

# Thresholds

Patrick Eastman

Come to the edge  
I might fall  
Come to the edge  
I might fall  
Come to the edge  
I came to the edge  
I fell  
And then I flew

ON THE HALLWAY WALL just by my office door is a coloured ink etching created and given to me by Meinred Craighead. It features a common sight of a grassy bank with a stream at which a profusion of yellow irises are growing. At one point on the stream there is a serpent proffering a fish in its mouth to a young boy who has a stance of fear, rejection and also tentative acceptance. It is a powerfully paradoxical image and it all takes place at the edge. The drawing has, over the years come to mean a great deal for me. It speaks eloquently of what is best described as a threshold experience. As you know a threshold is that liminal place where the old and new meet. It is an opening or a door at the edge and it is in this liminal venue that we're touched beyond what we can understand or control. It is that still point, spoken of by T.S.Eliot, a place of nowhere yet with infinite possibility.

Such thresholds are evident in Thomas Merton's life. Although readers will be familiar with those suggested here it is worth revisiting some of them again. First we recall his experience as a teenager in 1931 while

looking at the mosaics in Rome, Merton describes it in these words:

*These mosaics told me more than I had ever known of the doctrine of a God of infinite power.....Of course I could not grasp and believe these things explicitly, but surely I grasped them implicitly (SSM p.121)*

William Shannon in the Merton Encyclopaedia describes this as a "brief conversion experience" (ME p.393) and the inclusion of the experience by Merton in his autobiography surely indicates its threshold nature. It was one of those moments unrecognised at the time that went deep and began to work its influence as his life went forward.

Another experience described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the visit to Our Lady of Cobre in Cuba. After what was initially a disappointing visit, later back at the hotel Merton remarks:

*La Caridad del Cobre had a word to say to me. She handed me an idea for a poem...so the poem turned out to be what she had to say to me and what I had to say to her. It pointed the way... it opened the gate and set me travelling on a certain and direct track that was to*

*last me several years... it made me realize all of a sudden not merely intellectually, but experimentally the real uselessness of what I had been half deliberately looking for. (SSM p.303)*

Words that give us a clue to the effect this had on Merton are indicated by the phrases "It pointed the way" and later "it opened the gate."

You will certainly be very familiar with Merton's experience in Louisville at Fourth and Walnut where he is touched by something beyond explanation that forced him to write:

*In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. (CGB p.153)*

Again the crucial words here are "waking from a dream." It was breaking of the illusion of a totally separate existence to an experience of oneness. And we all know what an effect this had in the rest of Merton's life.

Finally there is his description on his Asian journey of his visit to the large Buddha figures at Polonnaruwa on December 2, 1968. He writes:

*Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things and an inner clearness, clarity, as if*

*exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. (AJ. 233)*

This was certainly a powerful experience which potentially revised his life. As Merton himself says: "I have now seen and pierced through the surface."

I am suggesting that all these are descriptions of threshold experiences by Merton and that they are similar to the experience of Pablo Neruda in the opening lines of his poem 'Poetry,'

*And it was at that age...poetry arrived  
In search of me. I don't know, I don't  
know where  
It came from, from winter or a river.  
I don't know how or when,  
No, they were not voices, they were not  
words, now silence  
But from a street I was summoned,  
From the branches of night,  
Abruptly from the others,  
Among violent fires  
Or returning alone,  
There I was without a face  
And it touched me. (BBW 205)*

If we carefully examine the concept of threshold in the light of this poem we are first of all struck by the liminal nature of the experience. Neruda is suddenly taken away from his normal path, "from a street I was summoned." He is wrenched from the security of knowing the path he was on and his life is now up for grabs. Furthermore he loses even his sense of identity "there I was without a face" and in the midst of this radical uncertainty he is "touched" by something that is beyond his understanding "beyond words" and outside of his control. From that moment a new life begins beyond his agenda and the gate-barrier becomes

the place of entering into a new existence charged by whatever it was that touched his innermost being.

This literary experience and Merton's life experience come together for me in William Faulkner's short novel 'The Bear'. You may be aware that Merton once gave a talk on this work to the Community at Gethsemane. The novel contains an account of a search for an elusive and somewhat mystical bear by a young boy. The boy sets off alone to search and as he proceeds on his journey he first realizes that he has to set aside his gun. As time goes on he must leave his watch and compass as well. Only when he has set aside these security props of time, place, direction and protection is he ready to come to the place of apprehension at the edge. Faulkner describes it thus:

*The leaving of the gun was not enough. He stood for a moment a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the*

*other from his overalls and hung them on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and entered it...then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It didn't walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion as he watched.....(WF. 201)*

After examining these accounts we might ask whether these thresholds are restricted to a few select people. Surely they are all part of the human experience for Merton the contemplative teaches us like the great Zen Master Maezumi Roshi that these so called thresholds are none other than the reality of life itself. We are to learn that, for the contemplative, life is to be an awakening to each moment as a threshold. It is to turn one's face towards the unknown as a way of life.

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As such a person learns to dwell in a threshold state of uncertainty and openness. The threshold then becomes a place at once empty and full. It is on the edge where one thing meets another; a fecund time and place of dynamic freshness. The moment-by-moment attention to it in every breath is openness to the possibility of a fall or a loss of identity essential if one is able to embrace the attendant new life that flows from it. The breath itself then becomes a veritable threshold as with the emptying of the lungs we physically let go of the old in order that we may be filled with the life-giving nature of the new. And yet fear oft times prevents the experience of the richness to be found at the threshold from bursting into the larger dimension of the reality of one's life. Yet if one is to enter into the new path that arises from the touch of the infinite in one's innermost being it is necessary to take the risk and to be profoundly present in all that presents itself in one's life.

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