

**“Wisdom Cries the Dawn Deacon” –
The Healing Power of the Night Spirit
and the Dawn Air**



1. Silhouetted Tree

At the virgin point of the new day Merton writes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, that the dawn deacon cries “Wisdom” but “we do not attend”. Merton is here making a reference to the call of the Deacon to listen to the Gospel read in the Gethsemani Abbey Church at the crack of dawn each morning. Merton was probably aware of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (the main Eucharistic Liturgy used in the Orthodox Church) where, before the reading of the Gospel the Deacon announces: “Wisdom! Let us attend! Let us listen to the Holy Gospel.”

We have already heard several times today about Merton's book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. This afternoon I want to reflect prayerfully on the theme of the "night spirit and the dawn air" in Thomas Merton's book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton's central, pivotal chapter of *Conjectures* is entitled "the night spirit and the dawn air" a phrase he discovered in "The Ox Mountain Parable" of the Chinese Sage Meng Tzu. So, in this time of guided prayer, I want to reflect on the meaning of that phrase and on the meaning of "The Ox Mountain Parable" for us, and for our world today.

The texts and imagery used here are essentially based on a guided meditation that Paul M. Pearson gave at the 13th ITMS (International Thomas Merton Society) Conference at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, on June 15, 2013.

In "The Ox Mountain Parable" of Master Meng Tzu it is said that once there was a beautiful forest on the Ox Mountain. But men came with axes and felled all the trees. But in the alternation of days and nights and moistened by the dew, the trees began to grow again. Then came goats and cattle and ate the still young shoots. The Ox Mountain was completely bared and bared, people thought, that there had never been a forest there.

And so, as with the forest, so is the human being, says Master Meng Tzu. Our mind, too, has the basic inclination to love, but through our daily actions we destroy our right mind. Now the workings of the Night Spirit and the Morning Air are able to renew our good qualities. But the more we destroy them by our actions, the less the night spirit and the dawn air will be able to revive our right spirit, and one thinks that we have never had anything other than evil in mind. Meng Tzu then asks: Is this the nature of man?¹

1 See <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/15/Merton20-22.pdf>

Another motif that Merton takes up in the essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and which will be reflected below, I would like to briefly explain. It comes from a play by the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco.

Ionesco describes a fictive society in which people, with the exception of the protagonist Bérenger – despite all the warnings that one does not believe – turn more and more into herds of rhinos that are no longer capable of self-reflection.

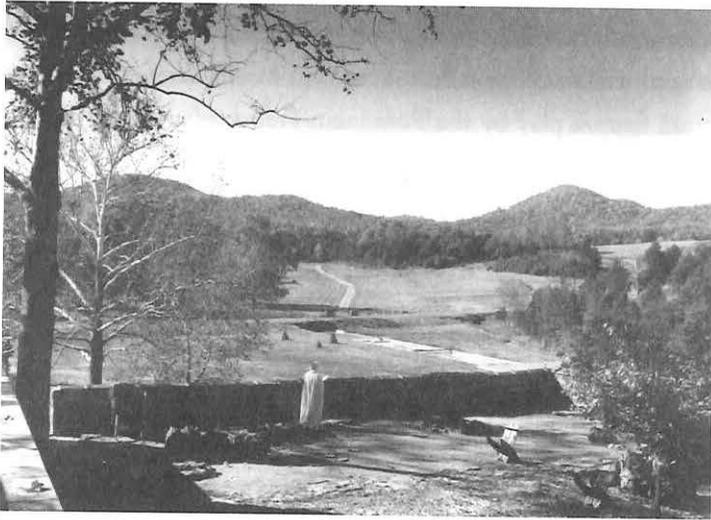
Let us begin with just a few moments of preparing ourselves for this time of quiet and reflection.

Begin by becoming aware of our posture and our breathing – let us turn to focus on them, leaving behind the last session, leaving behind our conversations over the break, putting aside all the noise – both the outer noise and the inner noise.

Concentrate for a few moments on your breathing. Take some deep, slow breaths. Perhaps you might like to imagine breathing out all your frustrations, distractions, anxieties, and breathing in all the good gifts of God, peace, gentleness, serenity.

Take some time to be in this present moment. Not somewhere else – another place or another time – but being truly present in this moment, in this place.

In *Conjectures* Merton writes "this day – this moment – will not come again" – so let us embrace this moment, and let us give it our full attention.



2. Monk looking over Kentucky Knobs

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and in his essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros” Thomas Merton sets out his understanding of the role of the monk, his own role as a guilty bystander, in an age when such voices could easily be overlooked against the bellowing of herds of rhinoceroses. More than fifty years have passed since he penned these works and yet his reflections on the role of the guilty bystander are still as relevant as when he wrote them, if not more so, and such voices are still mostly going unheard, still being drowned out by the grunting and bellowing of the herd. Such grunting and bellowing are a significant contrast to the cry of the dawn deacon to “listen” to the awareness, in silence and solitude, of the “night spirit and the dawn air”.

Amidst all the techno-babble that assaults us daily, amidst all the grunting and bellowing, do we find time to listen to the truly important things in life?



3. Merton's Hermitage beneath Trees

In the period covered by *Conjectures* Thomas Merton develops his prophetic voice – from his years of contemplative living at Gethsemani he finds himself the guilty bystander “willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream.” In “The Ox Mountain Parable” the “night spirit and the dawn air” are important “in restoring life to the forest that has been cut down”. Through rest and recuperation “in the night and the dawn” the trees will return. Similarly, Merton writes, “with human nature. Without the night spirit, the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, our nature cannot be itself.”²

Out of this silence Merton develops his prophetic voice.

How does our silence speak to us? – let us take some time to listen to our silence.

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2 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 122-123.

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander is about transformation, Thomas Merton's transformation, and the transformation that the wisdom found in silence, found in our contemplative practice, can bring to our world.

Essential to Merton's transformation is his experience of mercy and compassion, his experience of nature, and his experience of silence, passivity, rest. All themes central to "The Ox Mountain Parable". And it is from "The Ox Mountain Parable" that Merton discovers the phrase "the night spirit and the dawn air", which he uses for the pivotal third chapter of *Conjectures*.



4. Path through Trees in Snow

"The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" section of *Conjectures* begins with a description of the valley awakening in the early morning. Having spent section two of *Conjectures* looking at the challenges and questions raised

by the modern world Merton, in his description of dawn and the gradual awakening of nature, points to a different kind of wisdom. He describes the early morning as "the most wonderful moment of the day [...] when creation in its innocence asks permission to 'be' once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was" and at that moment of dawn "all wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point".³



5. Wooded Glade

In "The Ox Mountain Parable" Merton found an expression of his experience of the effect nature had upon him, especially the effect of the woods and of nature in the very early hours of the morning a time when he, as a Cistercian monk, was awake as nature itself began to awaken so, in the early morning, Merton discovers "an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand", the "dawn deacon" cries out "wisdom" but "we don't attend".⁴

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3 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 117.

4 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 117-118.



6. Field View

Or again in his journal from this period Merton writes:

The first chirps of the waking birds – “le point vierge [the virgin point]” of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to “be”? And he tells them “Yes” [...] with my hair almost on end and the eyes of the soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise.⁵

Can we see paradise all around us?

In a letter to Abdul Aziz Merton spoke of “the hour of dawn when the world is silent and the new light is most pure”, as “symbolizing the dawning of divine light in the stillness of our hearts”⁶ – a rekindling of Eckhart’s spark of God in the soul.

5 Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco, HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 7.

6 *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 46.

In his introduction to “The Ox Mountain Parable” Merton draws a parallel between the violence, war and chaos of Meng Tzu’s age and the sixties. He wrote:

One of Meng Tzu’s central intuitions was that human nature was basically good, but that this basic goodness was destroyed by evil acts, and had tactfully to be brought out by right education, education in “humaneness”. The great man, said Mencius, is the man who has not lost the heart of a child⁷ [...] This is a parable of mercy. Note especially the emphasis of Meng Tzu on the “night wind” which is here rendered “night spirit”, the merciful, pervasive and mysterious influence of unconscious nature which, according to him, as long as it is not tampered with, heals and revives man’s good tendencies, his “right mind”.⁸

All of Meng Tzu’s teaching centered around the word Goodness, for different schools within Confucianism this term could mean different things. But, for Meng Tzu, in a paragraph underlined by Merton:

Goodness meant compassion; it meant not being able to bear that others should suffer. It meant a feeling of responsibility for the sufferings of others.⁹

A pertinent description of Merton at this time.

What is our experience of the mercy, the compassion, the goodness of God?

7 This statement was not meant to be sentimental. It implied the serious duty to preserve the spontaneous and deep natural instinct to love, that instinct which is protected by the mysterious action of life itself and of providence, but which is destroyed by the wilfulness, the passionate arbitrariness of man’s greed.

8 *The Ox Mountain Parable* [With notes and text arrangement (after the translation of I. A. Richards) by Thomas Merton] Lexington, KY.: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1960.

9 Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 83.



7. Fourth and Walnut

The revelatory experience Merton had on a visit to Louisville in March 1958 is a clear expression of the transformation that had been taking place in his life. On the corner of a busy street in Louisville Merton was “overwhelmed with the realization that I love all these people” seeing the “secret beauty of their hearts” and knowing “we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers”.¹⁰ As the birds hear the call to awaken, so too Merton awakens at Fourth and Walnut. Significantly this incident is placed by Merton in the pivotal chapter of *Conjectures*, “The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” and is another illustration

10 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 140.

from Merton’s life of the power of that night spirit and dawn air to bring healing to the human condition.

Let us reflect for a moment on some of the wake-up calls in our life, those moments of insight which affirm the meaning of our life and give it direction – how attentive to them are we?



8. Merton in Hermitage

In Merton’s personal journal from December 1960 he records another such moment on insight writing of the first evening he was allowed to spend at the hermitage:

*Lit candles in the dusk. Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi [This is my resting place forever] – the sense of a journey ended, of wandering at an end. The first time in my life I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended.*¹¹

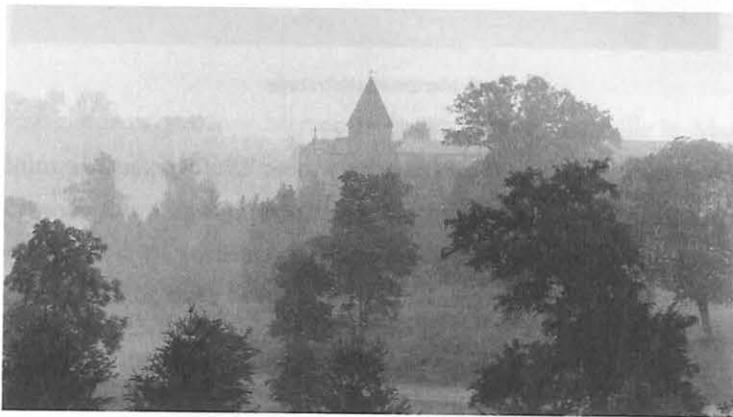
11 Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 79-80.

What places have we experienced that are home for us – places that return us to our true self?



9. Merton's Hermitage

Where are the places and times that we've discovered God?



10. Gethsemani Abbey in Mist

For Merton, the wind and the rain and the darkness and the solitude of the night in his hermitage at Gethsemani had a restoring effect simi-

lar to the night spirit and the dawn air in "The Ox Mountain Parable". The rain helped to heal the damage done to the woods by men who had "stripped the hillside" and it also had a similar effect on Merton as he says in his essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros":



11. Merton's Hermitage in Snow

In this wilderness I have learned how to sleep again. Here I am not alien. The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part, and the world goes on with me in it, for I am not alien to it.¹²

Elsewhere he writes:

It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of Day, in the solemn silence at which the sun appears, for at this moment all the affairs of cities, of governments, of war departments, are seen to be bickering of mice. I receive from the Eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one

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12 Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), 7-8.

word DAY, which is never the same. It is always in a totally new language.¹³

In contrast rhinocerotis is the sickness that lies in wait “for those who have lost the sense and the taste for solitude” – or we could say, for those who are no longer open to the experience of the night spirit and the dawn air.

Where do we experience our night spirit and dawn air?



12. Moon Calligraphy by Merton



13. Calligraphy by Merton

In “Rain and the Rhinoceros”, Merton paints a picture of his life as a life lived in protest to the herd mentality of his day – whether the monastic or ecclesial herd, the political herd, the commercial herd, or we could add today the technological herd. His solitude in the forest and the rain are contrasted with modern society especially through the SAC plane flying overhead and through the guns of Fort Knox thumping in the distance. The rain, the noise of the guns and the SAC plane occur again and again in Merton’s personal journal at this time:

A constant thumping and pummeling of guns at Fort Knox. It began last night when I was going to bed. Then there were big “whumps”, unlike

13 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the water of life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 241.

canon, more like some kind of missile. Now, it sounds like a new kind of rapid-fire artillery.¹⁴

Later the same day he adds:

2:15. Bumps and punches at Fort Knox faster and faster.

Or again:

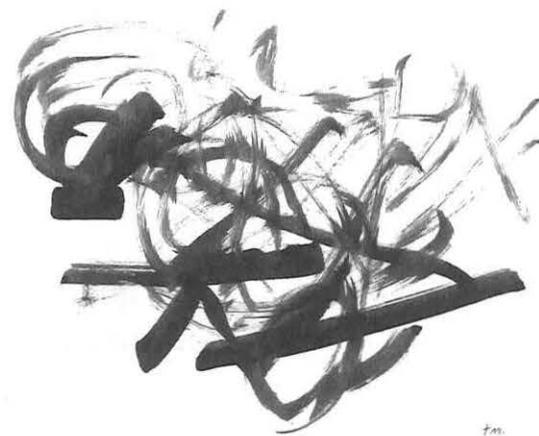
The guns were pounding at Fort Knox while I was making my afternoon meditation, and I thought that after all this is no mere "distraction", and that I am here because they are there so that, indeed, I am supposed to hear them. They form part of an ever renewed "decision" and commitment for peace.¹⁵

How do we live, how do we cope with the grunting and bellowing we face in our lives? Do we? Let's take a moment to reflect.



14. Calligraphy by Merton

Conclusion



15. Calligraphy by Merton – Considerable Dance

14 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the water of life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 177.

15 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the water of life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 182.

The age in which Mencius lived, as Merton points out, was a time of violence, war and chaos which he parallels to the time in which he was writing at the beginning of the sixties and the message of "The Ox Mountain Parable" is as relevant to our present age of violence, war, nationalism, xenophobia and chaos, technological upheaval and ecological vulnerability, as it was for the times in which both Merton and Mencius lived.



16. Calligraphy by Merton – Dance

Merton calls us to awaken, to awaken to the mysterious action of the night spirit and the dawn air in our lives and in our world today. He calls us to preserve some element of silence and solitude in our busy lives. And he calls us to dissent from the general myth dream, the clichés and prejudices by our compassion and our responsibility for the suffering of others, share that compassion, that mercy, our Christian hope, with a world so desperately in need of that message.

Merton came to realize that the night spirit and the dawn air gave him life and enhanced his prophetic and poetic voice so he could declare that life to others. In the end, life counts in all its humility, fragility, silence and perseverance. Here are again words from Merton from "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air", with which I would like to conclude:

There is a time to listen, in the active life as everywhere else, and the better part of action is waiting, not knowing what next, and not having a glib answer.¹⁶



17. Thomas Merton

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16 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 173.