

The New Heroism – Faith and Courage: Vital Remedies against Terror and Fear

LARRY CULLIFORD

Fear readily kindles aggression. This is the fight part of our evolutionary 'fight or flight' reaction to threat. The true antidote to terror, however, is courage; courage of the kind that depends upon faith. Thomas Merton knew this. In the preface to *Thoughts in Solitude*, for example, he wrote:

No amount of technological progress will cure the hatred that eats away the vitals of materialistic society like a spiritual cancer. The only cure is, and must always be, spiritual.¹

I say this by way of introduction. However, let us step away a pace or two and begin again by taking two apparently contradictory positions, to try to reconcile them. This, after all, is an important component of peacemaking.

The first example, also from Merton, is taken from a letter published in the *Catholic Worker* in October 1961². The second is from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on 'Heroism,' published in 1841.³ (Incidentally, according to authorities at Gethsemani and the Thomas Merton Center, Merton is not known to have written anything himself about Emerson.)

This is Merton: 'The present war crisis is something we have made entirely for ourselves.' He was referring to Vietnam, but of course we have other wars now: the conflict in Iraq, for example, and the ubiquitous war on terror. Merton speaks of, 'War-madness – an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world.' He asks, 'What are we to do?' and then gives the answer himself:

The duty of the Christian [Given the spread of the contagion, I would say here, 'any thinking or spiritually-minded person'. Incidentally, I

am told that the word 'Muslim' simply means 'one who believes in the one true God,' which more or less makes all of us here Muslims.] is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war.

Here, however, apparently in opposition, is Emerson:

Our culture must not omit the arming of the man. Let him hear in season, that he is born into the state of war, and that the commonwealth and his own well-being require that he should not go dancing in the weeds of peace, but warned, self-collected, and neither defying nor dreading the thunder, let him take both reputation and life in his hand.

We may be reminded by this of Lord Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, speaking to Arjuna, who is hesitating before the field of battle: 'Is this hour of battle the time for scruples and fancies? Are they worthy of you? Shake off this cowardice, Arjuna. Stand up!' Krishna urges Arjuna to trust in the Godhead, *Brahman*, go forth and fight.

So, how are we to resolve these contradictions in a nuclear age, in an age of terror, when, as Merton says, 'The whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction'?

To grasp the full meaning of both Emerson and the Gita, we need to read on. For Emerson, the fight is a moral one. For Krishna, it is an allegory encompassing a much greater, spiritual reality into which Arjuna is being encouraged to awaken.

For Emerson, 'Heroism' is an attitude, a 'military attitude of the soul.' But he describes it also as, 'an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character.' Heroism has a spiritual character and is, for him, a necessity. 'Seen from the nook and chimney-side of prudence, Life wears a ragged and dangerous front.' Heroism is thus, says Emerson, for people who reject this kind of wimpish hesitancy and, 'with perfect urbanity, dare the gibbet and the mob by the absolute truth of their speech, and the rectitude of their behaviour.'

Emerson's hero therefore assumes a warlike attitude towards external evil, towards evil in the guise of 'the violations of the laws of

nature by our predecessors and our contemporaries, the disease and deformity around us, the infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws.' The hero, Emerson then says 'affirms his [her] ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies ... These men (people) fan the flame of human love, and raise the standard of civil virtue among mankind.'

Heroism, he says:

works in contradiction to the voice of mankind ... its essence is self-trust ... it is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents. It speaks the truth, and it is just, generous, hospitable, temperate, scornful of petty calculations, and scornful of being scorned ... It persists; it is of an undaunted boldness, and of a fortitude not to be wearied out. Its jest is the littleness of common life. That *false* prudence which dotes on health and wealth is the butt and merriment of heroism.

'Citizens,' (in contrast to heroes) Emerson continues, 'thinking after the laws of arithmetic, consider the inconvenience of receiving strangers,' (perhaps we should think here about refugees and asylum seekers), 'reckon narrowly the loss of time ...' He then says, 'The soul of a better quality thrusts back the unseasonable economy into the vaults of life, and says, 'I will obey God.'"

How much of this rings true now! We are much closer here, both to Merton and the Bhagavad Gita. Merton is bold on this as the passage from 'Thoughts in Solitude' attests. Here it is again 'No amount of technological progress will cure the hatred that eats away the vitals of materialistic society like a spiritual cancer. The only cure is, and must always be, spiritual.'

Heroism, then, is the true and only remedy for terror – the necessary antidote to the ordinary citizen's fear of 'Life's ragged and dangerous front.' Heroism requires courage, and faith – religious faith – is the only true basis of genuine courage.

Courage without faith is false, therefore. It is self-seeking and partisan. On the other hand, a person of faith has natural virtue – or perhaps I should say, is in touch with the divine source of natural virtue

– and thereby embodies not only courage but also honesty, tolerance, generosity, kindness, humility, natural wisdom and other serviceable qualities, patience and perseverance included. Emerson has already told us as much.

This embodiment of virtues is largely an unconscious one. It cannot easily or abruptly therefore be willed; and this may cause us problems. So, how does faith grow in us? How are we transformed from citizens into heroes?

Shall I let you figure it out? I should, because a part of the answer is this: we each must travel our own road, growing in faith and virtue in our own way. However, as a psychiatrist with an interest in the psychology of spirituality, you might permit me, you might even want me, to go a little further.

This is where we shift emphasis from combating *external* evil, as Emerson prescribes for his heroes, and include a consideration of what is going on *internally*, in terms of constructive versus destructive thoughts, emotions and impulses to speech and action. This is the methodology of many Eastern religious practices such as Hindu yoga (especially bhakti yoga – devotional yoga) and Tibetan Buddhist thought transformation⁴. This, then, is the psychological work that a hero of the modern age needs to engage in, in order to move forward in faith and maturity.

Emerson, in his essay, says, 'Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right.' This attests too to the unconscious and spontaneous nature of courageous action and speech (also courageous inaction and silence), so I want briefly here to examine the primacy of emotion over thinking with regard to courage, while noting of cowardice that the reverse holds. Thought, in the form of self-regard and calculation, are often at play.

To explain the matter, I offer you a reasonably comprehensive list of negative or painful emotions: fear/anxiety, bewilderment, doubt, anger, shame, guilt, sadness. There is one more: desire. This is the origin of the others; and a characteristic of heroes is that they are free of it.⁵

Worldly desire, as distinct from the spiritual hunger or longing for unity with the infinite, always has some kind of object. Its object can be anything from any category: a physical thing (a jewel), a person (a loved one), a place (home), an idea, an ideology (including a religious ideology), a state of mind. Emotional discomfort and pain begin then when you become aware that you desire something and do not have it.

The discomfort or distress is not relieved, however, when you get whatever it is – because you might later lose it. Emotional pain is intensified when your attachment to the valued object is threatened – whether by separation, damage, destruction, decay or whatever – and, of course, intensifies again further when you are temporarily or finally separated from whatever it is. You can think up your own examples. What happens to your emotions when your fondest ideas are attacked? Even if you are reasonably comfortable then, what happens to you internally, psychologically, when any of your children – or anyone's children – are under threat?

To summarise, emotional pain begins with attachment and is occasioned by loss or the threat of loss. Courage can therefore be said to involve an absence of desire, and a deep-seated absence therefore of any fear of loss or threat, even the threat of extinction. This is what Krishna is telling Arjuna about in the Gita, to discover and find faith in the truth of a greater spiritual Reality where even death is transcended.

Emerson, in another essay⁶, points the same way. 'Our faith comes in moments,' he says, 'yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.' This, I think, is what Thomas Merton's entire opus, his entire life, has been telling us too. Think about these words from *New Seeds of Contemplation*: 'Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself ... Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul.'

However momentary, spiritual consciousness involves awareness of the whole, of the indivisible and seamless totality of existence. Spirituality is about our relationship to this paradoxically infinite entirety, and thereby to each other, to everyone else and everything else in creation. It is the dimension of experience, therefore, that affords us a comforting sense of belonging and motivation. Spirituality is what gives our lives true direction, a vital sense of meaning and purpose. It defines for us our values.

Emerson said of heroic people, 'That which takes my fancy most is the good humour they exhibit.' In terms of emotions, with even a slight degree of spiritual awareness, our good humour and general well-being are fostered. We feel gratitude rather than desire, contentment rather than distress or dissatisfaction. Our minds are clear (and therefore wiser), rather than distracted or bewildered. We are calm, rather than anxious. We have no cause for sorrow or anger, for shame or for guilt.

So it is that, in the absence of these negative, unpleasant emotions, we naturally find ourselves to be more joyful, serene and innocent; and sharing too in a profound personal sense of worth with that of pristine creation. We can tolerate greater extremes and intensities of emotion – in ourselves and in others too, hence compassion. We are capable of greater emotional resilience, greater love, and to making more secure commitments, because we are less afraid, less afraid of loss. This is part of my prized picture – important for a psychiatrist – of mental and spiritual health, of equanimity, of emotional maturity. This is what I think we are aiming towards for ourselves as well as our patients. This is the psychological work I was referring to earlier: the transformation of negative, destructive, painful emotions (perhaps especially anger) into their complementary alternatives, into acceptance, serenity, confidence, contentment and joy. It is a kind of homecoming to the home of the universal heart, the dwelling place of peace and truth and love and hope ... and faith.

Each in our own way, may be said to make this journey home, through growth and maturity, in stages. It was at Oakham in March 2000 that Dominic Walker, then Bishop of Reading and now Bishop of Monmouth, gave us an account of Merton's life in terms of James Fowler's six stages of faith.⁷ These stages are worth looking into.

The first two occur early, during childhood. Although a few people seem to get stuck in their primitive ways of understanding the world, most achieve Stage Three in which, to summarise, a person has largely adopted the traditions, belief systems and values of the family and culture in which he or she was raised. In Stage Three, we identify in a partisan way with those like ourselves. People who are different, alien, 'other', are covertly or overtly opposed and mistrusted. It is a competitive, 'we' and 'them' system, inherent in which, of course, is the ready potential for conflict.

Those who, whether during later adolescence, in young adulthood or later, come somehow to realize that their original teachers may have been flawed in their understanding, and that, for example, they themselves may have more in common with those initially deemed alien (or even hostile), to the extent that they begin, consciously or

otherwise, some kind of search for a new, broader set of values and beliefs: these are the people who have entered Fowler's Stage Four.

This is often a difficult time. And it may be a long time for some people, a period of persistent dissatisfaction because, for example, if your parents, teachers and social authorities all seem to have misled you, how can you now find anyone to trust or anything to put your faith in? Where will you find a place of belonging? How can you derive meaning and purpose from your existence? You have to go it alone, or look for a new set of like-minded people and teachers.

When you find a source of truth and wisdom, whether internal or residing in others, then you begin to learn that, 'Everyone's blood is red and everyone's tears are salty,' and that 'We are all one under Heaven.' You learn with the heart, rather than the head. You realise this wisdom, in the sense of making it your personal reality, the basis of thought, word and deed. As you do so, you leave Fowler's Stage Four and embark on the (usually) calmer waters of Stage Five. Then, by the time you reach Stage Six, you have become a hero, a teacher and a peacemaker. Fowler listed Thomas Merton and Mother Teresa among those who had reached his Stage Six.

Each step involves letting go. It involves the acceptance of loss, of giving up attachments, especially to people and ideas. From Stage Three to Stage Four, for example, there is a necessary renunciation of the safety of family and peer group support, and of familiar beliefs and practices – perhaps including religious beliefs and practices. Human relationships may be damaged or broken, and there is pain involved; but there is, driving us on, that 'secret impulse of character' to which, as Emerson says, the heroic type is obedient: that secret impulse of faith.

Faith mitigates the suffering, and it is an atmosphere of love, of feeling loved, that will bring us home to joy and serenity; but we may have to endure much in the way of anxiety and fear, of bewilderment, doubt, anger, shame, guilt and sadness on the journey, until we are comfortable with the infinite and therefore able to let go of our many and natural attachments to the material world and the materialistic culture of our time. This is why I often say that sanity and sanctity are one. They come from the same sacred source, the divine source of wholeness and healing and love, The Godhead, the source of faith.

Thomas Merton was obedient to faith's secret impulse, stage by stage, perhaps blindly and unconsciously early on, more wittingly and

voluntarily by the time he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani and came to write *The Seven Storey Mountain*, fully by the time he reached his final years. The writing was, I think, part of the making conscious – for all of us – the wisdom, the sacred knowledge that he had acquired and accumulated, through contemplation and as a gift of his faith.

Thomas Merton, spiritual master, exemplar and guide, was a hero of the Emersonian kind who found ways to combat negativity and evil both internal, the sorrows, doubts and fears of his own mind, and external, 'The infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws,' exemplified in civil rights violation and contemporary warfare. This is the new kind of hero, and heroism, we need – and for which, in faith, I believe we, the human race, are destined in future generations, by the grace of God (perhaps through natural psychological and moral evolution) to achieve. The example Merton sets is one of faith, and thereby of courage and virtue. If Fowler, and many others, are right, we are all on a similar path to emotional and spiritual maturity. We each have to choose only whether to stay, like cowards, 'by the nook and chimney-side of false prudence,' or let go of the false security offered by the tenets of an ailing world gripped by 'a furious and subtle contagion of war-madness.' Then, inexorably, we will move forward in faith.

We are here, men and women, of all creeds and none, of all races and cultures, to love, help and support each other, not to argue and fight. So the first task, I submit, to paraphrase and amend Merton, is, 'To work for the total abolition of war' – *within ourselves* . . . and to do so through contemplation, at times, rather than action: to find the still-point of courage and peace, and hope and love, and wisdom through humble openness to God's grace and the ineffable action of faith.

The capacity to do this is what turns the monk and the contemplatives among us into heroes. When you think about it, there is nothing to prevent or delay us from following their blessed example.

Shalom.

Notes and References

- ¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*. Boston: Shambhala, 1993
- ² To be found in full in: Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991, pp.135–8
- ³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Heroism* (in *Essays: first series*. 1841) This can be found using an internet search engine by typing in 'RW Emerson' and 'Essays'.
- ⁴ Consider this, for example:
'When someone whom I have assisted and in whom I have placed great hope
inflicts me with extremely bad harm, I shall view him as my supreme spiritual friend'
It is from: Geshe Rabten & Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, *Advice from a Spiritual Friend: Tibetan Teachings on Buddhist Thought Transformation*. New Delhi: Publications for Wisdom Culture, 1977, p.17
- ⁵ I have written more extensively about this under my pen name in: Patrick Whiteside *Happiness: The 30 Day Guide*. London: Rider Books, 2001
- ⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Over-Soul* (in *Essays: first series*, 1841)
- ⁷ See 'A Mind Awake in the Dark': Papers from the 2000 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain & Ireland, Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (eds). Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2002, pp.43–60