

Alienation and Solitude

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Exactly fifteen years ago this evening I was staying with friends in New York, and I set off to attend a service in Corpus Christi Church. Fr. John Eudes Bamberger was preaching at a commemoration of Merton's death. Under the impression that I was getting out of the subway in the University district of Columbia I was surprised to find myself instead in an area of unlit, sleazy streets. It was very cold and it was intermittently sleeting with snow which perhaps caused the streets to be virtually empty. Here and there were drinking establishments of a rather sinister kind. Often there was a brazier outside on the pavement with men standing round it warming their hands. Undeterred I duly walked from 116th Street to 121st Street, as I had been instructed, and thought it odd that on the way I did not see a single female face. When I got to 121st Street there was no sign of a church, only a seedy park and streets that looked like London after the blitz. At first the road was quite empty but then I heard a shouting, whooping sound and saw that a gang of youths, some of them on roller skates, were tearing down the road towards me. Even I had the sense to realise that perhaps I was not in the safest of situations and I prayed silently "O God, please make me invisible. If I cannot be invisible then make me look like a social worker." (I cannot quite tell you why I thought the latter identity would be a good idea, but at the time it felt like a refuge). To my huge relief the gang swept straight past me, just as if I really was invisible, shouting and whooping, and I realised when I looked round that they were heading for a second gang that was coming whooping in the other direction. The two tangled, whether in affection or aggression I did not wait to find out, and I walked quickly on. I continued to wander, and to fail to find Corpus Christi church, and after about an hour I found myself at a subway station and thankfully got into a train and went back to my friends in Chelsea.

As I described my adventures to them, indignant not to have got to the service, they turned pale and sat down rather abruptly. "You went on the wrong subway" they said. "So you got out in Harlem" they said. "Even the taxi-drivers won't go where you went. Even the social workers go in twos. In daylight!"

It is said in Ireland that God looks after the drunks, and I can only conclude that She also looks after the feckless, the forgetful and the downright stupid.

I have taken up your time with this egotistical story this evening because I think in a sense the whole adventure, inspired because I was going in search of Thomas Merton, inadvertently explored a theme that was close to his heart. The theme of alienation.

I entered Harlem as an alien, and felt strange and out of place and frightened while I was there. And some of the reason for the sense of danger, if danger there was, was the appalling alienation that white cultures have imposed upon the black culture of America, beginning with slavery and going on through centuries of oppression. In fact Merton, who as a young man was no stranger himself to Harlem, frequently spoke of the huge creative potential buried alive in that place.

One of the themes that interested Merton was the transformation of alienation. Along with alienation went loneliness, whether individual, or social. Merton was interested in the transformation of loneliness into solitude, a process which he said began right there in the place where you were. 'Solitude is not found by looking outside the boundaries of your dwelling, but by staying within' he says in The Sign of Jonas. 'Solitude is not something you must hope for, in the future. Rather, it is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present, you will never find it.' Through entering the solitude, Merton thought, you found God 'whose solitude was his being' and you discovered the ability to love and care for your fellow-beings.

Someone who writes a great deal about alienation and loneliness is usually someone who has suffered and struggled in that area of life themselves. I believe that one of the important keys to Merton is something that occurred when he was six years old. He was playing in the garden when his grandmother came to the door of the house and handed him a letter. He took it, excited to receive a letter addressed to him, opened it, and with painful childish difficulty spelled out what it said. It was from his mother who was in hospital with cancer telling him that she was dying, and that he would never see her again.

You could certainly pinpoint this as a classic moment of alienation and loneliness in Merton's life, but if you study his life carefully, you will see that his sense of loss began earlier - that he experienced his mother as critical, severe, as finding him an unsatisfactory and disappointing child. A woman who chooses to say goodbye to her child by letter is probably someone who has difficulty in expressing affection, or perhaps feelings of any kind. 'Contemplatives' Merton was to say much later in his life 'are made by stern mothers.' This is a bit of a generalisation - I am sure we could find exceptions - but there is enough truth in it to intrigue. Some of us learn early to despair of the reliability of human love and may find ourselves turned towards a deeper and stronger source of love.

The sense of alienation continued as Merton spent the years after his mother's death travelling with his artist father, sometimes left in a boarding house alone in a strange country, sometimes dumped on relatives of friends who did not

really want him (the fate of the orphan child), sometimes, worst of all, forced to be companion to his father and a woman with whom his father was having an affair. It wasn't all bad. He loved his father dearly and his father loved him, and there was a home for him with his American grandparents on Long Island whenever his father was prepared to leave him there. But Owen Merton preferred to set up home in the south of France, where young Tom was soon able to speak perfect French, and eventually was sent to boarding school - the Lycee Ingres. This was one of those nightmare schools about which fiction has taught us a great deal, a school with a lot of fierce bullying, with Merton as the one fair-haired, blue eyed child in a school full of dark southern children. Merton was, in fact, quite a tough kid, who could hold his own, but in later years he wrote of the all-pervading fear he felt in that place, a fear that was unmitigated by gentleness or tenderness.

I don't want to be guilty of a piece of special pleading for Merton. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, experience fear and loneliness in childhood, and if invited to do so, I am sure a lot of people could recall fearful and hurtful school experiences. It seems, unfortunately, to be part of the human condition.

But the combination of the orphaned state together with the experience of living in a number of different countries - France, America, France again, England, and America again all before his twenty first birthday - I believe gave Merton a particularly powerful sense of being homeless and being an outsider, and these experiences were an important influence in the course his life took.

As an undergraduate at Columbia he came close to having a nervous breakdown. He suffered from a kind of endless activity - a sort of anxiety/depression perhaps - which forced him into a frenzy of drinking and love-making and hanging out with friends and reading and joining in political demonstrations, all of it driven by a sort of inner despair. Such a state of tension is not all that unusual with undergraduates. He then went on to experience a religious conversion - which is not all that unusual either - in his case to Roman Catholicism, and he was baptised in Corpus Christi church, the church I failed to find as I wandered in Harlem.

He tried to join the Franciscans, had in fact been accepted and received a date for joining, and a list of things he needed to take with him including an umbrella (how surprised St. Francis would have been!) when it occurred to him that he had not told them how chaotic his previous life had been. Especially he had not told them how, as a nineteen year old undergraduate in England, he had fathered a child. He set off on the long journey to talk to them about this, and, looking out of the train window, he saw a sight which struck him painfully.

'We were slowing down, and the first houses of the village were beginning to file past on the road beside the track. A boy who had been swimming in the river came running up a path through the long grass, from the face of the thunderstorm that was just about to break. His mother was calling to him from the porch of one of the houses. I became aware of my own homelessness.'

At this point he knew that the Franciscan vocation would not work, and sure enough they did turn him down when he told them the details of his past life. This debacle was followed by a long period of doubt and searching, and then, first with increasing longing, then with a sort of certainty, he turned to the strictness of the Trappist life as lived at Gethsemani, Kentucky. I find it interesting that his final choice was an enclosed community, a place where everyone was always at home.

The life he took up was one of extreme austerity - austerity even in Trappist terms, since the Americans lived it out with an obsessional and hungry earnestness unthinkable in France or Italy where they drank wine and ate quite well. It relieved him at a stroke of all the diversions and distractions that had been driving him crazy in New York and Olean. The life was closely structured and by the end of the day you were exhausted. You conversed only in sign language with rare exceptions, and others found that silence and lack of communication by speech a painful and lonely experience. Merton, on the contrary, found it satisfying and enjoyable, as if the outer state at last confirmed to an inner one. Like all writers he used writing to say what he could not say in speech and he wrote a book about his experiences - The Seven Storey Mountain - that was instantly a huge success.

In 1949 Merton was ordained priest - he had entered Gethsemani in 1941 - and quite soon afterwards he began to suffer from neurotic difficulties, with attacks of fainting, and difficulties with reading the gospel or celebrating the Mass, something that was to trouble him on and off for the rest of his life. His health was poor and it was not helped by the inadequate diet of the monastery.

As time went on part of his distress was due to the fact that Gethsemani was so overcrowded - at one time it had a hundred and fifty novices - and the irony was that some of them were there as a result of having read Merton's book. He began to acquire a huge hunger for solitude, and Abbot James Fox, fearful that he would lose this famous son from the monastery, responded by making him a kind of forest ranger with responsibility for looking after the woods that belonged to Gethsemani. He took to this work with enormous pleasure and spent hours walking and praying in the woods, clearing and cutting and replanting with help from his brethren. When he became, first, Master of Scholastics, and, later, Novice Master, he often took groups of young men with him into the woods where they worked or prayed or sat in silence.

Merton himself was beginning to have a longing to live as a hermit, although he had to wait a long while for this ambition to come true.

Some inner transformation was taking place in Merton - I suspect as a result of a growing capacity to confront his inner pain. His later writing suggests that at last he had begun to look at the loneliness that had dogged him all his life. It is a strange phenomenon. Some people are lonely because they are, or believe themselves to be, awkward, shy, unattractive to others. They give the wrong signals or no signals at all to others, and they receive very little human response in return. This was not Merton's case. At school, at university, as a teacher, and finally as a monk, he was a popular man to whom others were strongly drawn. In conversations with friends or with students or novices he gave himself unreservedly, paying a close and intuitive attention to their interests and needs. He enjoyed company, and was the life and soul of any party. Yet, as he himself says, he was afraid of being loved, fearful of the trap of possession. In his journal he regretted the way that, in the old days when he had been involved with girls, he had treated them hurtfully and with coldness, unable to attempt the alternative to this, to take the huge risk of loving them. At school he had suffered, he said, from the absence of girls. He had wanted someone to give his adolescent love to and had been reduced to giving it to Hollywood film stars. At Gethsemani in the early days he had an exaggerated dislike of women, being openly rude to Naomi Burton, his agent, when she came to see him. But gradually he learned to recognise his loneliness, his fear of intimacy and his longing for love.

Towards the end of his life he wrote to a Catholic woman in great distress because her husband had left her. 'I know from my own experience that the loneliness and confrontation with death only become intolerable when I have unconsciously argued myself into a position in which I am in fact refusing to accept them and insisting that there is some other way. But there is no other way.' The way through loneliness is not by way of trying to avoid it. It is rather by confronting it head-on, like a sailor steering straight for the eye of the storm. It is also by recognising the universal loneliness of the human condition rather than falling into the absurdity of envy - fantasising about the full and happy lives we imagine others are leading.

One of the places where Merton is most interesting about loneliness is in his essay The Cell, written in 1966, and eventually published in Contemplation in a World of Action. It was this essay, drawn to my attention by Donald Allchin, which stimulated in me a further interest in Merton in the late sixties. At the time I despaired that any Christian writers were writing anything I wanted to read, and then I read The Cell and felt profoundly excited. It starts with a young brother who is living as a hermit complaining that he is suffering from acute boredom and thinking that perhaps the answer is to go out and visit the sick. The experienced old monk he consults tells him to stay

right where he is and face out his inner feelings rather than trying to distract himself. To undergo this struggle, the old monk says, is to imitate the great things St. Anthony did in the desert. Here, in this place, right here, within the frustrating limitations of our own persons, is the place of encounter, with oneself and with God.

The primary task is to experience solitude, and the first important lesson, as shown in the young monk, is that one does not do it very well. After the first excitement has worn off, a very different picture begins to emerge. All the frailties that we learn so skilfully to hide from ourselves and which Christians perhaps learn to hide better than most, become glaringly evident once the outer props and affirmations are withdrawn. We discover ourselves fretful, greedy, lustful, profoundly unhappy. The importance of all this, says Merton, is for us to discover that we live with an illusory image of ourselves, a false self, and this gets in the way of the essential change. One of the things that I have often observed in friends going through some huge and painful change in their lives - through the agony of divorce, say, or through a hateful illness that leaves them less than the strong person they were, through some scandal or shame or disgrace, through the loss of a job or a wounding personal failure - is that they seem to become much more human, and much more lovable. It is as if the illusory self disintegrates. I think this is what we often see in the sort of people we tend to describe as holy.

To get rid of the illusory self, at least temporarily, to give up the plausible identity or persona we have assumed for use in a worldly existence, sets us free in a very special way according to Merton. He says 'we gradually find our place, the spot where we belong . . . there is a kind of mysterious awakening to the fact that where we actually are is where we belong. Suddenly we see, this is IT.'

First we vanquish loneliness, at least temporarily, by steering into the eye of the storm, then we struggle with solitude where the problem has more to do with boredom and the discomfort of our very unideal selves, than there is real doubt whether that self is very real at all, but then there is a surrender, a movement of grace, in which we discover that this place and no other, is the right place. The spiritual life always happens in precisely the place one is in, and not where the grass is greener.

Gradually, says Merton, a sense of order overtakes the wretchedness of boredom, there is a movement towards stillness, and in the stillness we find God, and in God, our true identity. The story of the lonely Jacob in the wilderness describes the whole process. So within the stability of solitude there is a new identity that is the first step to a total giving away of the self.

In the sixties Merton moved more and more deeply into studying life outside the monastery and particularly the terrible history of the second world war

and its aftermath. He paid great attention to the history of the holocaust, and the kind of 'abstract thinking', as he called it, which made it possible for respectable chemical institutions to send canisters of gas to concentration camps to destroy 'units', certainly aware that those units were men, women and children. Abstract thinking is still very much alive in our world today. A friend who works as a speech therapist in the Health Service was telling me last week of the instructions she has been given about 'improving productivity'. Her work is not with inanimate matter, however, but with stroke victims struggling to regain their speech. Merton also studied the Cold War, the terrible cloud of the A-bomb and the H-bomb, and the fearful threats to the ecology of our world - this last before it had become a fashionable concern. He kept abreast of current literature in all its forms, and in several languages, eager to understand the way others understood the human crisis.

It seemed to Merton that, in a world being rapidly overtaken by capitalist values, and by a consumerism that demanded a lot of rushing around in search of pleasure, it was perhaps the value of the monk not to be superior to all this, as he had once believed himself to be, but to live a life of simplicity and happiness that ran clean contrary to the idea of gain and accumulation.

It was this that he began to do when he at last got permission to live as a hermit in the grounds of Gethsemani. He lived in a cinderblock hut close to the woods and with a view of the hills, and as time went on he learned to cook for himself and to find huge pleasure in his surroundings. He loved watching the flight of the deer through his binoculars, he got great pleasure from roaming the woods, from sitting out on his verandah reading his breviary or reading anything from politics to poetry. He did not find it all that easy. He said that living alone exposed his 'nonsense' - "and I have a lot of nonsense inside me." I don't think I am giving away any secrets when I say that I don't think he was a very successful hermit. Partly because he was greatly sought after by visiting celebrities and others, partly because he was a sociable man, partly because he had become so much less rigid that he had been in his early years at Gethsemani and there were bits of living he had to catch up with, he seemed to spend rather a lot of time visiting friends, drinking beers with his psychiatrist, and going on trips in cars.

There was also a different way in which he was changing. Having forced women out of his life at the beginning of the nineteen forties, by the nineteen sixties he was beginning to feel the need for them. Or perhaps it was that he realised that the exclusion of the feminine, for both the Church and himself, had been part of an unrecognised sickness, a tragic imbalance. This imbalance began to appear in his dreams in one of which he was distressed by his fellow-monks mocking a visiting woman Latinist (he thought this had to do with Catholic attitudes to Anglicanism). Women became a feature of his dreams, particularly a Jewish girl called Proverb. At the same time he was mixing

more with women - comfortable Catholic mothers of seven who let him blend in with the sort of easy family life he had never really had a chance to enjoy - his agent Naomi Burton, who became a close friend - the wives of friends of his, and correspondents like Rosemary Radford Ruether, who took him sternly to task over theological ideas about which she thought he was rather lazy. He seemed to enjoy it all. It was on a visit to hospital for serious surgery that he met, and fell in love with, a young nurse who, for a time at least, fell in love with him in return. He eventually gave this relationship up - he was too old for her, too committed to the monastic life, too aware that now his life was about something different - but it cost him a great deal, not least because it had had great healing power for him. To give it up was the greatest offering he made to solitude.

I do not think we are looking here at some masochistic defeat or sick choice, but rather a steady awareness of where, for Merton, fulfilment lay. His life had been shaped by loneliness - he had turned loneliness into solitude, which is the task of the contemplative, and in the experience of contemplation he had found a new identity for himself which he could not deny. As Merton often pointed out, there is something utterly paradoxical in the identity that is found because the person has become entirely unselfconscious.

'The only true joy' Merton had written in *Seeds of Contemplation* 'is to turn away from self-will and obsession with our own appetites, and seek only to know and to do the will of God and to find joy in that. The only true joy is to escape from the prison of our own selfhood... and enter by love into union with the Life who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our minds.... A tree gives glory to God first off by being a tree. The more a tree is life itself, the more it is like Him.... This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.' Sanctity, Merton thinks, consists in something or someone being itself, him or herself, though for human beings there is the fact of choice. 'We can be ourselves or not, as we please. But the problem is this: since God alone possesses the secret of my identity. He alone can make me who I am or rather He alone can make me who I will be when I at last fully begin to be.'

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