

When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature Readers Group Guide

When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature

By Thomas Merton

Drawings by John Giuliani

Edited by Kathleen Deignan

Kathleen Deignan has done a great service for those who admire the work of the great spiritual master Thomas Merton. She has brought us the first-ever collection of Merton's writings on nature, organized in accessible categories. She has indeed created a "book for all seasons."

Deignan, a sister of the Congregation of Notre Dame, has a Master's degree in Christian spirituality and a doctorate in historical theology. She is the founder of the Iona Spirituality Institute in New Rochelle, New York

As You Read This Book

Read the introduction to the book. Then look for recurring themes in Merton's work, including:

- His Franciscan soul (Page 26);
- His Cistercian heart (Page 29);
- His Celtic spirit (Page 32); and,
- His Zen mind (Page 34).

Which of these traits seem most like you, and why? Which of these traits would be worth developing, and why?

Inscape

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a 19th century Catholic poet who influenced Thomas Merton. Hopkins created the concept of *inscape* and *instress*. *Inscape* is the unique design of each thing in the universe, and *instress* is both that which holds *inscape* together and the power to recognize an item's *inscape*.

In speaking of creatures, Merton says "their *inscape* is their sanctity." (Page 49) What do you think Merton means?

Sense of the Sacred

A sense of the sacred is missing in modern ecological movements. Nature is the primary manifestation of God. (Foreword, Page 18)

How can our perception of nature be incorporated in a program of spiritual growth?

Paradise Refound

Kathleen Deignan notes that Merton, perhaps because he was Welsh and had Celtic roots, was on a quest to recover paradise. But Deignan says that Merton's quest wasn't otherworldly. He believed that "paradise was all around."

Discuss the concept of the recapture of paradise on earth.

Hagia Sophia

In the Jewish and Christian tradition there has been a representation of God as Sophia. Sophia is also the Greek word for wisdom, and in the New Testament in the Gospel of John Jesus is described as Wisdom.

Read about Merton's vision of Sophia, including on Pages 38 and 39. Read the postscript on Page 179. What is your understanding of Sophia, and of the masculine and feminine aspects of God?

Merton Vis-à-vis the World

Merton said that post-Cartesian technologism "separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right, with his clear ideas; all by himself." He talks how the "sudden power to deal death all around us *simply by the way we live* and in total "innocence" and ignorance, is by far the most disturbing symptom of our time. (Page 47)

Do you agree with Merton? What would you define as the most disturbing symptom of our time?

Man In Space

Merton talks about a space probe: "We have an instrument flying to Venus, and as it goes past, for thirty seconds it will have a view of the

clouds. This will be in December. Then it will go on out nowhere, it will be an eye nowhere." (Page 57)

What does space exploration do to our view of the universe and God? Where have our space explorations, such as the Columbia, taken us?

The Landscape Painter's Eye

Merton's mother and father were both landscape painters. After Merton's mother died, his father spent time with him, teaching him contemplation and how to celebrate the sacred mysteries of nature. Merton says that his father's view of the world was "sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure.... His vision was religious and clean...since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself." (Page 25)

What incident from your youth do you remember that was particularly connected with an experience of nature? Which person in your life encouraged you to stop and smell the piney forests?

In Good Times

"The sun is bright. Catbirds sing with crazy versatility above my head in the tree. Fasting is *easy in good weather*," says Merton. (Page 95)

What say you? How much are you influenced by the tenor of the day?

Free Bird

"My whole life is this – to keep unencumbered. The wind owns the fields where I walk and I own nothing and am owned by nothing and I shall never even be forgotten because no one will ever discover me. This is to me a source of immense confidence," says Merton. (Page 91)

In a choice of vocations, how does the monastic life compare with other ways of living? How do the distractions of life affect your sense of place?

Paintings

Merton writes with a painter's eye, and his writings on nature are full of exquisite images.

Of all of the descriptive language in the book, which passage do you like best and why?

Which Merton image best fits the particular point he was trying to make?

AFTER YOU READ THE BOOK

Final questions: Analyze Merton as a spiritual director, and discuss his strengths and weaknesses. Are the best spiritual directors those who live the kind of life we do, or those who bring a totally different perspective?