

Merton at Fifty

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Ten years ago my interest in Thomas Merton resulted in my first article on this inspiring figure. It had the unpromising title of 'Thomas Merton – Ikon of Commitment for the Postmodern Generation'.¹ The conceit of the publication was to express the views on the state of contemporary Christian spirituality of what was then termed 'the postmodern generation'. At the time I was in my mid-thirties and Merton seemed like a wise old father figure who offered sound and balanced advice to the young spiritual seeker—much as he had done whilst he was alive.

Ten years later, and well into the new millennium, I was delighted to be asked by the Thomas Merton Society to address their autumn gathering. As I began to prepare the presentation my thoughts returned to that earlier article and I contrasted my view of Merton then to my view of Merton now. In 1999 he seemed like a wise old man, but on the eve of my 46th birthday I was taken aback by how young he was when he died—53. I decided then that the presentation (and this article) should take the form of an extended meditation on Merton's fiftieth year—'Merton and Midlife Crisis' if you like. Apart from my own midlife reflections some recent work on what psychologists call the 'stages of life' showed that Merton's approach to this period was unusually rich and potentially very helpful for those undergoing similar transitions. In some other work I have done I have

argued (and won't repeat here) that Merton can be seen as a 'postmodern prophet'.² When I surveyed his journal entries for his fiftieth year I found that the seven categories I had found in Merton's writings generally were exemplified in those writings, that is to say, the centrality of contemplation to Merton, his engaged social ethic, his psychological insight, his embodiment and awareness of the everyday, his respect for creation and his wider ecumenical outlook. Accordingly, in this article I shall look at Merton's journal entries for his fiftieth year in the light of these categories.

The journals for Merton's fiftieth year (1965) are mainly written in the transition from his busy life as novice master to the more hermit-like existence he had been longing for for so long (see, for example, *Survival or Prophecy?*). Thus, after so many years of prayer and anticipation, Dom Fox, the Abbot of Gethsemani, finally granted Merton his longed for wish. As he states in the journals: 'I can imagine no greater cause for gratitude on my fiftieth birthday, than that on it I woke up in a hermitage!' (Entry on his fiftieth birthday, 31st January 1965). Much of the year, then, is spent with Merton enjoying this new state of life which in itself deepens his experience of the *theoria* or *contemplatio* so central to his life and message. Life in the hermitage also allows his love of photography and photographic art to flourish once again.³

As he writes in September 1964, his love of the camera begins to meld with his 'Zen-like' appreciation of the odd and the unusual:

After dinner I was distracted by the dream camera, and instead of seriously reading the Zen anthology I got from Louisville Library, kept seeing curious things to shoot, especially a mad window in the old tool room of the woodshed...

The whole place is full of fantastic and strange subjects—a mine of Zen photography. 24.9.64

And perhaps more ecstatically two days later:

Camera back. Love affair with camera. Darling camera, so glad to have you back! Monarch! 26.9.64

The fruits of this Zen-centred love of photography are in the remarkable portfolio of late photographs shot by the monk. What is also striking in the pictures is Merton's love of waste places, weeds and neglected nooks and crannies. Here again we see echoes of another influence on the 'myriad-minded monk': the English Jesuit poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins.⁴ Merton's 'Zen-like shapes' seem not too distant cousins of Hopkins' 'inscapes' which themselves owe much to his reading of medieval attitudes to 'Quiddity'. When we examine Merton's journals there is more than a passing resemblance to those of Hopkins. Both record the minutiae of weather, atmosphere, humidity and temperature. Indeed Merton's journal entries in 1965 rarely omit a ref-

erence to the weather:

Fierce cold all night, certainly down to zero and inside the house almost freezing, though embers still glowed under the ashes in the fireplace. 31.1.65

The cold weather finally let up a bit today—the first time in about a week that it had been above freezing. Zero nights, or ten above. Very cold, sometimes even cold in bed. 4.2.65

The hills are blue and hot. There is a brown, dusty field in the bottom of the valley. May 1965

At midnight I woke up, and there was a great noise of wind and storm. Rain was rolling over the roof of the hermitage heavy as a freight train. The porch was covered with water and there was a lot of lightning. Now at dawn the sky is clean and all is cold again (yesterday warm). 27.11.65

Like the Jesuit, he 'sees God in all things' and his awareness of weather, temperature and climate blends into his wider ecological and environmental awareness. The journals contain many beautiful descriptions of the forests and landscape around the hermitage and monastery and it is clear that Merton responded to them on a fundamentally deep level of contemplation. Like Hopkins, Merton also loves what the English poet calls 'the wet and the wildness':

What would the world be, once

bereft of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, O let them be left, the wildness and wet; Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet. (Hopkins: 'Inversaid')

And the same can be said of Merton's journals, as von Balthasar writes of Hopkins:

In the creative sources of natural things, whether they be enduring or completely transitory, like water and clouds and the light and the shade of landscape, the novice, the scholastic framed himself in this encounter with the Creator of all nature. (von Balthasar: Herrlichkeit)

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Merton's beloved Desert Fathers and Mothers had spoken of the 'book of creation' and in his new-found liberty of the hermitage Merton enjoys this encounter

with the secret author of all things in the smallest and most delicate aspects of His creation, whether that be a caterpillar, mist, snow, frost or the tiny titmice that swing around his hermitage. Yet, as well as the beauty and calm of his new surroundings in the hermitage Merton is well aware of the internal changes that are accompanying the midlife transition, or, as he refers to it in June 1964:

I suppose that in some way I have been going through a small spiritual crisis. Nothing new, only the usual crisis and struggle, a little more intensified by the 'fiftieth year'. Still it is getting to be decisive because there are fewer evasions possible. 2.6.64

According to the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, the 'mid life transition' is a move from the 'knowing and certainty' of youth to the 'unknowing and uncertainty' of old age. As he puts it in 'The Stages of Life':

Thoroughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie. (Jung: 'The Stages of Life')

The young Merton, so memorably immortalised in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was a man of strong principles, iron

determination and a great lack of patience with his own (perceived) failings. The later Merton of the mid-life transition is one who learns to accept the inconsistencies and foibles that make him more human. Most famously this occurs in the incident that occurs in the year following the fiftieth—his falling in love with the nurse M at the Louisville clinic in 1966.⁵ Yet already in 1965 we have intimations of Merton's 'surrender to the feminine'⁶ in a truly archetypal dream he records in February 1965:

Last night I had a curious and moving dream about a 'Black Mother'. I was in a place (where? somewhere I had been as a child, but also there seemed to be some connection with the valley over at Edelin's) and I realized that I had come there for a reunion with a Negro foster mother whom I had loved in my childhood. Indeed, I owed, it seemed, my life to her love so that it was she really and not my natural mother, who had given me life. As if from her had come a new life and there she was. Her face was ugly and severe, and yet a great warmth came from her to me, and we embraced with great love (and I with much gratitude) and what I recognized was not her face but the warmth of her embrace, and of her heart so to speak. We danced a little together, I and my Black Mother, and then I had to continue the journey I was on. 4.2.65

The place he connects the dream with—Edelin's—was a piece of land close to the

hermitage that had been given to liberated slaves in the nineteenth century. Merton in the dream encounters what the Jungians call his 'shadow'—the black feminine to the white masculine. Although at first 'ugly and severe' he does embrace the shadow so much so that he can dance and hug her. The image is beautiful and moving and a reminder of the loss of his own mother at such a tender age. The bereaved Merton, whose feminine wound must have been so deep, seems at last to be embraced by the other half of his soul hidden for all those years. Perhaps only after this transition was Merton psychologically prepared to embark on the love affair which would not only shake up him (and Dom Fox) the following year, but also act as a means of healing. With this psychological transition comes a physical transition that Merton maps with his usual painful honesty:

A distant relative sent an old snapshot taken when he and his wife visited Douglaston thirty years ago... And there am I: it shakes me! I am the young rugby player, the lad from Cambridge, vigorous, light, vain, alive, obviously making a joke of some sort...

And now what kind of a body! An arthritic hip, a case of chronic dermatitis on my hands for a year and a half; sinusitis; lungs always showing up some funny shadow or other on ex-rays; perpetual diarrhoea and a bleeding anus; most of my teeth gone; most of my hair gone; a chewed-up vertebra in my neck which causes my hands to go numb and my shoul-

der to ache. What an existence!
21.12.65

The contemplation of his mortality explored in these journals is made even more poignant by the fact that we know that in less than three years he will be dead:

Does my solitude meet the standard set by my approaching death?

...

The solitary life should partake of the seriousness and incommunicability of death. Or should it? Is that too rigid and absolute an ideal? The two go together. Solitude is not death, it is life. It aims not at living death but at a certain fullness of life. But a fullness that comes from honestly and authentically facing death and accepting it without care, i.e. with faith and trust in God. 5.7.65

Yet the fruits of his heightened levels of contemplation in the hermitage are remarkable and should be heeded by all who take Christian contemplation seriously at mid-life. More than anything he revises his vocation as he begins to understand that the life of the Christian is about experiencing Christ's *be-ing* as much as Christ's *do-ing*.

My own personal task is not simply that of poet and writer (still less commentator, pseudo-prophet); it is basically to praise God out of an inner centre of silence, gratitude and 'awareness'. This can be realized in a life that apparently accomplishes nothing.

Without centring on accomplishment or non-accomplishment, my task is simply the breathing of this gratitude from day to day, in simplicity, and for the rest turning my hand to whatever comes, work being part of praise, whether splitting logs or writing poems, or best of all simple notes. 21.12.65

For in these late journals we glimpse Merton's awareness that the pursuit of 'contemplation', 'religion', 'spirituality' or whatever you want to call it, can be as pernicious as the wilful turning away from that pursuit. Merton's target had always been the 'pseudo-prophet' and those suffering from religious delusion, with sharp insight he now turns this critique on himself in some of the most memorable passages from the journals:

In an age where there is much talk about 'being yourself' I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else. Rather it seems to me that, when one is too intent on 'being himself', he runs the risk of impersonating a shadow...

This is not a hermitage—it is a house. ('Who was that hermitage I seen you with last night?').

What I wear is pants.

What I do is live.

How I pray is breathe.

Who said Zen? Wash out your mouth if you said Zen.

If you see a meditation going by, shoot it.

Who said 'Love'? Love is in the

movies.

The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual. Spiritual life is guilt. (May 1965)

Had Merton himself succumbed to these temptations as a young man? If so it would explain his vehement exposure of

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them at middle age. For as much as the search for 'real spirituality' he questions the search for the 'real self' that somehow lies beneath the surface of our 'everyday self'.

Yet another element of the diaries is that Merton's own mid-life crisis is reflected in the external 'mid-life crisis' of the Roman Catholic Church of the 1960s—the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath. Like his beloved Pope John XXIII Merton was at heart a traditionalist when it came to liturgy and worship and regretted the passing of the old of-

fices at the monastery. He also greets the changes of 1965 arising from the Council, such as the institution of concelebration and the vote on the tonsure, with a quizzical and ambiguous reaction. However, on the Council itself he is unambiguous as he records in his journal at the close of the Council in December 1965:

I am repeatedly thankful for this Council, for having lived at this time, for having learned so much from it. Certainly my own attitude to 'the world' will have to be modified. I have too easily and unthinkingly used the old contemptus mundi line as an evasion. 11.12.65

For finally, as throughout his life, Merton's inner spiritual compass is as attuned as ever to the changes that wider society was undergoing and what has been termed America's 'collective nervous breakdown' of the 1960s. Merton, as always, is able to articulate in this its implications for the spiritual life:

Yesterday I read some articles on psychedelics. There is a regular fury of drug-mysticism in this country. I am in a way appalled. Mysticism has finally arrived in a characteristic American mode...

Certainly the great thing I see now is to get out of all the traffic: peace movement traffic, political movement traffic, Church traffic, 'consciousness-altering' traffic, Zen traffic, monastic reform traffic. All of it! 27.11.65

As the world around him (and to a cer-

tain extent the world around us) looks to find the ever-refined spiritual 'high' whether that is in Zen, Sufism, Taoism or any other '-ism' Merton shines his perceptive light on the search and realises the folly of looking for the 'inner' or 'real' self, whatever that may be. His comments are made more piquant by the realization that he himself has also fallen prey to this delusion:

The time has probably come to go back on all that I have said about one's 'real self,' etc, etc. And show that there is after all no hidden mysterious 'real self' other than of 'hiding beneath' the self that one is, but what all the thinking does is to observe what is there or to objectify it and thus falsify it. The 'real self' is not an object, but I have betrayed it by seeming to promise a possibility of knowing it somewhere, sometimes as a reward for astuteness, fidelity, and a quick-witted ability to stay one jump ahead of reality. However, the empirical self is not to be taken as fully 'real'. Here is where the illusion begins. 11.4.64

At the end Merton's burning light of self-examination is as pitiless as ever and he realises that the life of the Christian is a life of 'kairos' not 'chronos'. We must live in the eternal 'now-moment' of God's presence without anxiety for results, conditions, 'spiritual progress' or any of the other delusions to which we are prey:

It is the Kairos, say the stars, says Orion, says Aldebaran, says the sickle moon rising behind the

dark tall cedar cross...

I want to give God everything. Until now I really have not, I think.

Or perhaps in a way I have tried to. Certainly not too hard! 13.10.64

Midlife is often the time for regret and a passing sense of failure. My re-reading of Merton's journals has shown me how the critical self-destruction of the delusional 'I' can act as a very subtle spiritual corrosive. At the end of the day, the spiritual life in Christ is a call to freedom, and that freedom means a liberation from regret of the past as much as fear of the future, as well as the tyranny of an illusory search for a fictitious 'real' or 'spiritual' self. It also means, as Merton understood so well, concentrating on God's presence in the here and now rather than trying to run a spiritual assault course to attain bigger and better 'spiritual gifts'. God is as much in pain, desolation, isolation and failure as in the great successes of life. As Merton writes at the end of the year:

I see the huge flaws in myself and don't know what to do about them. Die of them eventually, I suppose, what else can I do? I live a flawed and consequential life, believing in God's love. 30.12.65

I cannot say my life in the monastery has been useless, or a failure. Nor can I say where or how it has had its meaning.

Nor will I probably find where and how the hermitage has a meaning.

It is enough that there is the same

mixture of anguish and certitude, the same sense of walking on water, as when I first came to the monastery. 31.10.64

As always with Merton, detailed study of his writings is enormously helpful and inspirational. By concentrating on the 'private' writings of his fiftieth year I feel there is much material to help those struggling with the difficult transition years of mid-life. As always he teaches us the subtle delusions and traps open to those who pursue 'the spiritual life' and his writings remain as timely today as when they were written.

As for myself, I look forward to revisiting the journals in ten years time to listen to his wisdom as an accompaniment to the next phases of life! In this respect, the words he wrote on 20th August 1965 seem as prophetic now as when he wrote them:

'All those having borne witness to the faith, did not receive what was promised, because God foresaw something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect' (Hebrews 11. 39-40)

Entering upon the new way I think especially of this: that from part of the promise and fulfilment for which others have suffered and hoped: and in turn I will suffer and prepare the way for others.

Notes

1. In *The Way* Supplement 2000/98.

2. See 'A Spirit of Optimism: Thomas Merton and a Christian Spirituality for a New Millennium' in *The Pastoral Review*

2:4 July/August 2006 and 'Thomas Merton Forty Years On: A Postmodern Guide for Troubled Times' in *The Pastoral Review* 4:6 Nov/Dec 2008.

3. For more on this see P. Richter 'Late Developer: Thomas Merton's Discovery of Photography as a Medium for his Contemplative Vision' in *Spiritus* 6, 2006.

4. It was of course Merton's reading of Leahy's 'Life of Gerald Manley Hopkins' in 1938 that helped push him in the direction of becoming a Catholic.

5. For a fuller exposition of this encounter see my earlier article referred to 'Thomas Merton: Icon of Commitment for the Postmodern Generation'.

6. The phrase is taken from Dom Bede Griffiths—another monk who underwent a transition from the hard certainties of youth to the softer edge of old age in his move from Europe to India.

Works by Thomas Merton cited:

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