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Note: Two poems from this volume, 'Lectio (1)' & 'Lectio (2)', were included in the previous edition of *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 23.2, Advent 2016.

Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics

Christine Vaulters Painter

Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2016

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\$17.95

In this book the author, a Benedictine oblate and online abbess for Abbey of the Arts, takes us on a journey through the inner life accompanied by twelve great monastics, poets and mystics from across the ages.

Her approach is firmly grounded in the field of expressive arts. This comes from an understanding that each of us speaks a variety of languages. In our culture we tend to emphasize and promote the language of science, logic and verbal analysis as the superior way of knowing. But we have multiple ways of knowing -musical, poetic, visual, kinaesthetic, intuitive - which are often ignored or undervalued. She considers that these ways of knowing give us insights into both our interior and exterior landscape which are not fully available through cognitive ways of knowing. They widen our capacity to see the holy in all that we do and experience.

She employs Jungian archetypes to identify a particular aspect of twelve individuals, encouraging us to explore the archetypes within ourselves. Her choice is wide-reaching: Miriam - the Prophet, King David - the Sovereign, Francis of Assisi - the Fool, Mary - the Mother, Dorothy Day - the Orphan, Amma Syncletica - the warrior, Brigid of Kildare - the Healer, Brendan - the Navigator and Pilgrim, Benedict of Nursia - the Sage, Rainer Maria Rilke - the Artist, Hildegard of Bingen - the Visionary, and Thomas Merton - the Monk.

Amma Syncletica is cited in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. She came from a wealthy family and gave it all up to join the monastic

community in the desert. By joining the desert community with all of its privations and disciplines she was able to throw off the yoke of patriarchy to which the women of that time were subject. The title of *Desert Mother* does not imply a nurturing role in relation to her male counterparts but a recognition that her strength, resolve, and wisdom were garnered from the harsh and challenging conditions she experienced in the Egyptian desert.

Brigid of Kildare (ca. 451-525) is one of the three major saints of Ireland along with St Patrick and St Columba, and is known for her kinship with animals and her identification with the poor and the oppressed. The stories gathered in her name highlight the dignity of everyday tasks, particularly those carried out in the home with the recognition that it is not the task itself which is deemed to be worthy or unworthy but the quality of attention and love brought to each act.

She introduces the reader to Thomas Merton by quoting one of her favourite passages, from the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.

Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.

She uses Thomas Merton as a vehicle to explore the power of silence as a way to develop and explore our interior lives. Silence and solitude open up our lives, as it did his, to a much grander canvas, to a recognition that God is in everything, inviting us into the great giftedness of the universe. The author urges us to stop our busy lives, to pay attention, to listen, to observe, and, quoting from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, to reflect on the fact that 'the rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence'. Despite Merton's erudition

and scholarship the author considers his great gift to a modern world to be that he makes what many people consider to be remote and inaccessible available to all, and delivers insights that all can access in their daily lives. Further, his diaries ensure that his human frailties are always in view.

The author advises the reader to take a week or a month over each of her chosen archetypes, to explore the implications of how they could illuminate aspects of their own life. Using the concept of Anam Cara from the Celtic spiritual tradition, she considers that it would be good practice when embarking on this spiritual journey to have a soul friend with whom one could share difficulties and discoveries made on the journey. The book could also be a fruitful source of material for group work for those who undertake to embark on this spiritual adventure in the company of fellow travellers.

There are an increasing number of books and retreats where the multidimensional aspects of our spiritual lives are explored. I think this book could be of use as a starting point to investigate many of the interesting figures she introduces us to from across the ages - from Miriam and King David of the Hebrew bible to Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day in the twentieth century - and to explore the ways in which they can serve to illuminate our own spiritual journey.

Patricia Higgins is a retired teacher who lives in London. She has served on the TMS committee since 2014. She has become increasingly interested in the nature of the relationship between mysticism and resistance. She is a member of the W.C.C.M. (World Community of Christian Meditation) and is actively involved in issues around the cause of the Palestinians and that of the environment.

Pure Act—The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax

Michael N. McGregor

Fordham University Press, New York, 2015

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Those coming to Lax predominantly through an interest in Merton would know little about him other than the epithet 'the hermit of Patmos', the mutual friendship between Lax, Merton & Reinhardt as described in the *Seven Storey Mountain*, and through the macaronic correspondence