I want to talk to Thomas Merton about race

Merton has been my spiritual companion, but as a Black woman, I have questions for him.

by Sophfronia Scott in the March 24, 2021 issue

Thomas Merton (Used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University)

I want to talk to Thomas Merton about race. One might doubt whether a cloistered White man who lived in Kentucky in the middle part of the last century would have anything useful to offer, but this particular monk knew that such a conversation is never about race alone. Talking about race means, among many things, sharing our fears and frustrations about our place in the world, about how people are treated, about a hope for better opportunities that never seem to materialize. In other words, it's about dignity, respect, a shared humanity, and ultimately our hearts and souls. Racism is not just about White people treating people of color badly; it is about how the repercussions of that treatment reverberate for everyone, to the detriment of us all.

There is something so intuitive about Merton's views that I think talking to him about race would be helpful. I have a hunch that he, unlike many White people, would be willing to go to the heart of the matter in a way that doesn't focus on him.

Merton moved to the United States in the late 1930s, when African Americans were referred to as "Negroes" and segregation was a fact of life. His own position—that of a young White man and a Columbia University student—was a privileged one that would have allowed him, if he chose, to ignore the injustice and inequality imposed on people of color. But somehow he was able to look at race and say, quite coherently, that something was very wrong.

When he was a teacher at St. Bonaventure's College in Allegany, New York, he met Catherine de Hueck, who visited the school to speak about the conditions in Harlem and the community center she ran there, Friendship House. Merton asked her afterward if he could come to Harlem and volunteer. She agreed, and he arrived via subway on a rain-soaked, humid day in August 1941. His impression of Harlem affected him so deeply that he would recall it with stunning power years later in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

> Here in this huge, dark, steaming slum, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are herded together like cattle, most of them with nothing to eat and nothing to do. All the senses and imagination and sensibilities and emotions and sorrows and desires and hopes and ideas of a race with vivid feelings and deep emotional reactions are forced in upon themselves, bound inward by an iron ring of frustration: the prejudice that hems them in with its four insurmountable walls. In this huge cauldron, inestimable natural gifts, wisdom, love, music, science, poetry are stamped down and left to boil with the dregs of an elementally corrupted nature, and thousands upon thousands of souls are destroyed by vice and misery and degradation, obliterated, wiped out, washed from the register of the living, dehumanized. . . . Harlem is there by way of a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown. The brothels of Harlem, and all its prostitution, and its dope-rings, and all the rest are the mirror of the polite divorces and the manifold cultured adulteries of Park Avenue: they are God's commentary on the whole of our society.

Merton returned many times to Friendship House. He looked after children, led prayer services, sorted through clothing donations. He thought seriously of making Friendship House his own life's work and went back and forth trying to decide whether to live in poverty serving God in Harlem or to live in poverty serving God as a monk in Kentucky. He eventually chose the cloistered existence.

Once he entered the monastery, Merton wrote little about race, but those pages in his autobiography were enough for the leaders of the civil rights movement to mark him as an ally. When he took up the subject again years later as the civil rights movement gained steam, Merton came to the table with credibility.

In 2019, Gregory K. Hillis of Bellarmine University, which houses the Merton Center, summarized Merton's 1963 essay, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal":

> Overarching the entire essay is Merton's conviction that the oppression of African Americans is systemic and that white liberals (a) do not do enough to fight against the racism baked into American society; and (b) are, in fact, guilty of propping up this racist system for their own well-being.

I don't want my life weighed down by resentment. How do I avoid that, Thomas?

In the same article, Hillis quotes a man who said he carried one of Merton's books in his pocket when crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in 1965 and a Black woman who said she "felt alienated by her church and religious community for her civil rights work in the 1960s" but that "Merton got it when few others did." Eldridge Cleaver, an early leader of the Black Panther Party, notes in his autobiography *Soul on Ice* how he would often reread Merton's Harlem pages whenever he felt his resolve weakening. The passages helped him "to become once more a rigid flame of indignation."

Sounds like I've come to the right monk for this conversation.

Yet I don't want to be a rigid flame of indignation. I don't want my life weighed down by anger, hopelessness, and resentment.

How do I do that, Thomas?

I have a biracial teenage son. Tain has a strong faith and a sunny disposition that makes him look for, and see, the best in all he beholds. When he was about eight or

nine and decided to don a black choir robe, a cross, and a purple stole in order to be Martin Luther King Jr. for our church's All Saints' Day procession, he told me why: King was a great leader and helped Black people have better lives. I was so proud of him, but I also knew I had to guide him. Despite appearances, including the Black president who was in office for most of Tain's young life, King's fight is not over.

Tain is growing up in a time when it's not uncommon to see videos on the internet and the evening news of unarmed Black people being shot and killed. I feel the need to affirm his attitude, but I also have to be real with him.

I don't want Tain to become fearful and angry. But he also has to be aware, now that he's grown lanky and well past the six-foot mark, of how others may view him. He has fair skin, dark brown eyes, and a few freckles sprinkled over his cheeks. His dark brown hair, once worn short and close-cropped, is now long and curly, topping his head like a soft cloud. It's the hair we often talk about. Tain needs to understand the possible effects of having such hair.

We look at images on television and in magazines and discuss how African Americans are portrayed. I remind him to pull back the hood of his jacket from his head when he walks into a store. I showed him footage of NFL player Michael Bennett being apprehended during an active shooting situation simply because, being tall and Black, he stood out as a threat. When Tain learns to drive, I will teach him how to behave during a police stop, how to keep his hands in view and make no sudden moves.

I still think about the 2015 video showing a Black man, Walter Scott, who had been stopped for a traffic violation, being gunned down by a police officer. Scott is running away when the White officer fires eight shots at his back. Scott falls face down, and the officer handcuffs him that way. The officer does not check to see if he is breathing. He does not turn him over. He tosses a Taser near the man's body. Later, he claimed that Scott had tried to take it from him. Scott receives no assistance, not even from the Black officer who later arrives on the scene. Scott dies at the scene. The coroner later said that Scott was struck five times. He was unarmed.

Discussing the video with a friend, we talk about the shock of witnessing the killing, of watching Walter Scott fall, of the bitter taste in our mouths after seeing him hit the ground. What really leaves our souls scorched and grieving is the casual

behavior of the police officer who fired the weapon. It's as though this event was not extraordinary for him, as though he had no sense of the impact of his action, that he had ripped a precious life from the world.

It's this sense of my soul being scorched that I need to heal, Thomas. I don't want to pass it on to my son.

In 1963, Merton met a young Black priest, August Thompson, who visited Gethsemani from his home parish in Alexandria, Louisiana. A few months later, Thompson wrote to Merton for guidance after being berated by his bishop for speaking out on the poor treatment of Black people in the Catholic Church. How they could only receive communion after Whites had already received it. How White Catholics would rather pay someone to drive a Black Catholic to another town for church than have the person attend in their parish. How Thompson himself was prohibited from saying mass at White parishes and how some White Catholics refused to call him "Father." The church had betrayed its Black congregants and all notions of Christian love by only giving them more of what they experienced daily in the secular world.

It's striking to me that the advice you gave him, Thomas, appealed to the priest's loving heart and not his indignant mind. You instructed him to handle his bishop's disapproval with compassion: "You have to take into account the absolute blindness and absolute self-righteousness of people who have been scooled [sic] by centuries of prejudice and injustice to see things their way and no other."

To tell you the truth, Thomas, I would have taken this as a condescending word from an out-of-touch White monk. It sounds too much like the White moderates of the day—*Be patient; don't ask for too much; change happens slowly*. But I realize I need to be patient with the words in your response and understand that what you were trying to do for Thompson is what I need to do for myself. You wanted him to take care of his heart first. If he kept bashing himself against the stone wall of the bishop's blind racism, it would only lead to disillusionment and then anger and pain. But if he led with a loving heart, he could instead seep into the stone, like water trickling down a mountain, and eventually crack the mountain open from within, all without compromising his own emotional health. You sought to teach Thompson the essence of nonviolence.

Having studied Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent protest, you read and taught to your novices King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." You learned that nonviolence is not only a way of protest but a way of being, that if one is careless in thoughts and words, one can be violent without realizing it.

"Where minds are full of hatred and where imaginations dwell on cruelty, torment, punishment, revenge and death, then inevitably there will be violence and death," you wrote. This tells me that if I want to escape anger and hopelessness, my focus shouldn't be on the wrongs being done. I have to begin with my humanity.

I could be ruled by what I see—the ongoing occurrences of racism and hate crimes and the long shadow of police shootings of unarmed Black men. In order to release the power of these instances over my mind and heart, it is imperative that I unravel some of the complicated threads within myself.

The writer Robert Vivian once lectured on how we all have immortal wounds: events in our lives we simply cannot get over. James Baldwin never got over his stepfather's ruthless abuse or the racism that made him leave the US to live in Europe. These wounds showed up in everything he wrote. Vivian suggested that if we understood our wounds, we would understand what makes our writing unique.

My wound is betrayal. And the betrayal wasn't even my own.

I was 11 years old when the miniseries *Roots* aired on television. I was fascinated by the friendship between the enslaved girl Kizzy and the slave owner's daughter, Missy Anne. Missy Anne teaches Kizzy how to read—maybe this was the source of my fascination, because I loved to read. I didn't understand, though, how this went against the law of the time and how dire the consequences were. After Kizzy writes a note for a slave trying to escape, her skill is discovered and she is sold. She is put on a cart, and as her new owner prepares to haul her away, Kizzy is screaming for Missy Anne.

I kept waiting for Missy Anne to appear—to say something, if only good-bye, to her friend. When she didn't come, I assumed she wasn't at home or had been put someplace in the house where she couldn't hear Kizzy. But then the scene cuts to Missy Anne, sitting calmly despite the screams. She coolly observes how stupid Kizzy has been. And that's it. I couldn't believe the betrayal, the bonds of friendship torn asunder. I wondered if the bond had ever been real in the first place.

Betrayals, to me anyway, are about people who are supposed to know you yet intentionally put you in a place of having to be something other than yourself. Maybe I'm careful now only to allow people close to me who are unlikely to harbor betrayal—as if I can really tell! But that doesn't mean the wound is not at work within me.

In 2015, my brother's home in Florida was spray-painted with a racist threat. I posted a photo on social media of the ugly black lettering dripping down the side of his house; I wanted people to know racism was active and affecting someone they knew. One friend started a GoFundMe campaign to raise funds to have my brother's house painted, a campaign that ended up earning more than the goal amount.

But a good number of my White friends were simply stunned. They were surprised that this kind of thing still happens, and they shared the post with equal amounts of shock and horror. The Black Lives Matter movement was already going strong at that point. The spray-painting happened just weeks after a young White man, Dylann Roof, shot and killed nine African Americans during a prayer group at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I wanted to ask, "What country are you living in?" I thought they should know better. It may not be a betrayal, but it feels awfully close.

Asking "What country are you living in?" doesn't help—it's essentially resentment, not compassion. It's this kind of thinking Merton wanted August Thompson to avoid when he advised him about his bishop. If he could focus on nonviolence instead, then Thompson had a better chance of achieving something greater. Hillis describes it as "calling Thompson to work for his bishop's conversion." White religious leaders need to be converted too, a lesson we continue to learn. Merton says that the purpose of nonviolent conversation is to

> awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice . . . so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a white problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, is rooted in the heart of the white man himself.

Thomas, are you telling me the race issue is really an issue of faith? I'm willing to explore that. But the dialogue I've experienced, to my frustration, hasn't gone anywhere near an awakening of conscience. When I participated in conversations at

the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, we never seemed to get to a discussion of the current situation. The people who participated, most of them White, preferred to speak instead about what was—how they had participated in the civil rights movement, how they had attended protests and rallies, and how, yes, the Jim Crow era was terrible, but compared to that, things are so much better now. As well-meaning as they were, their words eventually began to sound like the trope, “I have Black friends.”

What do I want to hear instead? I guess something along these lines, which you wrote in 1967:

> I face the fact that I am living in an immoral, blind, even in some sense criminal society which is hypocritical, bloated, self-righteous, and unable to see its true condition—by and large the people are “nice” as long as they are not disturbed in their comfortable and complacent lives. They cannot see the price of their “respectability.” And I am part of it and I don’t know what to do about it—apart from symbolic and futile gestures.

If I heard that, I think I would respond, “I don’t know what to do either. But the fact that we’re here in this same place of not knowing is a really good place to start.” From there, we could look at the bigger picture and also challenge ourselves as individuals to make change from within.

We are called, you wrote, to be like the child in the fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” willing to upset the conditions of our comfortable existence: “Our vocation, as innocent bystanders—and the very condition of our terrible innocence—is to do what the child did, and keep on saying the king is naked, at the cost of being condemned criminals.”

If we don’t become the truth tellers, then a different kind of erosion can happen in which resentment breeds, a resentment that would threaten the wholeness of my heart and soul. If nothing else, I must be whole and respond to racism in a way that is true to the depths of my being. What does that look like?

We’re getting on the same page, I think, Thomas, because something else you observed gives me hope. You wrote, “These Negroes are not simply judging the white man and rejecting him. On the contrary, they are seeking by Christian love and sacrifice to redeem him, to enlighten him, so as not only to save his soul from

perdition, but also to awaken his mind and his conscience."

Redemption. Yes. My friend and neighbor Jane, after reading my first novel, a story about a family dealing with drug addiction, said that I seem to be "all about redemption." She added, "You don't throw people away." I suppose redemption works in me so deeply that I don't always recognize when I'm doing it. I'm drafting a novel about an enslaved girl of mixed race and a White girl. They are half sisters who share a father, a slave owner. As I work my way through figuring out the plot, developing the characters, and considering their actions, it occurred to me that, yet again, I have Kizzy and Missy Anne on my mind. I am seeking to redeem Missy Anne, writing still from this immortal wound. As I read over my pages and see how I'm righting wrongs in my fictional worlds, I see how I'm accessing compassion.

And because I can access it, I can offer and model it for my son. In turn, he supports my hope. Already he's showing me the possibilities. I drive him 45 minutes to school and, depending on traffic, nearly an hour home each day so that he can attend an arts high school in an urban area. He studies theater and enjoys a more diverse environment in terms of race, class, and sexual orientation than we have where we live. He and his friends are so accepting of each other that even if they don't know someone's gender, they don't ask.

They only care about the person: what their name is, the activities they favor, how they are doing on any given day. I think about this attitude blossoming throughout Tain's generation and the generations to come. It makes me feel an abundance of hope.

This essay is adapted from The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton *with permission from Broadleaf Books. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "After indignation."*