



The Four Walls of New Freedom  
Dean's Lunch Address  
School of Divinity, WFU  
August 22, 2008  
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In 1942 Thomas Merton, Columbia University professor and citizen of the world, entered the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani at Bardstown, Kentucky, a community in which he would remain until his death on December 10, 1968, 40 years ago this winter. I'm rereading segments of Merton's massive corpus these days in preparation for a lecture at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville on the anniversary of his death. I find myself returning again and again to this passage of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948 and recounting his entry to the monastery..

I rang the bell at the gate. It let fall a dull, unresonant note inside the empty court. My man got in his car and went away. Nobody came. I could hear somebody moving around inside the Gatehouse. I did not ring again. Presently, the window opened, and Brother Matthew looked out between the bars, with his clear eyes and graying beard.

"Hullo, Brother," I said. He recognized me, glanced at the suitcase, and said:

"This time have you come to stay?"

"Yes, Brother, if you'll pray for me," I said.

Brother nodded, and raised his hand to close the window. "That's what I've been doing," he said, "praying for you."

So Brother Matthew locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in *the four walls of my new freedom.*<sup>1</sup>

So here you are, tapping on the door of this not-quite monastic-community (Monks take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. At a Protestant Divinity School we let you choose two out of three!) Here you are, and, we've been praying for you. Welcome to the four walls of your new freedom!

The “walls of freedom” are a strange paradox, for Merton as it turned out, and perhaps for you as well. In welcoming you to a new and much less sanctified environment than the Abbey of Gethsemani, I want to remind you of at least 4 walls of our freedom here. We have no creed or Abstract of Principles to which faculty or students must subscribe. I doubt if anyone of us knows all the theological intricacies (or quirks) of our colleagues. Academic freedom, freedom of inquiry, freedom of voice, freedom of ideas shape us here, I hope. Nonetheless, there are walls of freedom that inform what we do, create expectations, and guide our life together. **Perhaps they aren't walls at all, but gates that open the world and the Spirit.**

Here at Wake Forest, the first wall of freedom is **scholarship**. Hence the question: Can you read, write and think? My God, could Thomas Merton write—that is one reason his books fill the trade-book stores and Amazon.com. The *Seven Storey Mountain* draws you in from the opening paragraph. Just listen to it:

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*

image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him; living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers. . . . My father and mother were in the world and not of it—not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it.<sup>2</sup>

Can you hear it? In one short paragraph Merton links his birth with horoscopes, WWI, geography, and Augustinianism. He introduces his life even as he defines the artist in the world. And we are hooked.

So the freedom we offer you within the walls of graduate education is the freedom to read, write and think. Divinity school is about learning, relearning, extending your ability to read, write, and reflect, reflect, reflect, analyze, analyze, analyze.

During the next three years don't come to me complaining about the work; that is what you came here to do. Complain about the way we teach, about the courses you AREN'T getting and the courses that don't push you to your limits. Complain about the grades, if you must, but don't complain about the work. Why? Because that is why you are here—to extend your skills as writers, researchers, analysts and thinkers. Because that is your 'calling' as a graduate student, because you owe it to the people who will call you to preaching, teaching, community service, and the unpredictable 'care of souls.' You owe it to your calling whatever form it may take to do the hard work of study.

And by the way, it only lasts three years. You can stand anything for three years. But for God's sake (and your own sake) learn to read, write and think in ways you've not experienced before. That is the first wall of freedom we offer you.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid,

The second wall of freedom of course, is **community**. Hence the question: Can you nurture community here and LET COMMUNITY NURTURE YOU? Much of Thomas Merton's early writing involves his celebration of and struggle with the nature of community in a monastic environment. In fact, he calls it a "**furnace of ambivalence**," a great term for community whether found in a monastery, a church, or a divinity school. He writes of his first lessons at monastic community:

In the Scriptorium, you find a book in the Common Box that begins to interest you intensely: and then someone else gets interested in it too, and every time you want it, you find he has got there first. Out at work you may be put to saw a log with someone who just puts his head down and closes his eyes in prayer and doesn't care how he pulls his end of the saw, so that it continually jams in the log and you have to do five times as much work as usual, with practically no result. ...All this becomes far more interesting when it happens that the same person is the one who coughs down your neck in the choir, and takes the book you want in the Scriptorium, and fails to get your portion [of potatoes] for you at the table...."<sup>3</sup>

Community, monastic or otherwise, is messy, cumbersome and sometimes ornery, like ourselves—full of its own theological and ecclesial "furnace of ambivalence." We are a small school; we know each other reasonably well warts and all. We are not a church, but we create churchly moments—intentionally and unintentionally—for community. If a student says to me: "We don't do enough to create community here." I'll listen to his/her concerns but then ask: Do you go to chapel? Do you attend monthly

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, "Unpublished, from the original manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 146.

Eucharist? Do you go to community lunches? Do you participate in small group discussions in Art of Ministry? Do you attend a local congregation? Do you seek out professors for conversation in and out of class? Do you ever have a drink with your peers? (Sweet tea or Pinot Grigio, Diet Coke or Red Oak?) Can you let community nurture you here in ways that may shape your life and friendships for the duration?

Merton sums it up for “them” and for us: “In fact, so marked is the importance given to [communal]. . .love in our monastic ideal that it occupies a crucial position in the structure of Cistercian mystical theology. The ascent of the individual soul to personal mystical union with God is made to depend, in our life, upon our ability to love one another.”<sup>4</sup> Welcome to community; I hope you find it here in the three years that lie ahead.

There is a third wall of freedom is found in **spirituality and solitude**. I think the spirituality of this place is dangerous, really, because you are forced to confront the MEANING of the ideas you encounter in biblical texts (where will the text take you?), in history (what is the context of your faith?), theology (what concepts keep you awake at night?), ethics (where will conscience take you?), and PREACHING (how dare you climb up into a pulpit and lay your ideas on anyone?) And, through it all you may ask: where and what is the Presence of the God? It is a Master of DIVINITY degree, isn't it? So for the next three years are you ready to confront hierophany, those moments when the Sacred appears in the ordinary? Merton writes, and writes, and writes about such hierophanic moments (I do love that word) and their impact on the solitary human being. He is never more eloquent and challenging than in these words from *The Sign of Jonas*:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 145-146.

God, my God, God whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer! I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives for entering the monastery and you have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept with shame . . . While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question.<sup>5</sup>

Merton never really tells us what the great question is, and we won't tell you that either, but rest assured questions will be asked of you that push you from the rational to the non-rational, from left brain to right brain and back again, from objectivity to vulnerability. And in it all this there is the solitude of search, your own quest for God and grace wherever it takes you.

The fourth wall of freedom is relatively easy to articulate but terribly difficult to live out. It is grounded in what I would call **gospel worldliness**, a willingness to take all this freedom of research and reflection with you into the world and do something about it. Thomas Merton channeled the natural worldliness that sent him tumbling to the monastery into a worldliness that looked beyond the monastic walls to the struggles and the pains of human beings world wide, evident in his responses to the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, ecclesiastical renewal through Vatican II, and interfaith

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* in *The Thomas Merton Reader*, 213.

dialogue that pursued uncommon spirituality with Buddhists. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote of the worldliness of prayer:

I do not mean to imply that prayer excludes the simultaneous use of ordinary human means to accomplish a naturally good and justifiable end....In fact, a believer should normally do both. And there would seem to be a reasonable and right proportion between the use of these two means [praying and acting] to the same end.<sup>6</sup>

Then, in words that seem frighteningly contemporary, he wrote:

When I pray for peace I pray God to pacify not only the Russians and the Chinese but above all my own nation and myself. . . . When I pray for peace, I pray not only that the enemies of my country may cease to want war, but above all that my own country will cease to do the things that make war inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

Lest you think this is mere sentimentality, I would remind you that so outspoken was Merton about our Vietnam incursion, that when he died in a terrible accident in Bangkok the rumor persisted that our own CIA or other intelligence agency might have had a hand in his death.

While you are here I hope we infect you with a good case of Gospel Worldliness by which you read the Greek New Testament, Augustine's *Confessions*, Aquinas' *Summa*, Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, Jurgen Moltmann's *Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit*, and Jonathan Edwards' *History of the Work of Redemption* ALONG WITH the *New York Times*, and, if you must the *Wall Street Journal*, deciding what it is that brings all those texts together.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, in *The Thomas Merton Reader*, 280.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 281.

Where will such Gospel Worldliness take you when you are done? To the Mississippi state legislature with Brandon Jones, a member of our first graduating class; to inner city Houston with Laura Mayo, a member of our second graduating class; or to the Institute for Dismantling Racism with Willard Bass, a member of our third graduating class? Or will it take you to prison, with Chaplain Nagako Mori, who graduated two years ago, and at 66 works to “set at liberty those who are imprisoned.” Gospel worldliness captured every one of those persons in different but parallel ways. I hope it will descend on you while you are here. Who knows where it will take you?

So here you are, and like the old monk at Gethsemani opening the door to Thomas Merton and the “walls” of his “new freedom” we welcome you here. What will you bring to US for the next three years? For that we might jump intentionally if awkwardly from Thomas Merton to Michael Phelps, and the best single summary of this amazing human being breaking all records and reason in the Olympics. It comes from British Freestyle swimmer Simon Burnett who says: “I have figured out Michael Phelps. He’s not from another planet. He’s from the future.”<sup>8</sup>

And that is what I would say of you as you begin your graduate work at the School of Divinity, Wake Forest University in the year of our Lord, 2008. Some of you may be very weird (I don’t know that, I just speculate based on statistical probability), but you are not from another planet. You are from the future. I hope we can help you get back there in the next three years, with wisdom and courage and grace. Amen

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Svrluga, “Phelps Now Without Peer,” *Washington Post*, August 13, 2008, A01.