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A Meeting of Angels: Thomas Merton and the Shakers

by Paul M. Pearson

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is arguably the most influential American Catholic author of the twentieth century. His autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* has sold over one million copies and has been translated into over fifteen languages. He wrote over sixty other books and hundreds of poems and articles on topics ranging from monastic spirituality to civil rights, nonviolence, and the nuclear arms race.

After a rambunctious youth and adolescence, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism and in December 1941 entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, just a few miles south of Bardstown, Kentucky. The Abbey of Gethsemani is a community of monks belonging to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, commonly known as Trappists.¹

The twenty-seven years Merton spent in Gethsemani brought about profound changes in his self-understanding. This ongoing conversion impelled him into the political arena, where he became, according to Daniel Berrigan, the conscience of the peace movement of the 1960s. Referring to race and peace as the two most urgent issues of our time, Merton was a strong supporter of the nonviolent civil rights movement. For his social activism Merton endured severe criticism from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who assailed his political writings as unbecoming of a monk.

During his last years, he became deeply interested in Asian religions, particularly Zen Buddhism, and in promoting East-West dialogue. After several meetings with Merton in 1968, the Dalai Lama praised him as having a more profound understanding of Buddhism than any other Christian he had known, and stated that Merton had introduced him to the real meaning of the word Christian. It was during this trip to a conference on East-West monastic dialogue that Merton died, in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, the victim of an accidental electrocution.

In this paper I will discuss Thomas Merton's interest in the Shakers and suggest some of the reasons for his attraction to them.

Introduction

After Thomas Merton first visited Pleasant Hill in June 1959 he wrote in his personal journal:

I cannot help seeing Shakertown in a very special light, that of my own vocation. There is a lot of Shakertown in Gethsemani. The two contemporary communities had much in common, were born of the same Spirit. If Shakertown had survived it would probably have evolved much as we have evolved. The prim ladies in their bonnets would have been driving tractors, and the sour gents would have advertised their bread and cheese. And all would have struggled mightily with guilt.²

This is a very different view from that of Charles Dickens who wrote of the Shakers over 120 years before Merton's visit:

We walked into a grim room where several grim hats were hanging on grim pegs, and the time was grimly told by a grim clock, which uttered every tick with a kind of struggle, as if it broke this grim silence reluctantly and under protest. Ranged against the wall were six or eight stiff high-backed chairs, and they partook so strongly of the general grimness, that one would much rather have sat on the floor than incurred the smallest obligation to any of them. . . . Presently, there stalked into this apartment, a grim old Shaker, with eyes as hard, and dull, and cold, as the great round metal buttons on his coat and waistcoat; a sort of calm goblin.³

Thomas Merton's Interest in the Shakers and Pleasant Hill

Merton's earliest reference to the Shakers can be found in his history of the Cistercian Order, *The Waters of Siloe*, where he gives a very brief outline of who the Shakers were. After noting that they arrived in Kentucky in the same year as the first Trappists, Merton writes:

In spite of their peculiar theology, the Shakers were much safer people to have for neighbours than the Philistines.

They were quiet, sober, hard-working men and women who segregated themselves into communistic villages of their own where they lived in celibacy, practiced their religion, and supported themselves by farming and various crafts. In spite of the note of derision in the nickname they



Photograph of Pleasant Hill by Thomas Merton. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

received, the Shakers did not go in for violent ceremonies. They did a little sober dancing and handclapping—the men and women dancing as they lived, in separate groups. Eventually the Kentucky Shakers, who took celibacy seriously, all died out. The plain, solid brick buildings of their old village now remain as a curiosity for sightseers.⁴

Merton makes no further reference to the Shakers until his visit of June 1959; from then up until his death in 1968 he records at least six visits to Pleasant Hill. Besides making these visits, Merton writes of the Shakers in two published essays. The first is a comprehensive but straightforward reflection on the history and values of the Shakers, entitled “Pleasant Hill: A Shaker Village in Kentucky,” which was published in the magazine *Jubilee* and later reprinted in his book *Mystics and Zen Masters*. The second is an introduction he wrote for Edward Deming Andrews’ book *Religion in Wood*. This article has been described by one scholar as “one of the most profound pieces of writing ever published on the Shaker spirit and the extraordinary culture that it crafted, particularly in the Zen-like purity of their furniture and dwellings.”⁵ Merton also makes reference to the Shakers in his correspondence with Mary Childs Black,⁶ Ralph McCallister,⁷ Robert Meader of the Shaker Museum at Old Chatham, Brother Thomas Whitaker of St. Maur’s Priory at South Union, and Sister Prisca and Mother Benedict of the Regina Laudis Community. He also corresponded briefly with a Shaker eldress at Canterbury.

I would like to suggest that Merton’s interest in the Shakers, and his sense of affinity with them, are based first of all on his wholehearted and unflinching embrace of monasticism—though not necessarily monasticism as it was being practiced in the nineteen forties, fifties and sixties—and second, on his vision of paradise in the world, i.e. his sense of what I would call “paradise consciousness” or original blessing. Related to these is his readiness to stand up against the culture of his day as a prophetic witness to truths different from those held by the majority.

Merton’s first visits to Pleasant Hill were in 1959, first in June and again in December. (At this time the main road from Gethsemani to Lexington went through the center of the village.) One senses in his early visits that he knows a little of the background of this Shaker community, but was not yet doing much serious reading. In December he was able to go inside some of the buildings for the first time and describes the Trustees Office, famous for its winding double staircase:

Marvelous double winding stair going up to the mysterious clarity of a dome on the roof ... quiet sunlight filtering in. ... All the other houses are locked up. There is Shaker furniture only in the center family house. I tried to get in it and a gloomy old man living in the back told me curtly "it was locked up." The empty fields, the big trees—how I would love to explore those houses and listen to that silence. In spite of the general decay and despair there is joy there still and simplicity.⁸

He concludes by saying, "Shakers fascinate me. ... I want to study them."

In late November 1960 Merton received a letter from the Shaker scholar and collector Edward Deming Andrews, and thus began a heartfelt exchange of letters lasting until the death of Andrews in the summer of 1964. In response to Andrews' initial letter Merton described briefly his plans for a book about the Shakers:

My part would not be precisely a study of their religion, if by that is to be understood their doctrines, but of their spirit and I might say their mysticism, in practice, as evidenced by their life and their craftsmanship. To me the Shakers are of very great significance ... by their wonderful integration of the spiritual and the physical in their work. There is no question in my mind that one of the finest and most genuine religious expressions of the nineteenth century is in the silent eloquence of Shaker craftsmanship. I am deeply interested in the thought that a hundred years ago our two communities were so close together, so similar, somehow, in ideals, and yet evidently had no contact with one another.

Merton then goes on to say:

There can be so much meaning to a study of this kind: meaning for twentieth century America which has lost so much in the last hundred years—lost while seeming to gain. I think the extinction of the Shakers and of their particular kind of spirit is an awful portent. I feel all the more akin to them because our own Order, the

Cistercians, originally had the same kind of ideal of honesty, simplicity, good work, for a spiritual motive.⁹

In November 1961 Merton met Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews for the first and only time. With Ralph McCallister, then director of the organization working to restore Pleasant Hill, they visited Merton at Gethsemani. In a memoir published posthumously Andrews recalled this visit:

The visit to the Trappist monastery was a memorable one. At Father Merton's suggestion we arrived in time to attend the short choral office of Nones. ... We met the good brother in a room reserved for visitors, and then he took me on a tour of the Abbey. (The rules forbade Faith from accompanying us.) Though the monastic rule of silence prevailed, in his role as guide and director of novices he was permitted to speak, answering all questions most graciously and with deep insight into the dedicated work of the order. In the book store we selected a volume we wanted to buy ... but he insisted on presenting it to us. "You can buy books elsewhere," he said, "but not here." Nor would he take money for the famed Trappist cheese, so Faith put the money in the poor box. After an hour or so of the best of good talk, we took our leave, gently waved away by one whom we had already come to regard as a spiritual mentor and intimate friend.¹⁰

Merton next visited Pleasant Hill on January 12, 1962. On the way over and back from Asbury Methodist Seminary he stopped to take photographs and wrote in his journal:

Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees ... some marvelous subjects. How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine. A completely miraculous achievement of forms.¹¹

The moments of eloquent silence and emptiness in Shakertown stayed with me more than anything else—like a vision.¹²

Merton didn't rush into writing about the Shakers and only in October 1963 did he write his first article about them, originally published in *Jubilee* with the wonderful title: "The Shakers: American Celibates and Craftsmen who 'Danced' in the Glory of God."¹³ Merton noted in his journal the following month, "I have more (good) reactions to the article on the Shakers ... than to almost any such thing I have written,"¹⁴ including a letter from Eldress Marguerite Frost at Canterbury congratulating him on a "very good piece of work."¹⁵

Soon after the publication of this article, Edward Deming Andrews wrote to Merton requesting him to write an introduction to a new book



Photograph of Pleasant Hill by Thomas Merton. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

he was writing, saying to Merton, "I know of no one who has caught so truthfully the spirit which animated the Shaker craftsmen."¹⁶ Merton accepted Andrews' invitation: "I love the Shakers and all that they have left us far too much to be able to say no."¹⁷ Edward Deming Andrews sent Merton a copy of the manuscript of *Religion in Wood* on March 24, 1964 so that Merton could read the text prior to writing his introduction.

By the time Merton completed the introduction Andrews had died.¹⁸ Merton wrote to Faith offering words of consolation and praise for her husband's work:

His vocation was to keep alive the Shaker spirit in its purity and mediate that to the rest of us. I feel personally very much in debt to him for this. I realize more and more the vital importance of the Shaker "gift of simplicity" which is a true American charism: alas, not as fully appreciated as it should be. Ted was faithful to his call, and his work has born more fruit than we can estimate on this earth. His reward will surely be with those angelic ones whose work and life he understood and shared.¹⁹

After receiving the introduction Faith wrote to Merton saying how beautiful she found it, adding she had read it every day since it arrived, "almost a month ago."²⁰

In May 1965 Merton visited Pleasant Hill once again, this time with his friend and publisher James Laughlin,²¹ noting the "inexhaustible variety and dignity in sameness"²² of the buildings. Merton went on to say, "Pleasant Hill ... always impresses me with awe and creates in me a sense of quiet joy. I love those old buildings and I love the way the road swings up to them. They stand there in an inexpressible dignity, simplicity, and peace under the big trees."²³ Merton's final visit to Pleasant Hill was in April 1968.²⁴

Monks and Shakers

I want now to look at some of the reasons for Thomas Merton's attraction to the Shakers, beginning with their shared monastic ideals.

The Shakers, as they developed, were essentially monastic—communities of men and women living celibate lives structured around work and prayer. They did not take vows as such, but the covenant they

signed on fully adopting the Shaker way of life involved a commitment to celibacy, to confession, and to community of goods—three “C’s” for which they were frequently criticized as being Papist. They modeled themselves after the early Christian church where “the faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed”²⁵—a model of community that has been achieved only in some manifestations of the monastic life.

The Cistercians took three vows—obedience, stability and *conversatio morum*, i.e. conversion of manners, or conversion of life, a vow which incorporated celibacy and poverty. In the Rule of St. Benedict, obedience and *conversatio morum* included manifesting one’s conscience to one’s superior, similar to the confession practiced by the Shakers. Similarly the Shakers were obedient to the elders of the community and, although they did not take a vow of stability, they chose freely to stay in the Shaker family which they joined.

It is also significant that the “Millenial Laws” of Shakers and the rule followed by the monks governed not just the spiritual life of the community but its temporal life as well—the day’s work, clothing, sleeping arrangements, and the treatment of vulnerable members of the community.

There are numerous other parallels between the Shakers and monastic life according to the Rule of St. Benedict:

- New members aspiring to join either community followed a special novitiate regime until they were judged to be ready for full admission to the community.
- The Rule instructed the monk to welcome all strangers as Christ, a precept followed closely by the Shakers.
- The Rule emphasized the importance of continually seeking God, which was also stressed by the Shakers and reflected in the words of Mother Ann: “Labor to make the way of God your own; let it be your inheritance, your treasure, your occupation, your daily calling.”²⁶
- In both communities, members away on a journey were instructed to follow the community’s life of prayer and upon returning not to disturb the life of the community by telling tales of what they had seen on their travels.
- In neither community could a gift be received without

permission from the abbot or elder.

- Abbots and elders were both subject to the same rules as the community and shared in its common life.
- Provision was made in both ways of life for receiving “backsliders” back into the community, and relegating them to the lowest place in the community.
- Both ways of life stressed the virtue of humility.

The chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict on humility is one of the longest and most structured sections of the rule, laying out the “twelve steps” of humility. The Shakers belief in humility is summed up succinctly in many of their songs.²⁷ They were admonished against using superfluous decoration and encouraged to avoid things that were expensive and extravagant. Of the humility practiced by the Shakers Merton writes, “The Shakers remain as witnesses to the fact that only humility keeps man in communion with truth, and first of all with his own inner truth.”²⁸

In the Rule of St. Benedict the craftsmen of the monastery were instructed to practice their crafts “with all humility” and if a monk got a “swollen head because of his skill in his craft” the Abbot was to prohibit him from practicing that craft again until “his pride has been humbled.”²⁹ Similarly a Shaker could be moved from a particular craft if there was evidence of “unseemly pride.”³⁰

What may have particularly attracted Merton to the Shakers was their understanding of work. Among the Cistercians there is a strong tradition of earning one’s daily bread by the work of one’s hands. In Merton’s early days at Gethsemani this was frequently work in the fields, though later, due to financial necessity, it was the production of cheese, fruitcake and fudge. Many traditions embrace the concept that work, i.e. manual labor, helps to purify the soul and bring it closer to God. Within the Buddhist tradition this is called “mindfulness,” in business circles managers would call it “focus,” while for the Shakers it was summed up in their maxim “put your hands to work and your hearts to God” and, for monks, the motto “*ora et labora*”—“pray and work.” Any chore in either monastic or Shaker life could become an opportunity to serve both God and the community. Merton witnessed to the holiness of work in his descriptions of the regular round of chores in his life at the hermitage. He clearly describes the rhythm of his hermit’s life, where his daily chores were embraced with mindfulness and given as much importance as his prayer and his work of writing:

Cutting wood, clearing ground, cutting grass, cooking soup, drinking fruit juice, sweating, washing, making fire, smelling smoke, sweeping, etc. This is religion.³¹

St. Benedict compared the workman's tools to the tools of the altar, instructing the cellarer of the monastery to regard "the monastery utensils and all its belongings ... as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar."³² Similarly for the Shakers, work equaled prayer and one could achieve a meditative state of worship in whatever task one was doing because all work was undertaken for God.

This idea of work as worship did not mean focusing on otherworldly matters at the expense of the task at hand, which could have resulted in work poorly done. On the contrary, both Merton and the Shakers valued excellent craftsmanship and doing a job to the best of one's ability. For example, when Merton was appointed forester he set about learning all that he could about the Gethsemani woods, the different trees, their life cycles and issues relating to reforestation—an approach to work far removed from the frenzied productivity for the sake of conspicuous consumption that we see in our own times.

Merton was also attracted to the Shakers' stress on simplicity and their understanding of their relationship to the place where they lived and the natural world they shared with that place. Some of Merton's descriptions of the Cistercians in *The Water of Siloe* are very "Franciscan" in their simplicity and appreciation of nature.³³

Forest and field, sun and wind and sky, earth and water, all speak the same silent language, reminding the monk that he is here to develop like the things that grow all around him ... even the site of a Cistercian monastery is, or ought to be, a lesson in contemplation.³⁴

And again:

When the monks had found their homes, they not only settled there, for better or for worse, but they sank their roots into the ground and fell in love with their woods.³⁵

Merton points out that the early Cistercian monasteries developed "a beautiful spiritual symbolism by their names alone—eloquent and harmonious names full of poetry and simple mysticism. ... Steeped in the language and imagery of Scripture, the Cistercians were acutely alive



Interior of the church at Gethsemani Abbey.
Photograph by Paul M. Pearson.

to the spiritual and poetic possibilities of their surroundings, which they condensed into names like Fountains, Clairvaux ('Clear Valley')³⁶ and Mellifont ("Fount of Honey"). The Shakers also appreciated the importance of place, carefully choosing sites for their communities, and often the place and their religious aspirations were reflected in the names they gave their communities—Pleasant Hill, New Lebanon and Sabbathday Lake.

For both the Shakers and the Cistercians, this sense of place extended to their architecture. Merton described the qualities of Cistercian architecture in *The Waters of Siloe*:

Cistercian architecture is famous for its energy and simplicity and purity, for its originality and technical brilliance ... for poising masses of stone in mid-air, and making masonry fly and hover over the low earth with the self-assurance of an angel.³⁷

He continues:

The typical Cistercian church, with its low elevation, its plain, bare walls, lighted by few windows and without stained glass, achieved its effect by the balance of masses and austere, powerful ... arches and mighty vaulting. These buildings filled anyone who entered them with peace and restfulness and disposed the soul for contemplation in an atmosphere of simplicity and poverty.³⁸

These words are equally applicable to much of Shaker architecture. They describe, for instance, the great round stone barn at Hancock. Built in 1826, it has the feel of a cathedral. It too "hovered over the low earth with the self-assurance of an angel"; yet its beauty does not detract from its practicality and technical brilliance.

Elsewhere Merton picks up this same theme in relation to Shaker furniture. In his introduction to *Religion in Wood* he suggests that "neither the Shakers nor Blake would be disturbed at the thought that a work-a-day bench, cupboard, or table might also and at the same time be furniture in and for heaven."³⁹

Paradise Consciousness – Original Blessing

Merton's attraction to the simplicity of the Shakers, to their search for what he saw as the core spirit, the *logos* of a thing, mirrors a trend in Merton's own thought and writing: a pursuit of paradise consciousness. This paradise consciousness comes across strongly in much of Merton's later writings and in his photographs where ordinary objects are shown to portray an extraordinary, unexpected beauty. It is central as well to many of the poets and writers Merton was reading—Blake, Hopkins, Rilke, and Pasternak, to name but a few.

Merton spoke to the monastic community at Gethsemani a number of times in 1965 and 1966 about Rilke's poetry, and in one talk spoke of Rilke's poetic view of reality, "inseeing," which he described as a deep encounter between the poet and his subject, getting right into the heart of the subject, seeing that "it was good, that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been made better."⁴⁰ It was this same spirit that Merton was attracted to in the Shakers. Their architecture and their furniture were made, so they believed, as God would have made them; they could not have been made better.

The essential Shaker message was deeply Christian. Merton describes the Shakers as "simple, joyous, optimistic people whose joy was rooted in the fact that Christ *had* come," and who believed in "a redeemed cosmos in which war, hatred, tyranny, and greed had no place."⁴¹ In Shaker work there is a certain Edenic innocence as each item that the craftsman makes is seen as a participation in God's work of creation, and the craftsman's ideal was to make each object to best fulfill its vocation. As Merton so famously put it: "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."⁴² In both their work and their worship the Shakers attempted to be "attuned to the music intoned in each being by God the Creator and by the Lord Jesus."⁴³

Counter Cultural: "Art degraded, imagination denied, war governed the nations."⁴⁴

Finally, Merton found in the Shakers many of the countercultural beliefs that he himself espoused long before they became popular in the Catholic Church⁴⁵—most notably pacifism and the belief in equal rights

for all people. The Shakers saw war and violence as related to sex and marriage, believing that “those who marry will fight”⁴⁶ and that lust and cruelty went together. Merton’s concerns about war and violence occur throughout his writings but are most prominent in his writings of the 1960s when, for a time, he was silenced by the Cistercian Order from writing on the subjects of war and peace and the nuclear arms race.

The Shakers were also great advocates of equal rights. Within their communities there was no distinction between male and female, black or white; all people were viewed and treated as equal. Similarly Merton was acutely aware of issues relating to racism and discrimination in its various forms. Both criticized the established churches for practicing social injustice and inequality. In words that Merton felt echoed St. Bernard, one Shaker elder said, “The divine man has no right to waste money upon what you would call beauty in his house or daily life, while there are people living in misery.”⁴⁷

There is at times in Merton an almost Luddite attitude towards technology and technological progress. Although the Shakers were great inventors and were happy to embrace the latest technology, their motives for doing so remained pure and this must have been attractive to Merton. Merton writes of their work’s inimitable honesty which “one cannot find in the slick new model of the latest car, tailored like some unearthly reptilian fowl and flashing with pointless gadgetry, marketed to replace other models designed for obsolescence, and to be replaced itself without delay.”⁴⁸ He asks whether it is still possible in our own time for the Shaker spirit to exist when our “lives are in full technological, sociological, and spiritual upheaval.” Can Shaker craftsmanship and its spirit “find a way to direct and inform machine production”?⁴⁹ These questions are as valid today as when Merton posed them.

For Merton, the Shakers “exemplified the simplicity, the practicality, the earnestness, and the hope that have been associated with the United States” and they acted out their conviction with a full awareness of the world around them, aware that the serpent had already entered into the paradise of the New World, that “already the irresponsible waste of mine and forest, of water and land, the destruction of bison and elk, were there to show that Paradise was not indefinitely self-sustaining.”⁵⁰ According to Merton, the Shakers were also aware that “it was a paradise in which the Indian had been slaughtered and the Negro was enslaved. In which the immigrant was treated as an inferior being, and in which he had to work

very hard for the 'gold' that was to be 'picked up in the streets.'"⁵¹

In spite of their critique, however, both Merton and the Shakers found hope through their deep faith in the ultimate goodness of humanity and creation, through their search for paradise. Merton found this hope in the Shaker's "Tree of Life."⁵² The image of the Paradise Tree, which had come to the Shakers as a spirit gift, suggested to Merton that

this particular symbolic hope needs to be taken seriously precisely in the moment of darkness and deception when, in our atmosphere of crisis, bitterness, and confusion, this hope has turned for so many into angry despair and the sacred tree has been stripped of those bright leaves and golden fruits.⁵³

As he had written in a letter to Faith Andrews after the death of her husband, the Shaker "gift of simplicity" was a "true American charism."⁵⁴ Maybe such simplicity and humility can cut through the suffocating materialism for which we in America and much of the West have traded our souls and plundered our planet.

The Dance of Creation

Merton's appreciation of the Shakers' values and way of life seems a long way from Charles Dickens' description of Shaker "grimness." The Shaker gift of music and dance is one more expression of their belief in the power of God among believers, of paradise consciousness, of realized eschatology, of the presence of God's Kingdom. Merton commented on the Shakers' "pure, entranced, immaculate dancing, shaking the sex out of their hands ... and the whirling," and he added in a somewhat wistful tone, "God, at least they had the sense to *dance*."⁵⁵

Merton's own embrace of the dance of creation was expressed most succinctly in the closing chapter of his revision to *Seeds of Contemplation*, written at the time of his interest in the Shakers, entitled "The General Dance." In one of his letters of this period, to Edward Deming Andrews, Merton recalls a visit to Pleasant Hill, looking out from the attic of the guest house "through the branches of an old cedar at the quiet field in which they used to dance. (Holy Sion's Plain)."⁵⁶ He then goes on to tell Andrews of his discovery of an old Christmas carol "about the 'dancing' of God with man in the mystery of the Incarnation," saying, "I think here there

may be an important lead. The carol is an ancient English one. In it, the Lord speaks of His coming at Christmas in the following words: ‘Tomorrow is my dancing day.’”⁵⁷ Each stanza of the carol concludes with an invitation to sing and to dance.⁵⁸

Merton himself echoes the invitation in the carol at the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, inviting us all to join in the general dance of creation:

The Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could go out of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance ... when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash—at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the “newness,” the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.

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 ... 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.

We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.⁵⁹

In a 1964 message to Latin American poets, Merton reiterates this invitation: “Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.”⁶⁰

Endnotes

¹ The Cistercian Order appeared in the eleventh century as a reform of the Benedictine Order. St. Bernard and the other founders felt that the Benedictine monasteries of their day had moved away from the simplicity of the Rule of St. Benedict and become too worldly. In the seventeenth century the Cistercian Order itself was reformed for similar reasons by Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé of the Abbey of La Trappe in France, from where the Cistercians of the Strict Observance got their common name of Trappists.

² Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 287.

³ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Middlesex. 1972), 257.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949), 67.

⁵ Kathleen Deignan, "'Wide Open to Heaven on Earth' – Thomas Merton and the Shakers." Paper delivered at the 10th Conference of the International Thomas Merton Society held at Christian Brothers University, Memphis, Tennessee, June 7–10, 2007.

⁶ In the early 1960s Mary Childs Black was the director of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection in Williamsburg, Virginia. At the time of her correspondence with Merton she was arranging an exhibit of Shaker spirit drawings which included some pieces from the Andrews' collection.

⁷ In 1961 Ralph McCallister was the executive director of the organization working to restore Pleasant Hill.

⁸ Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 362.

⁹ Thomas Merton to Edward Deming Andrews, December 12, 1960.

¹⁰ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Fruits of the Shaker Tree of Life: Memoirs of Fifty Years of Collecting and Research* (Stockbridge, Mass.: Berkshire Traveller Press, 1975), 172.

¹¹ In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton points to some typically Cistercian or Shaker trends in his father's art work: "His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself." Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London, Sheldon Press, 1975), 3.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 194.

¹³ Thomas Merton "The Shakers: American Celibates and Craftsmen who Danced in the Glory of God," *Jubilee* 11 (January 1964): 36-41.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace at the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 72.

¹⁵ Contrast this with her comments on *The People Called Shakers* by Edward Deming Andrews as given in Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (382), even though Merton's article relies heavily on that very source. In her brief letter to Merton, Frost also notes that she has "long been interested in your [Merton's] writings."

¹⁶ Edward Deming Andrews to Thomas Merton, January 21, 1964.

¹⁷ Thomas Merton to Edward Deming Andrews, January 29, 1964.

¹⁸ Edward Deming Andrews died on June 13, 1964.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton to Faith Andrews, July 20, 1964.

²⁰ Faith Andrews to Thomas Merton, August 18, 1964.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation* (Basingstoke, Hants: Lamp Press, 1988), 181.

²² Merton, *Dancing*, 254.

²³ Merton, *Vow of Conversation*, 187-88.

²⁴ The visit, made with Canon A. M. Allchin and a seminarian from General Theological Seminary in New York, was, he records, in the “pelting rain,” and they quickly moved on to visit the Meatyards and Carolyn Hammer in Lexington. Later that day, while still out with Donald Allchin, they heard the news that Martin Luther King had been assassinated in Memphis. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 77.

²⁵ Acts 2:44-45.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, “Introduction” to *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* by Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973.), ix.

²⁷ Their most famous song, “The Gift to be Simple,” is a good example: “When true simplicity is gain’d/To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed/To turn, turn will be our delight/”Till by turning, turning we come round right.” Edward Deming Andrews. *The Gift to be Simple: Songs, Dances and Rituals of the American Shakers* (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), 136.

²⁸ Thomas Merton to Edward Deming Andrews, December 21, 1961.

²⁹ *The Rule of St. Benedict for Monasteries*, trans. Dom Bernard Basil Bulton (n.p., 1969), chap. 57.

³⁰ Andrews, *Religion in Wood*, 10.

³¹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 225.

³² *Rule of St. Benedict*, chap. 31.

³³ This was a far cry from the seventeenth-century reform of the order or the strict observance followed at Gethsemani under Dom Fredrick Dunne at the time Merton was writing.

³⁴ Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, 274.

³⁵ Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, 273.

³⁶ Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, 273.

³⁷ Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, 14.

³⁸ Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, 14.

³⁹ Merton, “Introduction,” viii.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Natural Contemplation* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1987). Transcribed by the current author.

⁴¹ Merton, “Introduction,” ix.

⁴² Merton, “Introduction,” xii.

⁴³ Merton, "Introduction," ix.

⁴⁴ Merton, "Introduction," xiv. Merton is here quoting from William Blake.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. also focused on these issues in his final years: racism, militarism, and consumerism. In a recent paper Kathleen Deignan put the Shaker approach to these "isms" very succinctly: "capitalism yielded to communitarianism; militarism surrendered to pacifism; and racial and gender hegemony was dismantled in favor of the egalitarianism of genders and races."

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988), 194.

⁴⁷ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 197.

⁴⁸ Merton, "Introduction," x.

⁴⁹ Merton, "Introduction," xv.

⁵⁰ Merton, "Introduction," xii-xiii.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton to Mary Childs Black, January 24, 1962.

⁵² In a letter of February 2, 1964 Edward Deming Andrews says to Merton that he will shortly be mailing him a "silk-screen reproduction of The Tree of Life." On March 13, 1964 Thomas Merton replied to Edward Deming Andrews saying: "The Tree of Life has arrived, and indeed has been on the wall sometime. It really brightens up the room and fills the whole place with its own light. I am very happy to have it, and deeply grateful." The Tree of Life Andrews sent to Merton still hangs in Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

⁵³ Merton, "Introduction," xii.

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton to Faith Andrews, July 20, 1964.

⁵⁵ Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 362.

⁵⁶ Thomas Merton to Edward Deming Andrews, January 17, 1961.

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton to Edward Deming Andrews, January 17, 1961.

⁵⁸ The carol tells the story of Christ from his incarnation, concluding with Christ's ascension: "Then up to Heaven did I ascend/Where now I dwell in sure substance/On the right hand of God that man/May come unto the general dance."

⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 296-97.

⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 161.