
THE MERTON ANNUAL

Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns

Volume 35

2022

Edited by

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OYER, Gordon, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology*, Foreword by William Apel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), pp. xix, 275. ISBN: 978-1-62698-430-1 (paper) \$30.00.

The word “hope” is like a dark room in which one sits, waiting. One is waiting either for a light to come on or for someone to walk in through a door. What one is waiting for is a delivery of meaning; and then, maybe some help in figuring out what to do with that meaning. One may tire of waiting and go outside looking, not necessarily for the meaning, let alone the thing itself, but for at least some signs pointing in what might be, we hope, the right direction. Gordon Oyer’s *Signs of Hope* is an encouragement to live in this world, not leave it. It is not a book for tourists; it is a book for folks who would like to live in the deepest depths of an interrelational world. The very thought seems to be enough to scare some people to death, which is why Oyer turns to the letters of Thomas Merton as a way to identify signs of hope that are expressible, readable, relatable.

Many readers of *The Merton Annual* are likely already familiar with Oyer’s earlier book, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*,¹ which won the 2015 “Louie” Award given by the International Thomas Merton Soci-

1. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

ety, among other accolades. *Signs of Hope* is also attracting awards from groups such as the Association of Catholic Publishers and Catholic Media. What the awards bring attention to is Oyer's eloquent, historical insights into the significance of how and why Merton's grappling with the crises of the twentieth century has everything to do with our struggles in still grappling with them in the twenty-first century. The spiritual dimension of the crises is where Merton found the roots of protest and the signs of hope. These two books work in relation, they correspond to each other, address our precarious times and speak firmly to our need to recover the interrelationality of living in a living world. Our crises, however, may not seem shocking or sporadic anymore, but perpetual, normal, almost natural, which may signal the fact that we have lost sight of the signs of life.

Oyer finds signs of hope Merton's correspondence with diverse others, people who are willing to confront and seriously engage issues of a world in crisis, and who in turn are willing to question ourselves seriously and our certainty regarding how to fix the world with good old fashioned know-how. Oyer organizes a crisp sampling of Merton's vast correspondence in relation to three interwoven themes: peace, race and ecology. It is a clear, engaging work in which the author's insights grow stronger and plunge deeper into illuminating a vital need for social transformation.

Part I (21-113) is entitled "Advancing a Catholic Gospel of Peace," in which he examines correspondences between Merton and Dorothy Day, Jim Douglass, Jim Forest and Daniel Berrigan. Upon first impression, this section is familiar ground, yet Oyer does not repeat stock commentary, but guides readers through these relations in such a way that one is chilled to realize the world's burden becoming heavier with the loss of Jim Forest, Thich Nhat Hahn and Desmond Tutu, each dying within months of the release of Oyer's book. Peace and peacemaking suddenly seem precarious again in Oyer's care, but not dead. Oyer convinces the reader that history is alive. History is what and how we are living, and this is conveyed by his approach that never leaves the past behind on an interesting shelf marked: bygone era. We are not reading Oyer's book as much as his book is reading us. Oyer explores other unique themes of concern that emerge in Merton's communication, such as nonviolence, resistance, perseverance, social movements and conscience, as he helps us breathe what we are reading and truly realize our need for hopeful signs of a more livable world.

Part II (115-201) delves into the issue of race, "Reaching across the Racial Divide," where he provides fascinating background to Merton's relations with four creative African-American thinkers of conscience:

Marlon Dewitt Green, Fr. August Thompson, Robert Lawrence Williams and Vincent Harding. This section of the book is quite significant in that it breaks new ground in Merton studies by demonstrating how Merton sought to learn about the realities, not the theories, of racial injustice from those most impacted by its systemic forms. While much has been written on Merton's peace writings and relations with peace activists, less has been written, and thus less is known, about the dialogical pursuits Merton engaged with those eager to share their experience of racism in a climate of compassionate listening. Themes of key significance in this section are racial justice, truth-telling, vulnerability and whiteness.

If Part I feels familiar and Part II seems new, Part III (203-48) is startling. Oyer's text goes deeper and deeper into the problems of our world to find an ecology of conscious concerns interlaced with the cultural dynamics of our lives as promotes "Re-Visioning a Fragmented World." The argumentative pattern in the book converges here: we have warred against our living world (I) and disrelated ourselves from others (II) to the point of tearing our world apart (III), but the catch is that we have mismanaged life on earth despite selected benefits for ourselves. The science of ecology raises new ways to see and thus question the severe cost of our organizational overhaul of the lives of others. Here, Oyer opens the scope of the book as Merton sought dialogue with diverse partners and perspectives, with Rachel Carson, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Laurence van der Post, Ernesto Cardenal and Walter Weisskopf. This third section of the book may be the shortest, but I would argue it is the most important, the most stunning and the most regenerative for hope.

If I may take liberty with this review for a moment, I would like to offer a re-viewing of Oyer's work, reading backwards, from its conclusion (249-51) to its introduction (1-20), beginning with his Postscript, penned in September 2020, just before he submitted his manuscript for publication. The heart of the experience in reading Oyer's work is that we are not "looking back" for signs for hope, but that Merton's letters helps us look for signs of hope where we are today: in a world of perpetual war, pandemics, rising ocean levels, a climate crisis, systemic racism, rampant incivility, barbarism – humanitarian, civilizational, planetary crises – what Oyer calls "our destructive habits." Oyer's historical perspective is solid enough to show: "We have known what we are doing to ourselves for decades, yet we still mostly bluster along in collective denial" (251). The death of George Floyd in 2020 signaled to Oyer that things "remain unresolved" (250). Oyer shares that a friend suggested he use the term "precarious" to describe our times; Oyer admits that he thought, at first, the word might be hyperbolic, but by the time he

finished the book, "it seemed almost tame" (249).

In the final chapter just before the Postscript, Oyer allows Merton the last word via a phenomenal piece of original writing by Merton from 1968, previously unavailable, in which Merton ponders how to respond to the highly organized global civilization that has so "mastered" the living world that we are hardly in contact with it. "Obviously we cannot put the machine in reverse and go back to nature," Merton writes from his hermitage, but we must find a way to restore our vital relationship with the natural world to "restore our sanity," instead of pathologically playing "havoc with it" (248). Merton admits that his reflections might seem strange to some, but he explains where his thoughts are coming from: "these remarks emanate from a concrete experiment in living as a non-organization man" (248). As Merton said so many times: he does not have the answers – for there is no plan or program – because the kinds of questions we face can only be resolved through living in relation to the unknown.

Is it not obvious yet? We really, *really do not know* how to stop destroying the earth, how to end racism, how to cease waging war. It is not knowledge that we need in order to live. In his Introduction to the book, Oyer announces what we need: "In relinquishing such certitudes and embracing the suffering of setbacks, all that remains to motivate persistent and responsible action is hope" (20). Re-viewing the book from back to front reaffirms the gravity that was there at the beginning and that hits home in the end.

We live in between two sightlines, one long, one short: between seeing how we have lived, and being unable to see how we are going to live. Here is where we see the risks of living. Relinquishing our hold on this living world might be the best hope for life in this world to live. Oyer re-presents Merton's way of unknowing, that is, a way of not-knowing-the-world-to-death for a change, as a way of releasing our claims on the interrelatedness of life so that all lives can live in vital forms in peace, justice and wholeness. Merton uncovered as many signs of hope as he could in the course of his life. Oyer has gathered plenty of those signs, enough to motivate us to act with real hope without demanding the future be known before we destroy it. Oyer has enabled us to genuinely use the word "hope" again without kidding ourselves or blustering along as usual waiting for a light to come on or for someone to open a door and let us out.

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