Columns
Coronavirus



The interior of Thomas Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky (Flickr/Bryan Sherwood, CC by 2.0)



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As I reflect on living during COVID-19, some mentors are guiding me.

My mother, Edna Margaret Doran (her maiden name) brought all of her Irish faith, wit, temper and humor into my gene pool by marrying my dad: Bill Best, a quiet German, hardworking builder — who would often listen to her and then go play golf! Theirs was a "stormy" marriage according to Mom, and I would agree. I had to learn the hard way how to claim my voice in difficult times, favoring more my dad's approach of walking away which seemed "holier" than Mom's "We've got to talk about this!" belligerence.

Oddly enough it's both of them that I'm listening to during my journey through COVID-19. My dad's quiet ability to find peace in nature, silently and simply letting life happen around him, teaches me something about integrity. His approach would be to work at whatever I can do now in order to prepare for tomorrow when I can help rebuild what is being lost.

My mom's genes in my DNA have a different ring. This was highlighted while I was serving our sisters lunch recently; one of the sisters remembered meeting my mother and hearing her rendition of a charismatic healing service we had attended at the University of Notre Dame years ago. Mom and I were packed into the Notre Dame stadium, listening to others share their healing experiences. It was pouring rain and we had been lucky enough to buy two black plastic garbage bags that each of us was holding over our heads as the rain dripped off around us. At one point in the service, a woman announced "I have just been healed of arthritis!" Upon hearing this, Mom raised her garbage bag and shouted to me in a loud voice: "And I've just gotten it!"

Remembering her story 30 years later, we laughed together.

I also remember inviting Mom to my community for a weekend. Midway through her visit, I asked, "How are you doing?" Her response shocked me: "I'm dying!" She said seriously, "Yes," repeating, "I'm dying of terminal niceness!"

Oh, the grace to name our situation with honesty and humor!

Living through this pandemic is going to take all the honesty I can handle as well as finding in the silence what I need to rebuild community here and now, as well as in

the future.

Another "voice" is also floating in my psyche.

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Thomas Merton has been my mentor through these months of COVID-19, and his writings have been a source of wisdom, humor and desire to become a decent human being.

His journals are calling me to do the same. In visiting the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, I'm aware that his reading of St. Augustine's *Confessions* influenced him to speak as honestly as possible in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This honesty also carried over in his journals.

My understanding is that Merton's choice to leave his writings in the hands of trustees at Bellarmine University was meant to foster a spirit of honesty in spiritual seekers; offering a way of learning how to live as a human being, following Christ with a spirit of openness to truth, regardless of who might share it with him. His "journal writing" was without censorship by his superiors, and we receive the "unexpurgated" Merton which I find so energizing.

After these months of somewhat "monastic" living, I find my mentor's writing on May 21, 1968, shortly before his death in Bangkok on Dec. 10, 1968, an invitation and a challenge:

> *In our monasteries we have been content to find our way to a kind of peace, a simple, undisturbed, thoughtful life. This is certainly good, but is it enough?*
>
> *I, for one, realize that now I need more. Not simply to be quiet, somewhat productive, to pray, to read, to cultivate leisure* — otium sanctum!
>
> *There is a need of effort, deepening, change and transformation. Not that I must undertake a special project of self-transformation or that I must "work on myself." In that regard, it would be better to forget it. Just to go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the*

*inside.*

*But I do have a past to break with, an accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk, a great need of clarification of mindfulness, to push on to the great doubt. Need for the Spirit.*

*Hang on to the clear light!*

May this "sheltering in place" time be such an experience for all who find the inner journey inviting and challenging.

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