

IAN THOMSON

1934-2003

IAN THOMSON *who was assistant editor of the Merton Journal from its inception died in February of this year, just a few days short of his 69th birthday. Just before Christmas I met with Ian and agreed to speak at his funeral when the time came. My address from that beautiful February day follows.*

WHAT IS THERE TO SAY of Ian? Those of us here and those who cannot be with us – like relatives from South Africa – will have our own experiences and memories of him. Yet from a whole range of sources the message about Ian is remarkably consistent.

Jeanne, his wife, and Laura, his daughter, speak of his warmth, his smile, the twinkle in his eye, his openness, his generosity with his time, his energy and his money. His remarkable sensitivity and kindness to others when they were ill or finding life difficult was also a mark of who Ian was.

Ian's South African relatives bore witness to this, indicating that even from such a long distance he was a strong guide and support to them. One in particular said that she would never have come through a serious car accident without Ian's insights and wisdom and that this in turn enabled her to have a very open conversation with him when he was clearly dying.

She commented on his clear courage as he faced this particular stage on his spiritual journey. Different people commented on the fact that Ian reflected a sense of wholeness, that he was not afraid of his humanity nor of his emotions. Just as Ian had a range of qualities so he had diverse interests. He was an educator eventually becoming a deputy headteacher in a primary school in Milton Keynes. He retained his passion for education through his interest in adult education and rightly remained critical of any Government that failed to recognise the radical nature of education and its potential for authentic empowerment.

Ian was equally passionate about music and in Wells, where he and Jeanne lived, this was reflected in his membership of the Volly Choir and the Oratorio Society. Music spoke to the spirit within Ian, which is why he chose music rather than hymns for his funeral.

I understood Ian's love of writers and writing through our membership of the Thomas Merton Society. I edited the Journal until 2001, and for seven years Ian was assistant editor. I have to be honest and declare that I always felt Ian did the hard work. Most often I found the writers and it was Ian who put the whole thing together and worked with the printers and produced the final result.

He, of course, thought he did very little and here was a very distinctive mark of who Ian was. A spiritual seeker and explorer, always conscious of the needs of others and with a genuine humility completely unaware of his exceptional gifts.

Like myself, Ian was a critical refugee from the institutional Catholic Church and found its narrowness irreconcilable with the essence of authentic spirituality. This is why Thomas Merton the deeply contemplative yet fallible human being and monk attracted Ian's interest so much.

Through his discovery of Merton and other spiritual writers Ian opened himself completely to a spiritual pilgrimage and in particular to the connection between the Buddhist and Christian contemplative paths.

When Ian went into hospital a few years ago for major and delicate heart surgery the last thing he read before his anaesthetic was the following Buddhist reading which I had sent to him—a reading from Shakyamuni Buddha:

You shouldn't chase after the past
Or pin your hopes on the future.
What is past – is left behind.
The future – hasn't yet arrived.

Whatever experience is present
You clearly see – right there, right here –
Not taken in, unshaken;
That is how you develop the heart.
Ardently doing what should be done today
For – who knows – tomorrow
Death may come.

There is no bargaining with death and his mighty hordes.

Whoever lives thus ardently,
Relentlessly both day and night
Has truly had an auspicious day.
So says the peaceful sage.

Equally in the last few months of his life I had wonderful exchanges with Ian about a book on the vocation of the hermit in today's world.

Ian was a fallible human being – not perfect – yet a human being who was cherished as husband, father, relative and friend. He never knew the number of lives he touched so deeply.

When I made what we both knew would be our final farewell just before he died I thanked Ian for who he was and for how he had enriched my life. He looked completely stunned. He was true to the end in his unawareness of how he touched others' lives. I was thinking about how to sum up this aspect of Ian's deep humility when I came across the following passage in the book *Benedict's Dharma* which seemed to me to say it all. It is written by a Buddhist commenting on the Rule of Saint Benedict:

I prefer to see the practice of humility as a bridge across the chasm that separates the shore of selfishness and ignorance from the shore of love and true vision. Wise and loving contemplatives are always going back and forth across the bridge until finally they can't see the difference between the two shores. There is only the bridge, the bracing, wide-open view of the chasm itself, and the brisk feeling of moving legs and air filled lungs. Wise and loving contemplatives are then truly and necessarily humble—and everyone can see this but them!