Nature,* ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003). See also Monica Weis, Patrick O'Connell, and Paul Pearson for their work on Merton's ecological consciousness, nature poetry, and sense of place.
72. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 70.
73. Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 294-95.
74. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 72.
75. See Barbara Marx Hubbard's website: http://www.evolve.org/pub/doc/footer_about_fce.html
76. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, pp. 72-73.
77. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 73.
78. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, pp. 74-75.
79. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 74.
80. Merton, Thomas, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 74, quoting Aldo Leopold.
81. *At Home in the World*: *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, Mary Tardiff, OP, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 30.
82. *At Home in the World*, pp. 34-5.
83. *At Home in the World*, p. 31.
84. *At Home in the World*, p. 35.
85. See http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/buddhism/projects/thai_ecology.html.
86. *At Home in the World*, p. 35.
87. *At Home in the World*, p. 35.
88. *At Home in the World*, pp. 35-36.
89. Merton, Thomas, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 38.
90. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 115.