

# BEYOND GENDER

The 'masculine-feminine' relationship is basic in all reality—  
simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God.<sup>1</sup>

## THE SOUL SEARCHES FOR DYNAMIC BALANCE

**I**n becoming conscious we become aware of external and internal dualities and the many aspects of ourselves—I am this, and so I am not that. One of the first ways we are defined by others is whether we are male or female, and this duality appears to be the generator of most subsequent psychic dualities. It is not uncommon to judge one side of a duality as being better, or more appropriate or important than the other, and such splits can generate chasms of misunderstanding, pain and hatred—from such a tendency we can trace the roots of sexism, racism and many other miseries. At the very least, if one aspect is deemed superior then many are left unfulfilled and many souls are left out of balance.

The sexual distinction between man and woman is the external duality, but within each of us the 'masculine' and 'feminine' energies are both present, and there is a tendency to search for a dynamic balance to create both healing and wholeness. In the process of living, these qualities which, for want of a better expression, we call 'masculine' and 'feminine' are also dynamic, fluid and hopefully ever-changing. In other words they can realign themselves as the human organism grows, develops and changes—and in this way balance and resolution can be found. This is part of the life-long process that Jung defined as individuation, arrived at partly through recognition of the *anima* and *animus*—the corresponding

female and male contrasexual aspects. Every man has a 'feminine' side and every woman a 'masculine' side yet in our conscious development these opposite parts can be repressed and remain unconscious. A contemporary psychotherapist might speak instead of gathering up the projections and split-off aspects within oneself. In a more general sense it is about a deepening sense of self-awareness.

One factor that influences our awareness of different gender characteristics is our actual experience with our parents, and our fantasies and feelings about their relationship with us. Inevitably these are highly emotional responses that deeply influence us, and our future relationships—including our relationship with God. Defining 'masculine' and 'feminine' quickly descends into stereotypical manifestations around dominance and subservience, or active and passive, but there are more creative and interesting ways of thinking about these gender aspects or principles that are present within each of us whatever our sex—such as logical thinking and compassionate feeling, linearity and circularity, action and contemplation and so on. Inevitably there are equivalent negative manifestations such as violent aggression and suffocating possessiveness potentially present in both men and women.

Male dominance has been the characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the Church as an institution functions with a structure and style generally accepted as 'masculine', with a patriarchal God-image—though there have been some notable witnesses to the Truth who

have attempted to balance this aspect. Interestingly we find the 'masculine' and 'feminine' aspects of Logos/thought and Eros/love held in balance in the written definition of God, and in Christ as an incarnation of God. So we read the following:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being (John 1:1).

'Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7-8).

So how do we achieve this desired balance and symmetry? How do we become conscious of dormant or split off aspects of ourselves? This is the long and often upsetting task of inner work, and yet the reward can be the potential freedom to accept and relate to anyone. The outcome is the ability to connect with others—whatever their or our circumstances. In other words in understanding our own differences we are not so threatened by difference in another. Paradoxically, the individuated person is released from self-serving individualism.

Woodward (2001) reminds us of Bonnie Thurston's 1993 Presidential address to the International Thomas Merton Society where she emphasises the importance of the legacy of Merton's ideas and concerns—over the 'heresy of individualism'.<sup>2</sup> However, many of us began our relationship with Thomas Merton the man, and through his autobiography identified with aspects of his personal journey that resonated with our own experience. Because of the relationship with him we were able to be open and interested in his ideas and concerns. So I would suggest that in his writings we also can find another sort of legacy—an account of a process of a soul on its personal journey, part

of which involves searching for this dynamic balance of opposites—and that from Merton's own inner balancing work we may also learn something. This is not the same as turning the individual Merton into a cult figure or icon, or his journey into our route.

Merton did warn against making facile connections from his personal story. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he wryly comments that in describing his response to Mr Duggan rifling the vegetable plot in Flushing, later interpretations will use this against him, linking his early 'mentality of a medieval serf' to his later becoming a monk.<sup>3</sup> With this ironic comment firmly in mind, I offer my somewhat tentative understanding of the process of gradual repair and reparation of his experience of the feminine aspect within himself as he writes about it primarily in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his Journals. The basis of my analysis is centred on Merton's account of his relationship with his mother, and much later with 'M', and my perspective is influenced by my experience as a psychotherapist.

## 'BECAUSE I AM ALWAYS BROKEN'

**O**n April 8th 1967, Merton writes 'My falling in love so badly was not a cause but an effect, and I think really it all comes from roots that had simply lain dormant since I entered the monastery'.

So what were those roots and what does Merton mean when in the same section of his journal *Learning to Love* he continues

At the root...I would like to be known, loved, admired...

and promptly castigates himself for such longings.<sup>5</sup>

From *The Seven Storey Mountain* we get a good picture of Merton's subjective experience of his parents—overall with his father there seems a sense of companionship and identification

despite the lack of stability in the living arrangements and his father's traumatic illness and premature death when Merton was only fifteen. However it is his earliest experiences of 'dissatisfaction' with his mother that I think left a part of Merton always feeling unknown, unloved, and criticised.

In his account he struggles with his experience of Mother (he uses a capital M) as different from the spoken experience of other family members. He introduces us to her through his comments on a picture (marking Merton's experience of detachment), which seems to fit with his memory of her as, 'worried, precise, quick, critical of me, her son'. Yet in contrast others spoke of her as 'gay and light-hearted' and of her 'happy laughter'. How does a child deal with such disjunction? Usually by blaming him or herself. Early on in Merton's account there emerges confirmation for his feelings of responsibility for her apparent change in character, and I think this presages his repressed sense of responsibility for her later illness and death. He reflects on her 'insatiable dreams' and 'great ambition after perfection'. He continues

Maybe that is why I remember her as mostly worried: since the imperfection of myself, her first son, had been a great deception...I was nobody's dream-child.<sup>6</sup>

D.W. Winnicott, a psychoanalyst and paediatrician, writes about the idea of the mother's face as a mirror, 'the mother's role of giving back to the baby the baby's own self'.<sup>7</sup> The baby sees him or herself reflected in the look on the mother's face. It is this sense that becomes internalised as a sense of oneself. If we are looked at critically or with disappointment as babies and small children this becomes part of our inner experience and we try to find other ways to get something different of

ourselves back from our environment. When Merton writes that he wonders whether, 'solitaries are made by severe mothers',<sup>8</sup> I think he understands the dangers of relationships and the fear of repeated critical rejection.

Given this deeply embedded early experience of anxiety and criticism, Merton's earliest experiences of God's love and grace following his conversion to Catholicism are then all the more wonderful, and offer a glimpse of the feminine aspect of God. Hospitalised and operated on for appendicitis he writes,

This lying in bed and being fed...was full of meaning...I was now, at last, born: but I was still only new born. I was living: I had an interior life, real, but feeble and quite precarious. And I was still nursed and fed with spiritual milk... My eyes were beginning to open to the powerful and constant light of heaven and my will was at last learning to give in to the subtle and gentle and loving guidance of that love which is Life without end.<sup>9</sup>

Such love and acceptance was a new experience, as it can be for many of us in touch with our own early deprivation who through grace turn to Christ. Interestingly this time in hospital has echoes in his later hospital experience with 'M' his nurse, when, as I shall later discuss, love and acceptance became embodied in a real woman.

It's a short step in the mind of the child from not being good enough in the parent's eyes to being 'bad' and 'destructive'. This sense of self can feed on itself and this seems to be confirmed when Merton writes of 'the devils that hung like vampires on my soul' that his baptism failed to loosen.<sup>10</sup> Feeling the contrast with the good, serene baby brother who is no trouble, Merton takes solace in an imaginary friend who has an imaginary dog—a compensation for many misunderstood, lonely children. A therapist might suggest that Merton's

mother's disappointed search for perfection in her son might lead him to feel anger and resentment—if not at the time then later in life. However the events of his mother's illness and death would probably have served to confuse and compound such feelings, which, immediately repressed, appeared to emerge much later in his destructive treatment of women as a young adult.

Merton's account of his mother's illness and death when he was six years old is deeply upsetting. Loss of a parent at such a young age is for any child a trauma, but can be mitigated by the empathy of other adults, and by the quality of the earlier relationship with the parent who has died. As he remembers the event, it seemed that no one felt able to explain to the little boy what was happening or was available to comfort him. Instead Merton turns on himself and writes of his unusual selfishness, but left on his own to make sense of his mother's letter he is weighed down by loss and grief. The words used in his description of the time of her death convey to us, the reader, the vivid mental imprint characteristic of remembered childhood traumatic events.

The car was parked in a yard entirely enclosed by black brick buildings, thick with soot. On one side was a long, low shed and rain dripped from the eaves, as we sat in silence, and listened to the drops falling on the roof of the car. The sky was heavy with mist and smoke, and the sweet sick smell of hospital and gas-house mingled with the stuffy smell of the automobile.<sup>11</sup>

The complicated relationship with his mother and all the resulting fantasies and guilty fears from her early death laid a foundation for Merton's later encounters and sense of the feminine. The effects seemed to cast a long shadow that can be glimpsed at various points in his writings—issues around shame and guilt, criticism, being good-

enough, recognised and so on. Perhaps underlying some of his frequent somatic distress lay the non-verbal expression of his inner unresolved feelings. Indeed Merton hints that entering the monastery could be seen from one perspective as an attack on his mother's relentless striving for his individuality,

which is of all things the ultimate paradoxical fulfilment of my mother's ideas for me—the last thing she would have dreamed of: the boomerang of all her solicitude for an individual development.<sup>12</sup>

### THE MONASTERY AS 'M'/OTHER

UPSETTING and unsettled childhoods tend to provide a pattern for future relationships and lifestyle—even if a reactive pattern. Some young people, in an unconscious attempt to mitigate such difficult experiences, seek the security of an institution as a way of holding the feelings of disturbance and insecurity. The Church can clearly function as one such institution—where awareness of being broken and contrite is welcomed.

After Merton made his initial decision to become a Franciscan he went to visit Cuba, and his happy description reveals the inner relief of feeling safely held at last.

It would be hard to believe that anyone was so well taken care of as I was: and no one has seen an earthly child guarded so closely and so efficiently and cherished and guided and watched and led with such attentive and prevenient care as surrounded me in those days. ... God was giving me a taste of that sense of proprietorship to which grace gives a sort of a right in the hearts of all his children.<sup>13</sup>

In the relationship with God and through Christ, a deficit of parental love can be repaired—'If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up' (Ps 27: 10).

Everywhere I turned, there was someone ready

to feed me with the infinite strength of Christ Who loved me, and Who was beginning to show me with an immense and subtle and generous lavishness how much He loved me.<sup>14</sup>

Merton was also feeling fed and consoled by his devotions to female saints and to the Mother of God.

New experiences invariably bring up past problems, and the delight in feeling accepted and loved so deeply could not be maintained for long by Merton, without the guilty old self-critical anxieties resurfacing. The early internalised pattern of his imperfection in the eyes of his mother and within himself, was inevitably confirmed when Merton himself felt and was seen as 'not good-enough' to enter the Franciscan novitiate. On the poignant journey to confess his past and 'all the troubles I had had' to Father Edmund at the Franciscan seminary, Merton, looking out of the train window, glimpses a passing scene of a boy running to his mother to escape a thunderstorm that was just about to break:

I became vaguely aware of my own homelessness...

I thought: 'I will never live in you: it is finished.'<sup>15</sup>

In his associations, it was as if his inner feelings of being unacceptable and destructive had created a terrible downfall that precluded ever finding maternal shelter.

The damaged feminine aspect only began to be consistently repaired with his acceptance and welcome into the monastery at Gethsemani, and Merton's own gradual sense of forgiveness of himself. The Benedictine way of living offered a structure and certainty within a safe family of men. There was a balance of body, mind and spirit in the tasks, and a daily rhythm and seasonal pattern to provide security and a form of holding. Externally and internally the vow of stability meant that Merton was at last rooted.

It may seem simplistic or even

sacrilegious to link the experience of monastic enclosure, removal from the world, the vow of obedience and path of submission with 'feminine' gender attributes, and the study and teaching of texts and physical labour with 'masculine' principles, but I think the conscious experience of living in such a disciplined and all-consuming way has unconscious implications for the development of soul balance. The stripping away of the individual as 'man' and 'woman' with all that goes with it out in the external world, can only lay bare the essentials of the inner world—both actual past experiences and the accompanying fantasies. Merton writes of emptying ourselves of every image—beginning with the harmful images, and then those that 'involve us uselessly in passion and emotion', this 'leaves the will free to seek God in faith'.<sup>16</sup>

The commandments to love God and to love one another demand from all of us inner searching, a process that can quickly reveal old hurts and familiar grudges, as well as embedded resentment and anger. This soul searching—upsetting and painful as it is—is best done in a safe environment, where we can hold both love and hate. Now people tend to seek out psychotherapists to help explore their inner world, committing themselves to a confessional process and exposure with another that can last for many years. Clearly both the method and outcome is different from that of religious life—therapy is ultimately a self-seeking process of 'building up' rather than 'stripping down', with the person usually aiming to feel more 'at home' if not successful in the world. In therapy the person realigns him or herself in the light of the relationship with the therapist, while a Christian life is to live out of oneself in Christ. When

Merton writes of experiencing our own 'nothingness',<sup>17</sup> he distinguishes loving ourselves because we think we're worthy of love for our own sake (I think the implicit agenda of much therapy), from seeking to be loved by the mercy of God, knowing that we have nothing and needing everything (the place of those who know their insufficiency and spiritual poverty).

The process of reparation of the feminine aspect within Merton became more marked and conscious through his dreaming of and thinking about Proverb. He writes on February 28th 1958,

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect "She belongs to the same race as St Anne." I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that it is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it—perhaps the others have mocked her for it'.<sup>18</sup>

A few days later Merton pens her a letter in his Journal entry expressing his gratitude for her love 'your lovely spontaneity, your simplicity, the generosity of your love'. This relief and reconnection with the repressed feminine part of Merton's soul leads indirectly to the 4th and Walnut experience, where he notes in his Journal his sense of meeting Proverb in each of the women he saw in that wonderful moment of deep universal union,

each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady...

Dear Proverb... I shall never forget our meeting yesterday.<sup>19</sup>

Here is Merton's *anima*—the female principle and energy, so long tainted by the difficult early experiences, released into consciousness through his dreams. She became an important and familiar symbol for him, whom he understood

as an archetypal manifestation that represented understanding, knowing and loving, and part of his path towards loving and being loved by God.

### SHE 'KNOWS HOW TO HEAL'<sup>20</sup>

CONFRONTING and consideration of our inner world leads to changes in it, and I think it inevitable that this then impacts and is experienced in external relationships. I understand the account of the relationship with 'M' (from Merton's perspective and the perspective of this paper), as a reparative, and so a necessary, and perhaps even an inevitable experience. Once again Merton finds himself vulnerable in hospital—an experience that for all of us is accompanied by infantile feelings of regression. This time the love and acceptance is not purely from a spiritual force, rather it is embodied in his nurse, and from his account is experienced at all levels—physical, emotional and spiritual. It gave Merton a different actual experience of intimacy with a woman—one both maternal and erotic.

I have got to dare to love, and to bear the anxiety of self-questioning that love arouses in me, until "perfect love casts out fear".<sup>21</sup>

Merton with his intuitive capacity for self-reflection understood three months into the relationship what was happening to him.

I cannot regard this as 'just an episode'. It is a profound event in my life and one which will have entered deeply into my heart to alter and transform my whole climate of thought and experience: for in her I now realise I had found something, someone, that I had been looking for all my life.<sup>22</sup>

This was I think partly the embodiment of the loving and accepting mother figure that he had never known, and partly the external realization of the 'feminine' aspect residing deeply within his soul. Thurston in her analysis

of the poetry of this period links the 'something' to 'the simple, total self-giving...that mirrors in the human arena God's way of loving'.<sup>23</sup> It was experienced as a conflation of human and divine love that led Merton to a deeper understanding of both love and God. In 'Louisville Airport' he writes, 'This is God's own love He makes in us'. Perhaps the experience can be understood as including all these aspects, and one that contributed to the reparative healing of the past.

### BEYOND GENDER

...there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one with Christ.  
*Galatians 3: 28*

MERTON wrote as a man in a man-centred society – he wrote before the second wave of feminism had broken – and his non-inclusive language bears reference to this. Still from what other perspective could he write? However, I think he also writes as someone who has struggled to know himself in a way that precludes difference. In accepting and knowing his own feelings of vulnerability and rejection, Merton is able to align himself with all those outside the mainstream, and there is evidence that he recognised some aspects of the position of women in the Church. For example, he writes approvingly of St Ambrose's approach to women:

This totally refreshing defense of woman gives us some indication of the depth and reality of patristic humanism. Indeed, how can there be true "humanism" when half of the human race is ignored or excluded?... A humanism for men only is, as we have seen, nothing but a barbarous falsehood. The light of true humanism is kindled by the Incarnate Word.<sup>24</sup>

From Merton's writing, particularly from his autobiography and Journals it is possible to follow a form of mapping

of a soul's journey. In this paper I have focused on one aspect of this journey that I have described as searching for dynamic balance in terms of masculine and feminine properties and energies. In his acceptance of his feminine aspect, Merton moves from distancing the frightened, damaged/damaging part of him linked to the memory of the 'severe mother', to accepting who he really is, and to his realisation and embrace of Sophia—the feminine wisdom of God. This inner reparation is evidenced in his actual relationship with 'M'. I have suggested that this recognition and reparation was enabled both by his vow of stability within an environment that accepted him, and in the service of God by whom he felt loved and wanted.

So what can we take from this part of Merton's narrative? I would suggest that Merton's experience framed within his masculinity offers to all of us who read him, women and men, a legacy that can help with understanding and reconciling fragmented gender aspects in our own inner world.

To follow the commandment to love one another, we have to believe that we can be loved in return—and that therefore we are loveable. This approval can be part of the reparation of earlier rejection by parental figures in our childhood. This is the process of healing the past—a process that involves both finding ourselves in God, and trying to become more as God is. In the process of finding ourselves we forgive ourselves our own trespasses and become reconciled with ourselves.

Unless we discover this deep self, which is hidden with Christ in God, we will never really know ourselves as persons. Nor will we know God.<sup>25</sup>

In the deep analysis lies the inclusive language—the discovery of personhood. Personhood lies beyond gender, and beyond individual selfhood,

and 'comes to light only when it fully confronts the "other"'.<sup>26</sup> In loving another as we love ourselves, the experience of God as love and God as the Word are held within our own brokenness.

### Notes and References

1. Taken from a letter to Victor Hammer May 14th 1959, quoted by Bonnie Thurston in her paper 'Human Love and the Love of God', 1998 Oakham Conference Papers
2. Michael Woodward's paper is 'The Pointing Finger', in *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2001
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1948, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. published by Signet Books, New York, page 16 (in future referenced as *SSM*)
4. The title for this section is taken from Merton's poem 'I always obey my nurse' written in May 1966
5. Thomas Merton's *Learning to Love*, Volume Six, Harper Collins, page 215 (in future referenced as *LL*)
6. These extracts are taken from page 13 of *SSM*
7. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 1971, Penguin Books, page 138
8. Thomas Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 1948, page 15
9. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 332
10. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 14
11. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 25
12. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 21
13. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 334
14. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 336
15. Thomas Merton, *SSM*, page 356
16. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 1993, Shambhala, page 127
17. *Ibid*, page 38
18. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, Volume Three, Harper Collins, page 176
19. *Ibid*, these two quotes are from pp. 176 and 182
20. The title for this section is taken from Merton's poem 'Cancer Blues', written in July 1966
21. Thomas Merton, *LL*, page 44
22. Thomas Merton, *LL*, page 328
23. Bonnie Thurston, see footnote 1, page 73
24. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 1967, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, page 119
25. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, 1961, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, page 41 and 43
26. *Ibid*, page 61