

## WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say they save me, daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you have to come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

Mary Oliver

*By living a contemplative life, Merton grew in love for God and all of God's children and creation—so much so that he became committed to doing what he could for the common good. Amidst the societal disruptions of the 1960s, it was not enough for him to simply pray. He also devoted himself to action—writing, collaboration, and teaching—though he never lost his deep yearning for solitude and contemplation.*

*As Merton began to seriously wrestle with the injustices plaguing the United States and the world, he published *Seeds of Destruction*, a book urging Christians to reflect on their moral responsibility to take a stand on issues such as racism, war, and poverty. His words speak to our moment as well:*

The contemplative life is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one's back on the world with its sufferings, its crises, its confusions and its errors. . . . The monastic [*that is, contemplative*] flight from the world [*or what I call "the system"—RR*] into the desert is . . . a total rejection of all standards of judgment which imply attachment to a history of delusion, egoism and sin . . . a definitive refusal to participate in those activities which have no other fruit than to prolong the reign of untruth, greed, cruelty and arrogance in the world of people. . . .

The freedom of the Christian contemplative is not freedom *from* time, but freedom *in* time. It is the freedom to go out and meet God in the inscrutable mystery of God's will here and now, in this precise moment in which God asks humanity's cooperation in shaping the course of history according to the demands of divine truth, mercy and fidelity. . . .

Therefore it seems to me to be a solemn obligation of conscience at this moment of history to take the positions which . . . are, it seems to me, in vital relation with the obligations I assumed when I took my monastic vows. To have a vow of poverty seems to me illusory if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to me to be absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God's will: the love of God's truth and of our neighbor.

*Richard again: Thomas Merton knew that contemplation and solidarity with the universal suffering of creation (the planet itself, animals, humans) is to enter into the eternal suffering of God, Divine Pity.*<sup>[1]</sup>