

A Perilous NEGLECT

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What makes for grounded and life-giving ministry in our Quaker meetings? It was in reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the 1948 autobiography of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, that a penny dropped about this question that is vexing many long-standing Friends today.

Merton was born in 1915 of artist parents in southern France. His father was a New Zealander, his mother an American, and while neither seem to have been fully signed up Friends, Merton remarks: “Mother went to the Quakers, and sat with them in their ancient meeting house. This was the only kind of religion for which she had any use.”

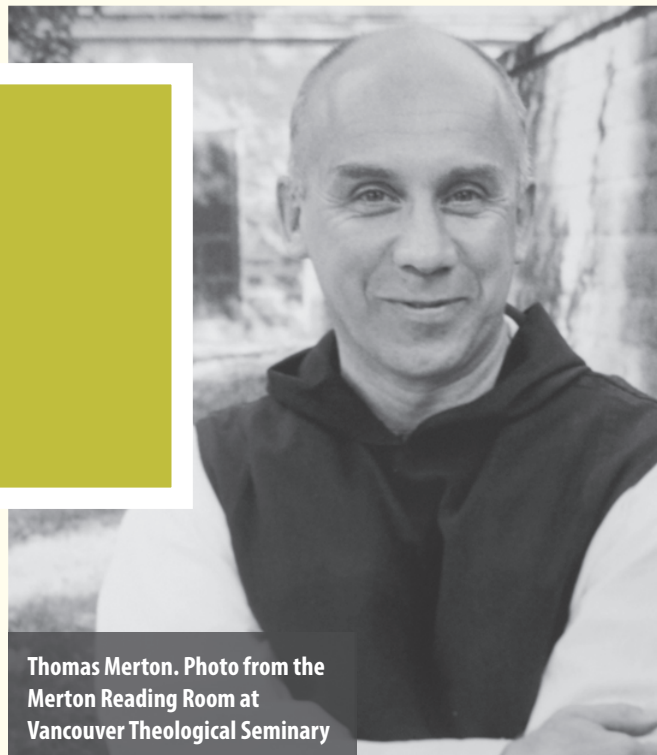
It was taken for granted, he goes on to say, that he and his brother “might be allowed to tend in that direction too.” However, on a visit to New York City in 1933, he attended the meeting in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens. Just as he was settling down, somebody got up and delivered a jarring piece of ministry that seemed to him devoid of any Holy Spirit.

It was the straw that led him to conclude about the Quakers:

They are like all the rest. In other churches it is the minister who hands out the commonplaces, and here it is liable to be just anybody. . . . I cannot see that they will ever be anything more than what they claim to be—a Society of Friends.

Now, allow me to address that by proceeding along the scenic route. Recently, while traveling in the Scottish Highlands, I found that the long-haul bus company had put in place a new system by which seats needed to be booked in advance. I’d turned up in Inverness without a booking for a

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Thomas Merton. Photo from the Merton Reading Room at Vancouver Theological Seminary

lengthy journey with connections. There was a long queue. As I anxiously made enquiries, a woman stepped forward. She’d have been in her 60s, conservatively dressed, and hair tied back in a manner that I took perhaps to signify adherence of some quaint Presbyterian provenance.

“I have a seat booking,” she said, brightly. “If you can’t get on, I can give you mine.”

It would have set her journey back by several hours. Fortunately, I got a seat. Further down the road when changing buses, I took the opportunity to ask her who she was.

Certainly not a Presbyterian! On the contrary, she said she was a “hermit nun,” and asked me to speak softly as she didn’t want the bus to know.

In common with what seems to be a growing number of do-it-yourself “religious” (as nuns and monks call themselves), she is answerable directly to her bishop. She has settled in a Highland village to live a life of contemplative prayer in relative anonymity. (Quite where the idea comes from that life in any Highland village can be anonymous, I don’t know, but that’s another story.)

“What do you pray about?” I asked her.

“I’m a retired obstetrician,” she replied. “I spent most of my life working in Africa. These days, I devote myself to the study of torture in the world. I read descriptions of what is happening and the research literature—both medical and military. And then I pray for the victims.”

“How do you do that”?

“Just . . . by holding them in God.”

And that was it. Like the gaggle of Christ's followers at the foot of the cross who were helpless in every way except by dint of their loving presence, this woman held the pain of all the world. If ever I were on the torture table, somehow I'm sure that I'd be glad to know that folks like her exist.

For the past 20 years, one of the strange tasks that has been opened through my Quakerism is that I get invited to speak on nonviolence at military staff training colleges across Europe. Over that time, I must have addressed some 7,000 serving officers, including an entire cohort of those involved in our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Late at night, sitting in the officers' mess over a couple of beers, some amazing stories come out. For example, there was the British lieutenant-colonel who told me of his operations in the reed beds of the Euphrates, flushing out pockets of Saddam's men. He personally hadn't killed, but those under his command had. Same difference from a moral point of view.

OUR TASK—

just as much as it was the task of the hermit nun, or even the military chaplain—is watching like that watchman, and waiting, and holding things in God. As a Friend in Glasgow Meeting told me many years ago, “It is perilous to neglect your spiritual life.”

“How did it feel?” I asked.

“I notice three things,” he said. “I don't sleep so well. I get irritable more quickly. And I feel the cold more easily than I used to.”

It made me think how Dante had described Hell's inner circle not as hot, but frozen.

Another day, I was seated at a function with a naval chaplain. He'd just returned from active combat with the special forces in Afghanistan.

“Beyond the Sunday sermons, what does that entail?” I'd asked.

Of course, I knew that chaplains' roles are not just spiritual. They also to hold in place the logic of “just war.” Never mind that this was never taught by Jesus. Augustine, leaning on Paul in Romans 13, taught just war theory. Augustine had written:

We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace.

“One of my roles,” said the chaplain, “was that I helped to run the course that trains the boys what happens if they're tortured. I'd tell them, ‘If you are captured by the enemy, you may have everything stripped away. Your uniform, your health, your identity. Not even the family bonds of those you love may be enough to help you hold together. You may find yourself broken—quite beyond imagination—by the forces brought to bear upon you. You may find yourself stripped down to where the only thing that's left is God.’”

That's precisely where the ministry of the hermit nun would have its traction. The ministry of “holding them in God.”

She told me that she loved the work of Thomas Merton, but that she wouldn't want to be a Quaker. I got the sense that some of Merton's censure had rubbed off. But as I re-read Merton's passages, I thought: he's missed a tick. And maybe she's missed a tick.

They've missed a tick because we too, too often, miss a tick.

Our full name is not “The Society of Friends.” Our full name, including that of Flushing Meeting in New York, is “The Religious Society of Friends.” We must remind ourselves of that, and try to educate those who sit in on our meetings likewise: especially if they come to us in unawareness of our wellspring; especially, if they hope to find in us their own image, or are hurting from some spiritual abuse sustained elsewhere.

While welcoming diversity, and angels coming unawares, we must retain our watchfulness around our meetings' spiritual lives. As Isaiah (21:11-12) put it in an oracle:

Watchman, how far gone is the night? Watchman, how far gone is the night? The watchman says, Morning comes but also night. If you would inquire, inquire; Come back again.

Ministry should be not about the “me,” not even about the “we,” but about an opening to the flows of God. If we turn into a therapy group, or use unprogrammed meetings as a platform for our egos, we undermine the roots of what gives life, and with it, our reputation.

Our task—just as much as it was the task of the hermit nun, or even the military chaplain—is watching like that watchman, and waiting, and holding things in God. As a Friend in Glasgow Meeting told me many years ago, “It is perilous to neglect your spiritual life.” □