

Thomas Merton & Harry Williams Through Breakdown to Spiritual Breakthrough

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We are all cracked in slightly different ways, that's all. The first thing is to accept ourselves as we are and God's grace as it is given...¹

Williams' Search for his Real Self

In the epilogue to his fascinating autobiography *Some Day I'll Find You* ² the priest and writer H.A. (Harry) Williams quotes from Merton's description of his epiphany at Polonnaruwa:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but [that which] has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything — *without refutation* — without establishing some other argument.³

Williams does this to compare what he describes as his aspiration for the person that he would like to be alongside his actual condition. Williams would like to be like Merton – he calls this the ideal - but feels that the reality for him is very different. Williams, writing in the early 1980s, some twenty-four years before his death in 2006 at the age of 86, feels far from this ideal. Instead Williams feels that he is a person who, because of what he has seen, is increasingly out in the cold, like the old men in

T.S. Eliot's poem, 'The Journey of the Magi':

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.⁴

And yet, as Williams continues, in essence he would choose what he actually *is* rather than an ideal. Because of what he has gone through he can write in conclusion:

Nothing is for nothing. You always have to pay for what you get. Without pain there can be no birth; without death no resurrection. In that necessity the ideal and the actual are reconciled and seem to belong inescapably to each other.⁵

Writing in the 1980s Williams would not have had access to volumes 2 and 3 of Merton's Journals, covering the period from 1941 until 1960, which were published in 1997. If he had he would have been interested to read about Merton's times of emotional breakdown, similar to his own experiences and from which he gained much insight. Merton too knew about the dawn that could arise from darkness, from the resurrection that followed times of death. Both eventually understood such times as part of the death of the false self and, arising from the pain that they both experienced, a form of rebirth. Their journeys have some similarity and both offer guidance in our contemporary world.

The central message for Harry Williams was that everyone should try to find the real God through finding their real self, and this he accomplished in part through a psychoanalysis lasting 14 years following a serious and prolonged nervous breakdown during the early 1950s. He then left his successful academic career at Cambridge University to become a monk at the age of 50 at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield – an Anglican religious order. Thomas Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 and it was during his 27 years there that he gradually discovered and faced his false self. My suggestion is that between the late 1930s and early 1950s Merton also was undergoing the painful process of rebirth through what he called 'nervous breakdowns'.

Merton's experiences of breakdown: 'defeat leads to rescue'

On October 22nd 1952 Merton wrote in his journal:

Since my retreat I have been having another of those nervous breakdowns. The same old familiar business. I am getting used to it now – since the old days in 1936, when I thought I was going to crack up on the Long Island Railroad, and the more recent one since ordination. And now this...I think it is good to write it down, without asking too many questions as to why it is good. The writing of it forms part of a documentation that is demanded of me – still demanded, I think – by the Holy Ghost.⁶

Merton understood that there needs to be an acceptance of mental and emotional struggles – however they are manifested – as part of the spiritual journey. His first experiences of what he calls a nervous breakdown seem to have been a period of anxiety-depression followed by severe panic attacks. He began to feel ill in the autumn of 1936 and then in November Pop, his grandfather, died. Merton described speaking to Pop the morning of his death before going into Columbia University where Merton had been called off the athletics track with the news of the sudden death. Returning home on an agonisingly slow train he went to look at the body: 'Now a strange thing happened... I closed the door and got on my knees by the bed and prayed... I only wanted to pray.' This was before Merton's conversion, and he saw it as a way of doing something for the grandfather that he had loved. Bonnemaman, his grandmother, grieving the loss and becoming increasingly ill and infirm, passed away in August of the following year. As he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

Then came the alarms at night when we thought she was dying, and stood for hours by her bed, listening to the harsh gasp in her throat. And then too I was praying ... although I continued to think I believed in nothing.

In the middle of all this Merton kept on with his life at Columbia University: studying, athletics, socialising. One day, feeling terrible and falling during a cross country race, he gave up athletics then and there. However, 'it did not help much to get rid of this burden'. And one day, travelling into the University with 'a bagful of work' and a date planned for that evening, Merton had a massive panic attack. It took place on the

railway – the one he had used every day including the time when he had travelled back after the news of Pop’s death - and he was overwhelmed by anxiety: ‘... my head suddenly began to swim. ... it was as if some center of balance within me had been unexpectedly removed, and as if I were about to plunge into a blind abyss of emptiness without end.’ Standing up and moving between the rail cars to get some air Merton found: ‘my knees were shaking ... so I got back and propped myself against the wall and held on. This strange vertigo came and went ... I was scared.’

Finding a doctor in the Pennsylvania Hotel near the station Merton was told to rest but fearful of another panic attack, scared about looking at the window and listening to the blood pounding in his head, he was beset by morbid thoughts:

And far, far away in my mind was a little, dry, mocking voice that said: ‘What if you threw yourself out of that window. ...?’
... I thought to myself: ‘I wonder if I am having a nervous breakdown.’

For many it is easier to accept a physical illness than mental instability. Whilst part of Merton understood this was emotional, he then developed the physical symptoms of gastritis and went on a diet and took medication to deal with what was thought to be an incipient stomach ulcer. As he noted, the effect of both was ‘more psychological than anything else’. The feeling that remained from what happened was fear. Merton, in the spirit of his early autobiography, rather than appreciating the trauma of abandonment following the bereavement of one of the most stable figures of his life and the decline and anticipated death of the other with the echoes of illness and loss from his childhood, saw the fear in a more punishing way as ‘justice’ and something that was ‘deserved’ because of the lifestyle that he was leading: ‘I had refused to pay any attention to the moral laws upon which all our vitality and sanity depends ... I had found distress and anguish and fear.’

The anxiety of a further mental collapse was managed by worrying about his physical health and his diet and ‘a thousand minute details of conduct ... which haunted me with vague and terrific sanctions. If I eat this, I may go out of my mind. If I do not eat that, I may die in the night’.

Emotional breakdown may be a vulnerable opening-up that can lead to insights and breakthrough; and for Merton this breakthrough began to break down his false self:

Such was the death of the hero, the great man I had wanted to be. Externally (I thought) I was a big success.... [Internally] I was bleeding to death. ... I had come very far, to find myself in this blind alley: but the very anguish and helplessness of my position was something to which I rapidly succumbed. And it was my defeat that was to be the occasion of my rescue.⁷

Following the loss of his grandfather Merton described how he looked back to a time in his childhood when he was with his father, remembering back to the old days in France and drawn again to the deep, naïve, rich simplicity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was this that led him to the course on French Medieval Literature and, from reading Etienne Gilson in February 1937, to serious thoughts on the existence of God. Over this period Merton wrote that from time to time he attended the local Episcopal Church, but without much enthusiasm. On one occasion, encouraged by the minister to come and hear mention of Merton’s father who had played the organ there, Merton dutifully attended only to have to leave with ‘an attack of my head-spinning.’⁸ This emotional vulnerability contributed to his eventual conversion.

Once Merton was in the Abbey of Gethsemani there were other incidents linked to stress and unacknowledged conflict. After his ordination, when deacon at a mass on a particularly ‘nasty, muggy day’ in July 1949, Merton having been ‘a little on edge ... the next thing I knew was that I was not able to get my breath, I felt as if I were suffocating. ... Then I seemed to be choking.’ He fainted. During September and October of that year Merton mused on suffering, sadness and fear: ‘Nobody likes to be afraid.’ However the memory of passing out in July re-emerged when Merton was deacon for a week in December: ‘... I can’t breathe and my legs turn to jelly ... I thought I was going to collapse for sure. A big wave of darkness came up from inside me somewhere ...’ Exhausted by the worry Merton asked to be let off being deacon for the rest of the week but was left feeling ‘lonely and small and humiliated – chopping down dead trees with a feeling that perhaps I was not even a real person any more. ... feelings of fear, dejection, non-existence.’ Through reflection and reading *Rilke’s Notebooks* Merton reached the insight that ‘our professional spirituality sometimes veiled our contact with the naked realities inside us’, whilst on a practical level he was ‘ready to collapse from overwork. ... I am worn out with activity.’⁹

This experience surely contributed to Merton’s growing realisation that solitude was necessary: ‘To belong to God I have to belong to myself.

I have to be alone – at least interiorly alone.’ Rediscovering solitude Merton turned to Psalm 54 5-9 (Anglican Psalm 55) and believed the answer was to be found there:

My heart is troubled within me: and the fear of death is fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling are come upon me: and darkness hath covered me.
And I said: who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest?
Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I abide in the wilderness.
I waited for him that hath saved me from pusillanimity of spirit and a storm.

Merton wrote that it was ‘terror that is driving me into solitude’, and saw the fear as arising from the contradiction between ‘my nature and my God’.¹⁰

It was also stress that precipitated the third episode in the autumn of 1952 with Merton identifying contributory elements: the refusal for granting permission by the General for *The Sign of Jonas* to be published, criticism of *Waters of Siloe*, and the disturbing breakdown of a fellow monk. About the latter Merton wrote: ‘Something beyond anybody’s control brought on the strain that finally sent him to hospital and now home. I hated to see him go and it worked on me very much.’¹¹ The stress caused about the publications led Merton to write about the collapse of the author and the exterior man:

What exhausts me is the entertainment of all my illusions ... shaken with storms of passion and of fear. ... And so I go on trying to walk on the waters of the breakdown. Worse than ever before and better than ever before.¹²

And a few days later he recorded that:

I realize more and more that the only thing that matters is our awareness of God and our desire to do His will – and yet sometimes I seem to be completely incapable of both, and incapable of *everything*. Yet I am aware of Him in the agony of knowing obscurely that I am paralyzed and know nothing.¹³

Merton became increasingly clear about the false self – ‘a cold house of my own devising’. And yet in the midst of what he describes as ‘emptiness and helplessness and humiliation’, and ‘aware that I might crack up at any moment’, he found, nevertheless, ‘that when I pray, I pray better than ever’. It was this breakdown that led together with the support of a doctor, Fr Bellarmine, and eventually also from the abbot of Gethsemani, Dom James Fox, to a solution: a new decision to spend time in solitude as a hermit in the woods- ‘to keep me from folding up completely’.¹⁴

Williams’ experiences of breakdown

After a long and severe mental breakdown Harry Williams’ remained clear in his belief that ‘God does indeed make Himself known to us by means of what we feel, and that our emotions can often be the angels of His presence.’ During this period he experienced similar symptoms to Merton: ‘When I celebrated Holy Communion the altar would sometimes heave itself up before me and then fall back into place. It was like being dead drunk. I used also sometimes to feel frightened and giddy standing at the altar ... I became more and more the victim of terror.’ Williams, at this time a priest and a Cambridge don, describes how this then affected his ability to eat in public, to go on public transport or into shops. His phobias increased until he was unable to walk outside and then scarcely across his room. At this point, after an unsuccessful intervention by a priest who ‘knew’ about Freud, Williams was seen by a consultant psychiatrist and sent to a nursing home for three weeks. Williams wryly notes the attitude of clergy who, on his return, ‘wanted to choke me with Holy Communion, to persuade me to make a good confession, to have me anointed with oil,’ but with no improvement they became angry, instead accusing him of ‘malingering and exhorting me to pull up my socks and show some signs of a stiff upper lip.’ He appreciated that their inability to help felt like a threat to themselves. But as Williams explains the healing could not work because he recognized that ‘there was in myself too great a confusion between the true God and my persecuting idol’.¹⁵

The effects of an evangelical childhood with its powerful, irrational and destructive guilt-feelings, combined with an awareness of his homosexuality and a situation of unrequited love had led Williams to what he called a notional belief that he was loved by God, but that underneath ‘in terms of real assent I was still the slave of a monster who was crushing and destroying me’.¹⁶

Able to return after some months of treatment to the basics of

academic life Williams avoided church and chapel and said no prayers. He wrote:

I had had enough of God for the time being. It was an indescribable relief not to have this ghastly figure breathing with disapproval down my neck, and to tell him instead to fuck off. It was the idol I was disposing of. But I wasn't at all clear about that at the time.

Years later he came across the line by Yeats, 'Hatred of God may bring the soul to God', which seemed to encapsulate what was happening to him; and so the passage above could conclude:

For the true God will never fuck off, however much you tell him to, while in the end the idol does, even if he remains in the wings and returns every now and then with his filthy magic.¹⁷

The Christian insight that stayed with Williams during the worst period of pain 'when everything was a black nothing' was the deep mystery that 'the cruelly destructive and negative nature of suffering can be seen, if only in a glass very darkly, as charged with positive and creative possibilities'. This is then for Williams the true God who, far from being a tyrant, was prepared to suffer in order to bring 'life and light and healing and liberty to mankind'.¹⁸

After some time in intensive treatment with the consultant psychiatrist Williams entered psychoanalysis and was a patient for 14 years three times and then twice a week. Christopher Scott who saw him was not a Christian in the formal sense and never went to church but, as Williams puts it, 'without doubt he was a man of profound spiritual perception. ... he was a mystic.' The fits of terror diminished but never completely cleared up and were especially strong in chapel. Williams continued the analysis although 'in a conventional sense I was "well" ... because it was leading me into a wholeness and integrity I had lacked before.' Williams saw that the breakdown and recovery were more adequately described as death and resurrection where through his personal experience something universal was being articulated, 'that what had hit me personally was part of some sort of comprehensive reality'.¹⁹

Conclusion

For both men the times of emotional turmoil were relieved by spiritual insights leading to further conversion and life changes. For Merton the episodes led initially to his conversion and confirmation, then to the search for solitude, and, finally, to the realisation that living as a hermit was essential for his sanity. In his vulnerability Williams broke through the false compliant self he had constructed, analysis giving him insight into those parts of his Christianity that were 'diseased and to be discarded'. For Williams a narrative of 'breakdown and recovery' would be far from the full truth. As he wrote:

More adequate would be the image of death and resurrection: death to a narrowly based life lived in slavish subservience to a tyrannical idol and resurrection to a richness of being which consisted of freedom to discover who and what I was combined with the ability at least to become it.²⁰

Similar to Merton he was able to free himself from the shackles of doctrine, coming to the view that 'traditional Christian orthodoxy looked less and less like a stately cathedral and more and more like a half-demolished railway terminus'. The result of rejecting this 'package deal' was that it 'made God more important to me as doctrines about Him grew less important'.²¹

For both men these insights emerged from times of great weakness when the ego was threatened and the irrational seemed overwhelming. In a letter of 1965 Merton wrote:

I can say as a Christian, and an existentialist Christian, that I have often experienced the fact that the 'moment of truth' in the Christian context is the encounter with the inscrutable word of God, the personal and living interpretation of the word of God when it is lived, when it breaks through by surprise into our own completely contemporary and personal existence. And this means of course that it breaks through conventional religious routines and even seems in some ways quite scandalous in terms of the average and accepted interpretation of what religion ought to be.²²

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1985) p. 530. Extract from a letter of June 18, 1966, to Linda (Parsons) Sabbath.
2. H. A. Williams, *Some Day I'll Find You*, (London: Mitchell Beazley International, 1982).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (London: Sheldon press 1973), p. 233.
4. T. S. Eliot, 'The Journey of the Magi' in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 104.
5. *Some Day I'll Find You*, p. 383.
6. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 3 1952-1960*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 20, October 22, 1952.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc. 1948), pp.195-201. All the quotes referring to this episode are in Chapter 4, 'The Children in the Market Place', section iv.
8. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 214.
9. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 2 1941-1952*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 336, 367, 378, 379, 381. The entries are from July 17 to December 13, 1949.
10. *Entering the Silence*, pp. 382, 383, 384, December 22, 1949.
11. *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 20-21, October 22, 1952. The General refers to Dom Gabriel Sortais, Abbot General of the Trappists.
12. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 22, October 22, 1952.
13. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 22, October 30, 1952.
14. *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 23, 25, 27. The entries are from November 7 to December 29, 1949.
15. Williams, *Some Day I'll Find You*, pp. 253, 166-7, 170, 171.
16. *Some Day I'll Find You*, p. 171. Here Williams draws on Cardinal Newman's distinction between those beliefs to which one gives notional assent and those to which one gives real assent.
17. *Some Day I'll Find You*, p. 176-7. The line by Yeats is from his poem 'Supernatural Songs - V'.
18. *Some Day I'll Find You*, p. 177.
19. *Some Day I'll Find You*, pp. 182, 190, 192.
20. *Some Day I'll Find You*, pp. 190,191.
21. *Some Day I'll Find You*, p. 194.
22. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994). From letter to Mr Wainwright, July 10, 1965, p. 254.

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