

# Thomas Merton...

*This is a reflection by John Justine David. It was published in Parabola on June 8, 2020.*

The language of life asks for our ears and calls for our souls. The early Greeks defined presence as the fundamental characteristic of being alive.<sup>1</sup>

I believe it is not easy for any of us to be fully present, and that we settle for shadows and glimpses, for fleeting moments that sift through our hands and are gone. We may become clouded from impinging distractions as we are carried into countless pressures, anxieties, and demands; or else we try to escape through the many abundant and tempting means at our disposal; or we seek to overpower obstacles through adrenalin-driven pursuits, or with our intellects, determination, and skillful maneuvers, or by other strengths and capabilities, continually striving for something out of reach, or once attained, soon abandoned, while we silently lack what we most want.

As flawed human beings, it can be difficult to see beyond ourselves and understand each other intimately and compassionately. Being hampered by our limitations and the context of our past experience (or inexperience), we can be blind to each other even when we don't want to be. Our failings can also blind us to ourselves, preventing us from reaching a deeper understanding below the surface of self-awareness.

We all have a fundamental need to be seen and heard. When people fail to be fully present with us when we need it, the feeling of abandonment can shake our own sense of presence. A failure to be present can spiral downwards, feeding more failures, in the same way that fear can provoke more fear.

In part, this may be why the Hebrew deity is conceived as eternally present,<sup>2</sup> which is undoubtedly too tall an order for any human being to attain.

Whenever we become distant from ourselves and from the world, a direct, open, and unmediated experience of being alive can be a welcome gift.

One way to reconnect with ourselves and become more present is to listen. We can listen to ourselves, and to life. A good place to listen is in the natural world. In our original experience of the natural world, life abounds everywhere: in Death Valley and Antarctica, as well as a cabin in the woods.



Nature has been the vocabulary in which the universe speaks to us, whether it be through lapping waves on a beach that sift slowly into our souls layer by layer, or through birdsong in the backyard at sunset calling to us like vespers bells.

When we experience the world as alive, we share an intimate connection with all that exists. We can see the world as being made of a life-giving language, and our awareness of this language goes deep into our psyches and deep into the cosmos.

By listening closely to nature, we can hear an organized energy of life, full of patterns and meaning, that speaks to us. According to scholar Elizabeth Sewell, we experience our environment as alive and speaking to us in a great variety of linguistic forms, such as an alphabet, grammar, syntax, cipher, book, and secret language.<sup>3</sup> This is probably because language renders us conscious, envelops the world in consciousness, and gives the world life within us. We think with the objects of the world, and we give them a life within us.

We experience nature as endowed with linguistic life. On the one hand, we have purified this linguistic life into mathematical

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and objective language that describes the empirical reality of nature. From our perceptions and observations of nature as exhibiting intrinsic laws, we have distilled the natural world into scientific theories using language that describes the physical essence of the world. In doing this, science strives toward a purified rational logos (Greek for word) that gives us an accurate picture of the inherent patterns in the world, providing order, reason, and logic, as well as utility.

We tend to think that scientific purification is the only real truth because it is objectively verifiable. That is, we interpret the purification of nature into scientific language as the only valid language of nature.

What we may not realize is that scientific interpretation is simply the more manageable part of our experience of nature. We experience the logos of the world as a form of logic and reason, but we can also experience the logos as discourse or speech.

As a communication, it inherently places us into relationship. This is a more intimate experience of nature, and it is less manageable because it connects us to things more closely without our fully understanding or being in control.

We experience a living logos, a creative, living language that embodies our fundamental connection to nature. This “language of life,” the conscious and unconscious experience of the world as imbued with life-giving language, is an inherent part of us and can be found everywhere we look, from scientists to socialites and even to hermits.

In his classic essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Thomas Merton celebrates the language of life and its intimate, meaningful connection to nature. In the following passage, he describes his experience of rain while alone in a woodland cabin set apart from his monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani, in rural Kentucky:

*The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water; washing out the places where men have stripped the hill side! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows!*

*Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.<sup>4</sup>*

When Merton says the rain is speech, it is much more than a metaphor, more than a “figure of speech.” It is a profound experience. Because he listens, the rain speaks to him. By letting the rain talk and by tuning his ears to the language of life, Merton is able to be present and to experience life fully. You can see how open and ecstatic he is the next day as he continues to experience the natural world with all his senses alive and glowing with joy:

The rain has stopped. The afternoon sun slants through the pine trees: and how those useless needles smell in the clean air!

A dandelion, long out of season, has pushed itself into bloom between the smashed leaves of last summer’s day lilies. The valley resounds with the totally uninformative talk of creeks and wild water.

Then the quails begin their sweet whistling in the wet bushes. Their noise is absolutely useless, and so is the delight I take in it. There is nothing I would rather hear, not because it is a better noise than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival.<sup>5</sup>

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Merton says that nature speaks to us in “the voice of the present moment,” which for him is a celebration, a “festival.” He hears this voice by being quiet and by listening in solitude. As a courageous monk seeking insight and truth on the contemplative journey, Merton discovers the heroic capacity to listen and understand the language of life.

There are many myths in which the hero gains an ability to understand the secret language of nature, such as by eating a dragon’s heart. This opens the hero to a new awareness and an experience of being connected to a world filled with the language of life. The hero becomes able to hear the life-giving language of the world—the language of animals and plants, the language of quails and dandelions, the language of the rain, of the elements, of energy, and of the spirit.

The language of life asks for our ears and calls for our souls. It calls for relationship and for intimacy. But it takes courage to listen and to be present with ourselves and others.

Merton listens to the natural world as it speaks to him in the language of life, but in the same way, he also seeks to be present by listening to God:

*Just remaining quietly in the presence of God, listening to Him, being attentive to Him, requires a lot of courage and know-how.<sup>6</sup>*

The same thing could also be said of our intimate relationships with people. It takes courage to be quiet, to be present, to be attentive, and to listen.

Who wants to eat the dragon’s heart?

If we are able to do so, we will be offered a gift, a treasure, which is not just from the person we are with, and from the world, but also from ourselves. We will be given the gift of our own selves.

Perhaps these gifts arrive together because they are joined by the connectivity inherent in the language of life, which brings us with it. This makes perfect sense, because we are a part of the language of life. The language of life can lead us to deeper understanding of ourselves and can help shape our lives. That is one reason we have come to comprehend our lives through stories.

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Storytelling has been such an important part of our conceptual landscape for so long and is such a deep part of our being that it has rooted us in the belief that our lives are stories and that we unfold through language. Language endows us with a mysterious creative power. We are created and we create what we are through language; we are alive and we create life through language. (It may be that the popularity of the memoir genre in recent times is a reflection of this belief.)

One place in Merton’s writing where you can see his deep identification with linguistic life is when he says that “God utters me like a word. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Merton is expressing an understanding that we are part of a “divine” creative language, which is the language of life, the *logos spermatikos*, or creative word. We are alive with language and filled with stories. We are children of the word, uttered in a world filled with linguistic ecstasy.

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Although the gifts we receive through the language of life are not always going to be those of ecstasy or joy and may include discomfiting perceptions, if we are brave enough to be present and listen, these gifts will lead us into a creative power that can reconstitute our understanding of life in unimaginably helpful ways.

Jacques Maritain, a beloved friend of Merton's, writes about this creative power (which flows from presence), although he discusses it in a different context—one of artistic creativity. He calls this creative power “poetry” but by poetry, he does not mean “the particular art which consists in writing verses, but a process both more general and more primary.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, he is talking about the poetry that can be found in all great art, no matter what genre or medium—the poetry of music, of movement, of image, and of words. According to him, this creative power “proceeds from the totality of man,” from a “creative source” that exists in a “hidden place, near the center of the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

Maritain points to a creative power he calls poetry, but I think it is the same power that we can all discover when we listen to the language of life. The language of life is “poetry” in this sense. It is a hidden, creative source that becomes available to us when we are able to be open to it.

What I like about Maritain's perception is that this creative power is not just a source, but a medium of communication that connects us with each other and with the world; he says it is “that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination.”<sup>10</sup>

When Merton listened to the rain speaking, it was an “intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self.” It was also “a kind of divination,” because despite claiming at the start of his essay that he was celebrating the rain's “meaninglessness”<sup>11</sup> and found it “unintelligible,” he nevertheless sees meaning in it, which informs his

social criticism. To Merton, the rain represents a kind of cleansing baptism in contrast to the utilitarian, consumerist, robotic, and militaristic aspects that he sees in the world. He also contradicts his own words when he listens to the rain. He recognizes how the rain is bursting with meaning when he says that “The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor.”

Perhaps he was thinking of the meaning that can be found in the language of life, because the language of life is filled with a whole universe of meaning. Its meaning exists in secrecy because it is secluded within things and within us. When we are able to be present, it communicates with us in the silence of this mystery, and we may understand it by a kind of divination. The language of life speaks to us when we listen for the hidden voice of the world whispering amidst the racket.

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NOTE: John Justin David's article on Merton was adapted from his study of language and creativity in his recently completed nonfiction book entitled *Seeing into the Soul of Books*.

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Notes:

1. See Allen Thiher, *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, pp. 53–54

2. Eternal presence is even suggested by the Hebrew deity's name ("YHVH"), which is derived from the Hebrew verb *hayah*, meaning "to be." God tells Moses from within the burning bush that does not get consumed, "This is my name forever" (Exodus 3:15).

3. Elizabeth Sewell, *The Human Metaphor*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1964, ch. 2, "Metaphors and Energy," p. 65.

4. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New Directions, New York, 1966, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," pp. 9–10.

5. *ibid.*, p. 23.

6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, NY, 1971, Part 3: *Contemplative Life: Is the Contemplative Life Finished?*, "The Discipline of Listening," p. 363; University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p. 246.

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, New York, 1972 (1962), ch. 6, "Pray for Your Own Discovery," p. 37.

8. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Meridian Books, New York, 1955, p. 3.

9. *ibid.*, p. 80.

10. *ibid.*, p. 3.

11. Merton, *Raids*, p. 9.

