

Book Reviews

Merton's Palace of Nowhere

James Finley

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A new edition of this now-classic and highly recommended book has been republished forty years after its first publication with the original foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen and a new preface by James Finley. In the preface Finley, who had been a novice under Merton, recounts a dream that he had five years after Merton's death and after he had left the monastery of Gethsemani, when he was finding himself stuck in the writing of this book. The message of the vivid dream that he describes, involving Merton and folk dancing, was that Merton was helping him to realise: 'that I was trying to write my book on his insights into the true self in ways that had me in bondage to the confusion and fear of my false self.' (p. xii) Finley hopes that his account of the dream will help the reader to see the 'surprisingly intimate ways that Merton invites us to discover that God is all about us and within us ... God is dancing away, inviting us ... [to] awaken to our true self, one with God, in the midst of our fragility and all our wayward ways.' (p. xiii) The effect of the dream on Finley was to release him from feeling stuck and to complete what is really a spiritual guidebook for our spiritual journeying and our quest for a spiritual identity – not a false, illusory spiritual identity depending on conformity and personal affirmation – but rather the opening up to

authentic participation in the life of God.

Some readers of *The Merton Journal* will already be familiar with *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* but for those who aren't, or those like me who read it some time back, there is a wonderful treat in store. The book consists of an introduction and then five chapters that take us through an understanding of the false self and the gradual awareness and ever deepening openness that comes from the practice of contemplative prayer. 'Merton leads us along the journey to God in which the self that begins the journey is not the self that arrives.' (p. xxii) This leads to discovering ourselves in discovering God where 'contemplation is the true self emerging in awareness' (p. 99). Finley includes many quotes from Merton's writings on contemplation in his exposition where Merton does not flinch from themes of 'death, emptiness, dread and loss' (p. 110) and the struggle with what Finley describes as, 'A kind of nakedness ... and the intrinsic relationship between communion and death to self' (p. 111). He quotes from Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*: 'The deepest prayer at its nub is a perpetual surrender to God ... Yet what is so often concealed is that there is a terrible dread that sweeps over me in the face of such an expectation.' (p. 111) Finley in the same chapter comments:

How strange God's ways are! He calls us to a union we do not understand. He calls us to a place of encounter which we cannot find. We search and search. Our silence reveals to us not a garden of delights but an awful nothingness. We can only throw ourselves completely on his mercy ... Our darkness is so intense God himself will have to be our light. (p. 115).

So as Merton and Finley both understood, the journeying leads us to 'no-where' where we are brought to 'no-thing' – this is poverty where there is 'only presence, only gracious emptiness, a freedom and love that forms a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere' (p. 115). The door of the Palace of Nowhere is the door of God where we are called to perfect union, 'where all the many things are one' (p. 119).

Fiona Gardner is a spiritual director and writer. Her latest book is *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*. A recipient of a Louie award in 2015, she was chair of the Thomas Merton Society 2004-2008, and co-editor of *The Merton Journal* 2008-2014.