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In the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Colorado

By Joyce Hinnefeld

The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another
of God's saints.
There is no other like him.
He is alone in his own character,
nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God
in quite the same way.
That is his sanctity.

--Thomas Merton, from *New Seeds of Contemplation*

The wooden roof of the little house where I'm staying, after baking all day in the desert sun--which shines steadily and reflects off of patches of snow--shifts and heaves as the temperature drops in the dark night. It shifts and heaves and groans with this change, as if it were a living thing. I lie in my bed and listen to its sound, summoning creatures--jack rabbit, bobcat, coyote--and imagining them traveling overhead. I've heard the coyotes calling to each other, both at dawn and in the dark night. They sound like they're laughing, or bickering, or both.

The mountains that surround me are named "Blood of Christ." In the stained glass windows of the chapel at this hermitage, the artist has depicted the mountains as blood red--a color I have not seen, in or on these mountains that surround me, during my time here. The mountains I see are green and gray, carved and etched yet also sheltering, soft, as they rise around me on three sides of this valley. In the distance, to the west and south, lies another chain of mountains, the San Juans. One day it snowed, and the highest, snow-covered peaks in all directions disappeared into banks of gray clouds.

In nearby Crestone, which was once a gold mining town, I watched a young man walking his dog, wolf, and llama through the streets. Earlier he'd sat next to me at the bar in a place called the Secret Garden, which

was filled with dark wood and dusty curtains--a saloon out of the Wild West where I ordered a latte and, as I drank it, watched a thin, bearded fellow working diligently to bake a tray of vegan cookies in a tiny toaster oven behind the bar.

"We need the tonic of wildness," wrote Thoreau. I need the tonic, every year or two, of living briefly among people who've chosen paths different from my own. Those who stepped aboard a different boat, who boarded a different train. Who've ridden the river, or the rails, in a different direction, toward a different goal, stepping off someplace else.

The story goes that my grandfather, my mother's father, often wished he'd joined his cousins who'd headed west, early in the twentieth century, to Arizona, Colorado, in search of what? Their fortunes, presumably, though that was late for silver or for gold. So for wilderness maybe--mountains, deserts, rootless Indian tribes. Subtle movement. Shifting slant of sun; clear, dry air; raucous coyote call.

I remember my grandfather as a quiet, wistful-seeming man that I hardly knew, whose pale eyes always seemed focused somewhere else. He told me once that he was relieved when my mother and father, who'd had a falling-out, patched things up and decided to get married. He was glad to hear my mother, his daughter, singing again, as she went about her chores and her business in that quiet farmhouse. She was his youngest child. I find that remarkable, to think that he heard her singing and felt soothed.

What was my grandfather thinking, as he chewed the dry wafer and drank the sweet wine in the little country church that still stands in the midst of acres of Indiana cornfields, his eyes focused somewhere else? Did he dream, still, of the sanctity of mountains all those years later, even then? Even when he heard his daughter singing--or maybe especially then?

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It Was a Singer, from the Seventies

Those stories they told me in New York—
can't get bus fare home the kids are hungry
I won't buy drugs just
food. I always thought,
I'm sure it's what they really
think and gave them money.
Who's the sucker, I know, well I
don't really know.
That was years ago, and
probably, now, they're dead.

I thought it was only a loan,
when I gave my mother's sewing machine
to a woman I hardly knew. Pillows and
blankets too, and my phone number so
she could call me when she was through.
Sewing, I guessed, suffering. Someone
had burned down her house.

She loved sewing and cooking,
womanly things, she'd had a
room full of cookbooks and patterns,
scraps of cloth, and now all of that was
gone and she lived with her kids in a hotel
while her husband rebuilt their house—
half a double as they call them in these
Pennsylvania towns, and I could picture it
then, its blackened hull, curled aluminum
siding, a little bit of brick, on a street
crowded with cars and lots more halves
of doubles. There'd been

other fires too—someone was setting them.
Her husband had spoken up for
the noisy neighbor, the Arab,
and the news moved from half to half,
double to double down that crowded
block. You'd be surprised, she told me,
what those people know,
living in those rows.

I never sew. And it surprises me
how I can't let go of that machine.
I'd like to know what she made,
or if she lied, as I'd like to know
how it felt to drive the needle with the
steel pedal on my mother's other Singer,
an older one. She had
three boys and another baby,
me, on the way when she sewed
herself a party dress—silk and
taffeta and tulle—for a dance
in the high school gym. Her

father, my grandfather, always
wished he'd moved west,
as cousins of his had years before.
I recall a wistfulness when I think
of him, though he rarely spoke to me,
that silent old dirt farmer, and
he died when I was twelve.
But I can picture what he must
have seen, standing in a field and
staring toward the sun—a path,
a road, a way out of the corn and
beans. Something bright there,
shimmering. He'd have run up
on some mountains eventually, of course,
Indian reservations, other troubles, but

oh, that pretty path! Don't we
all want to step out there? Whir
of silk beneath the jackhammer
needle, the drugs we said we
wouldn't buy, the come-here sun
that makes it all look gold.

Joyce Hinnefeld

Rain, Dusk, Solitude and Listening:
Thomas Merton's "Rain and the Rhinoceros"

Donald P. St. John

Introduction

Dusk in the forest is the time of the senses, of the damp coolness of evening touching the skin, of faint movements in the shadows, musk smells, the evening chant of birds, the rustling of small creatures. And, it is a time for listening: opening to the surrounding sound. The night embraces you, envelopes your life in the dark like a mother in the infant's dreams, embraces you like a lover under covers. In the cabin in the woods it is a time for the lamp and fire; in the camp, for the crackling of kindling and the smoky smell of pine. It is a recovery of the body and a return to place and ground; an awakening within the evening dark. Hearth and home, memories recovered and formed, the long evening's silences and sounds. While above the dark surround, a sky of stars, light made more fierce by the absolute darkness.

And when dusk settles in, sight recedes as the primary sense and a "listening" which involves all the senses takes over. Perhaps it is only at such times and in nature, especially if we are blessed with rain, that we experience the magic of an interconnected, multi-level world (the real ecological whole) that sight alone cannot grasp. In such a world, listening becomes a receptive, whole-body experience that "lets-be" and hence is visited by a harmonious co-presence of multitudes of other beings, great and small, breathing, pouring, resounding, snorting.

John Hull was a man who had lost his sense of sight and all visual imagery, including images in his memory. He shifted from "seeing" with eyes to "listening" with his whole body, indeed, his whole being. And it was rain that opened a new fuller world, a world resonating with flowing rich chords, not a series of controlled snapshots. Neurologist Oliver Sachs writes in *The New Yorker,* that for Hull,

> . . . the sounds of rain, never before accorded much attention, can now delineate a whole landscape for him, for its sound on the garden path is different from its sound as it drums on the lawn, or on the bushes in his garden, or on the fence dividing it from the road. Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a colored blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience . . . presents the fullness of an entire situation all at once . . . gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world with another. (Quoted in Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses,* 189

Merton and the Rain

One evening in December 1964, the monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) sat in his cabin *listening* to the rain. Out of this attentive listening came the wonderful essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” which appeared in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Merton’s essay is both a profoundly personal, contemplative response to rain and a sober evaluation of contemporary humanity's alienation from the sensory world of nature, its rhymes and rhythms and indeed reasons. And it is to the existentialist playwright Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* that Merton turns for a dramatization of how our widespread conformity to the artificial demands and rhythms of modern life impoverishes our humanity and weakens our personal authenticity.

Merton invites the reader to listen to the rain with him and to reflect on the importance of solitude and nature for the recovery of an authentic life. Merton’s essay begins:

> Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By "they" I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even the rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness. (RU 9)

Merton suggests that people value rain – and the natural world by extension-- in two different ways. The first way values rain as a utility , for its usefulness. A natural phenomenon is valued according to how it serves the needs and fulfills the wants of humans. The economic system or “market” purportedly determines its “real” value. The second way respects and celebrates the rain and the natural world as realities with a value of their own, an intrinsic value. The former mode of consciousness is rooted in the alienated *individual* who seeks identity through the manipulation and control of nature. By contrast, the second mode of consciousness is rooted in the *person* who is open to communion with nature (and human “others.”). The "uselessness" of nature is a reminder of the non-instrumental and hence “useless” nature of the free person. Only the free person in touch with his or her own wild, socially useless depths can appreciate the deeper truth proclaimed by the rain. "There is a time for warmth in the collective myth" and the "social womb," writes Merton. "But there is also a time to be born." (RU 17) Socialization too often means infantilism. The “uselessness” of the person, posits Merton, points to a inner freedom and depth that transcends the restrictive self-definitions created by society and contrasts with the shallow members of the herd.

The rain is also a reminder of the extent to which the rhythms and moods of nature have become foreign to many of us, indeed often considered intrusions on the pace of life set by a modern mechanistic society. Humans, like nature, have become resources and grist for "the greed of machinery that does not sleep, the hum of power that eats up the night." (RU l0) We have become acclimated to "a world of mechanical [and today, electronic] fictions.” (RU11) In contrast, Merton points to nature’s wonderful power of

self-renewal, a power that not only symbolizes but can nurture the renewal of the human spirit. Self-renewal is not possible for a machinelike economy whose wheels can only turn if its engine devours nature's resources, flooding air, water and land with toxic waste.

Indeed, the machinery of modern society seeks "to use [nature] up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and [humankind]." (RU 11) But rain renews, and night renews, and the forest provides a place for humans to rediscover and renew themselves.

> 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. (RU l0)

The rain speaks to one who listens, and "as long as it talks I am going to listen," confesses the monk. Merton is awed by all of this free speech, "pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody." The rain's speech is "perfectly innocent speech" and "the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of watercourses everywhere in the hollows!" (RU 10)

Rain speaks its own truth which is its own being. There is no duplicity in such language, this language of innocence and hence of paradise. The rain surrounds everything "with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor." (RU 10) The city has its own myth, and is "a world outside the world, against the world" of rain and nature. In that fabricated world, if a tree by chance "gets in among the apartment houses," it learns to "grow chemically" and is assigned a specific reason for existing. Perhaps a sign is placed on the tree, "saying it is for health, beauty, perspective; that it is for peace, for prosperity; that it was planted by the mayor's daughter." (RU 11) The city conspires in "one basic lie: *only the city is real."* Perhaps what we need is for business to make the rain, Merton says sarcastically, then *that* "will give it meaning." (RU 12)

"Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways," Merton observes, "I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed." (RU 12) Merton notes that in Ionesco's play, *Rhinoceros*, all the people have become rhinoceroses, members of a herd, except for one man who maintains his humanity. But, says Merton, "to be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster." Ionesco is making the point that "solitude and dissent become more and more impossible, more and more absurd" in the contemporary world. (RU 20)

> "In all the cities of the world, it is the same," says Ionesco. "The universal and modern man is the man in a rush (i.e. a rhinoceros), a man who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that *a thing might perhaps be without usefulness* . . . If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless… one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots . . ." Rhinoceritis, he adds, is the sickness that lies in wait "for those who *have lost the sense and the taste for solitude*." (RU 21)

For Merton, this means we must first free our minds from the hold that the myth of the herd has on our sense of identity, recover our wild inner self and thereby our own

and nature's truth. “The discovery of this inner self is an act and affirmation of solitude,” for “if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth.” (RU l5) The collectivity increases its power over us first by increasing our needs and then demanding conformity in order to satisfy them. In the herd we find security and the illusion of power but our inner freedom is never realized and our deeper capacities “never liberated.” (RU 16-17)

Hence, saving nature and saving our humanity are intertwined. Even on the somatic level, as Jon Kabat-Zinn, M.D. has shown, the cost of alienation from “our own feeling body and from the natural world” has been a diminishment in the power of the senses to overlap, blend together, and cross-pollinate. We can begin to recover our humanity by “purposefully according some attention to the natural world, which beckons to us and offers itself to us through all our senses simultaneously, a world in which our very senses were fashioned and honed, and in which we have been seamlessly embedded from the beginning.” (CS 190) He quotes these lines (CS 185) from the poet Mary Oliver:

> *I don’t know exactly what prayer is.*
> *I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down*
> *Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*
> *how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,*
> *which is what I have been doing all day.*
> *Tell me, what else should I have done?*
> *Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?*
> *Tell me, what is it you plan to do*
> *With your one wild and precious life? (”The Summer Day”)*

Perhaps thinking of poetry, David Abram writes, “it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language . . . [today] language has forgotten its expressive depths. It is no more true that *we* speak than that the things, and the animate world itself, *speak within us*.” (SS 81,85)

Merton wrote in the preface to the Japanese translation of *Thoughts in Solitude*:

> No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees. These pages say nothing more than to echo the silence and peace that is “heard” when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests . . . That deeper silence must be heard before one can speak truly of solitude. . . . [The solitary] is attuned to all [and] identifies with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself. (HR 111)

Rather than being isolated from Life, the solitary one has entered more deeply into their self and discovered not only the “ground in which all beings” exist but their deeper identity as a *person* who can say “yes” to all other beings and trust in Life because they have realized their inner potential for freedom, creativity, and love. (CGB, 82)

In a letter to a group of Smith College students who had been reading his works, Merton invites them to discover for themselves “the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned

any more than breathing) we can find ourself engulfed in . . . the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations." (HGL, 115) In that "space of silence and happiness," they may "get some sense, for a moment," that they are "full of paradise without knowing it." (HGL 116) Both a spiritual and moral sense of nature returns with the recovery of this "paradisal" consciousness and mode of being.

Pilosopher Erazim Kohak captures this in his wonderful *Embers and the Stars:*

> To recover the moral sense of our humanity, we would need to recover first the moral sense of nature . . . perhaps the most basic realization that stands out at dusk—that there is an order, there is a sense to it all, a rhythm, a rhyme and a reason, . . . in the pattern of animal life, in the cycle in which the forest renews itself. There is a rightness . . . there is *logos* . . . It is a time of letting be . . . Were the cosmos indeed a senseless aggregate of tools, devoid of meaning of their own as the world of artifacts is, then dusk, suspending the subject's purposive presence, ought to be a time of infinite nausea. (13,73)

Not for Merton is dusk a time of nausea, nor rain a useless intrusion. Nature is not a machine, for the forest renews itself. Despite the modern regime of cold technology and clockwork order, life awakens, the subversive "under ground" erupts, woods and fields laugh, meadows are drunk with "flowers of rebellion," night makes "every fool sing in his sleep" and morning makes him "stand up in the sun and cover himself with water and with light." (RU 106) Life breaks through if we let it, the voices of liberation call if we but listen. In wildness is not merely the preservation of *life*, but of hope and justice and mercy:

> ***There is another kind of justice than the justice of number, which can neither forgive nor be forgiven. There is another kind of mercy than the mercy of Law which knows no absolution. There is a justice of new-born worlds which cannot be counted. There is a mercy of individual things that spring into being without reason. They are just without reason and their mercy is without explanation. They have received rewards beyond description because they themselves refuse to be described. They are virtuous in the sight of God because their names do not identify them. Every plant that stands in the light of the sun is a saint and an outlaw. Every tree that brings forth blossoms without the command of man is powerful in the sight of God. Every star that man has not counted is a world of sanity and perfection. Every blade of grass is an angel singing in a shower of glory.*** (RU 106)

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Listening to a Tree

"Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never listen to the Indians so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit."

Tatangi Mani (Walking Buffalo)

How do you listen to a tree?
Not with your ears, only—
But with your whole being.

A tree is a presence to whom you open,
A friend with whom you sit,
A sage from whom you learn.

To listen to a tree
Is to return
To original simplicity,
Basic sanity--
Old Lao Tzu's "uncarved block."

How do you listen to a tree?

With hushed expectancy—
As when a mother, awake in the dark,
Listens for her infant's cry.

With soaring harmony--
As when a singer, losing self,
Becomes the song.

Losing self,
Become the tree.

_____*Don St. John*