

‘Perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers’: Reflections on Thomas Merton’s childhood, with particular emphasis on his relationship with his mother

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When Merton was thirty-four he commented in his journals that ‘perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers’.¹ This paper will explore what he might have meant by that. The focus will be on Merton’s childhood and in particular on his relationship with his mother.

As has been often noted, there are many paradoxes about Merton. He was a hermit whose death was fol-

lowed by an obituary on the front page of the *New York Times*. He professed to want to be ‘a nonentity and to be forgotten’,² yet became a bestselling writer. The tension between Merton the hermit and Merton the exhibitionist was illustrated by the psychoanalyst Zilborg who told Merton: ‘You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying “HERMIT”’.³ I believe

that Merton's early life experiences and his relationship with his mother can, in part, help us to an understanding of some of these paradoxes.

Thomas Merton's childhood

Merton's early life history is well known and will not be described in detail here. In summary, he experienced considerable loss and trauma in his early life. He was orphaned by the age of fifteen. His maternal grandparents—to whom he was close—had both died by the time he was twenty two. He is thought to have fathered a child whilst he was at Cambridge University and his younger brother died in the Second World War.

It is sometimes assumed that Merton's early life was relatively stable and that his problems began after the death of his mother. However, I am doubtful about this and think that his early relationship with his mother was also problematic. It is my belief that, in addition to the deaths that he experienced, it is likely that Merton also experienced significant emotional neglect as a child.

Merton portrays his mother as being strict and severe: 'I remember mother as strict, stoical and determined ... she was practical'.⁴ In his autobiography he describes her as 'worried, precise, quick, critical of me, her son'.⁵ Basil Pennington comments that Merton's mother 'was determined to make of her son Tom a man who would stand on his own

two feet'.⁶ Robert Daggy states that Merton's mother was 'austere, dominating, demanding'.⁷

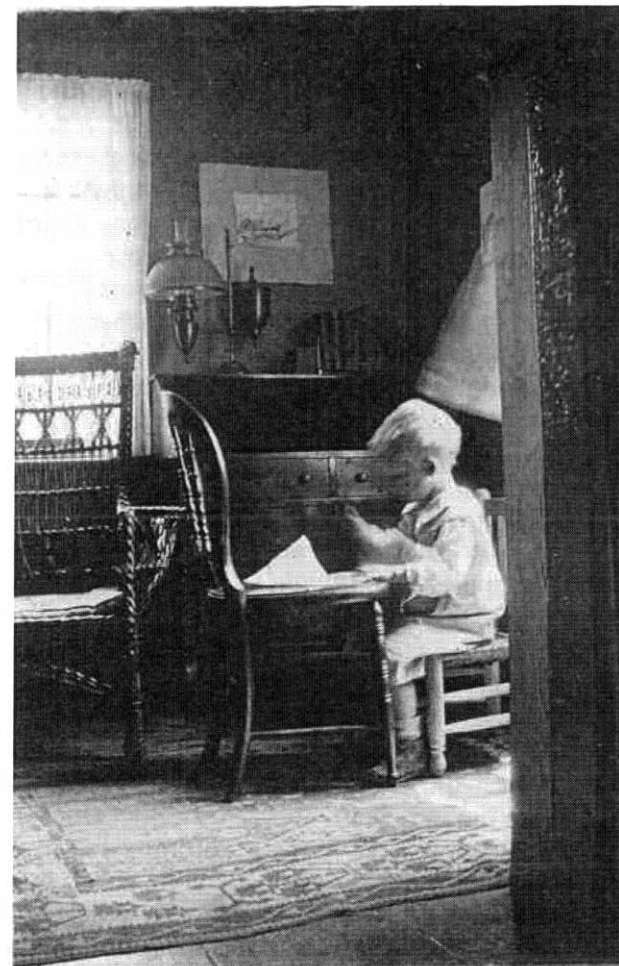
Merton's childhood was characterised by emotional neglect and extreme loss and grief. It does seem that his mother may have been severe and critical. Whilst his relationship with his father and grandparents seems to have had some warmth, his life following his mother's death was chaotic, neglectful and lonely. His childhood experiences are likely to have left him with a fear of abandonment, a sense of loneliness and alienation and a fear of trusting or relying on others.

Shame

Children who experience significant neglect or trauma are vulnerable to developing a deep sense of shame about themselves. Shame is different from guilt; guilt is more related to unacceptable behaviours whereas shame is an emotion about the self that is internalised. Guilt is about something we have done; shame is about who we are. Thus guilt might make someone feel: 'I have done a bad thing', whereas shame would make someone think 'I am a bad person'. (For a more detailed exploration of shame see the texts by Pattison⁸ and Walker.⁹)

I surmise that as Merton grew up he developed a deep sense of shame about himself. His shame might then have been intensified by the birth of a child when he was at Cambridge and his subsequent decision to abandon the child when he left Eng-

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Thomas Merton busy drawing as a small child in 1918

land to move to the USA. Merton himself seemed to acknowledge this when he wrote of his 'guilt and resentment at myself for having fled to America'.¹⁰

Merton's writings contain many examples of his shame. He is frequently highly self-critical. For instance, he says that, 'I do not find it at all hard to hate myself'.¹¹ In his

autobiography he wrote that he 'had turned out to be an extremely unpleasant sort of person—vain, self-centered, dissolute, weak, irresolute, undisciplined, sensual, obscene and proud. I was a mess. Even the sight of my own face in the mirror was enough to disgust me'.¹²

Other examples of when he writes of his shame are: 'One reason I have

not written to you is that I have been too ashamed of myself;¹³ 'I am childish, I am selfish, I love to gripe ... I will make a serious effort to grow up';¹⁴ 'My human nature, my weakness, and the cast of my evil habits still remained to be fought and overcome';¹⁵ 'I was really aware, at last, of what a poor, miserable thing I was';¹⁶ and 'my boasting and showing off and exulting in my own stupidity'.¹⁷ He frequently refers to himself as stupid, a classic expression of shame. For example, he says that 'the one thing that appals me is my own helplessness and stupidity'.¹⁸

In analytic terms, it could be said that he had internalised a critical maternal voice. He then came to treat himself the way he had been treated: critically and with a lack of compassion. What is striking about these comments that he made about himself is that, despite the fact that he had read widely about psychoanalysis, he remained lacking in compassion or understanding about himself.

I think that it is likely that Merton will have felt particular shame about his sexuality. His shame about his fathering a child at Cambridge and his seemingly playing no part in the child's upbringing is evident in the following statement that he made: 'Stab me with swords and shower my head with garbage at the horror and embarrassment I feel upon remembering Cambridge in May 1934'.¹⁹

Shame and becoming a monk

One potential response to shame is to withdraw and hide away from others. Flight is a normal reaction when people feel exposed and full of shame. This might include both a withdrawal from other people and a flight into silence.

It could be argued that Merton's motivation to become a monk was influenced, at least in part, by his shame. As the following quote shows, Merton at that stage of his life seemed to believe that by becoming a monk he would be freed from 'the burden of the flesh's tyranny':

There were still men on this miserable, noisy, cruel earth who tasted the marvellous joy of silence and solitude, who dwelt in forgotten mountain cells, in secluded monasteries where the news and desires and appetites and conflicts of the world no longer reached them. They were free from the burden of the flesh's tyranny.²⁰

Another passage is also illuminating:

I want to be as near as possible to nothing and nobody in the community—and everywhere else too—as a monk can possibly be. The reason for my wanting this is that I am altogether sick of myself and I want to do everything

that I can to cease existing as an ego outside of God.²¹

Merton seemed to believe that by becoming a monk he would be able to leave behind those aspects of himself which caused him shame, particularly the sins of the flesh. His motivation seems to have been, at least in part, a flight from the shame of his sexuality.

He first approached the Franciscans in his desire to become a monk. After he had shared with them some aspects of his past he was told that he was not a suitable candidate. It is possible that Merton had told them about his relationship at Cambridge and the fathering of a child. He could understand why he had been rejected: 'When I looked at myself in the light of this doubt, it began to appear utterly impossible that anyone in his right mind could consider me fit material for the priesthood'.²² However, Merton continued to be drawn to the monastic life and in time was accepted as a novice at Gethsemani.

Merton described in his autobiography how he became convinced that he should join a silent order: he describes how in his prayer he asked,

'God to let me know what I was going to do, or what I should do, or what the solution would be, by showing it to me in the Scriptures ... I made my prayer, and opened the book, and put my finger

down definitely on the page and said to myself: "Whatever it is, this is it". I looked, and the answer practically floored me. The words were: 'Ecce eris tacens.' 'Behold, thou shalt be silent'.²³

Merton was later to write about how silence can be a pathway to God and much of his contemplative life bore witness to that. However, silence can also have a more negative meaning which can be linked to shame: shame can have the effect of making people feel worthless and thus lead them to become silent and uncommunicative.

I would argue that part of Merton's motivation for choosing to join the Trappists was because it most closely mirrored the emotional severity of his childhood. In contrast he states that the Franciscan way of life was 'too easy going and worldly and relaxed for me'.²⁴ In joining the most austere of monastic orders Merton could be said to have been repeating a pattern of deprivation and neglect which had been his experience in early childhood: the deprived child becomes the self depriving adult. In later years, when his shame had decreased and his self esteem had grown, he recognised this. Shortly before he died he described his early life at Gethsemani as having 'something warped and inhuman about it ... hard, even unreasonably hard ... with a theology in some ways pathological... We carry deep

wounds that will prevent us from ever forgetting'.²⁵

In monastic life wearing the habit with a hood covering the head is symbolic of dying to oneself and being re-born in Christ. An additional meaning might be of hiding oneself and covering one's head in shame. It is interesting to note that the root of the word 'shame' derives from notions of covering, concealing and hiding. I suspect that this later meaning was part of the attraction for Merton.

Merton's writing

Merton was a prolific writer. In addition to the books, poems and journals that he wrote it is estimated that he also corresponded with over 2,000 people.²⁶ Merton was aware of the tension between his wish to live a solitary life and his compulsion to write:

By this time I should have been delivered of any problems about my true identity ... But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister. He is still on my track. He rides my shoulders, sometimes like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy? ... Maybe in the end he will kill me, he will drink my blood. Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.²⁷

Merton helps us to an understanding of this tension between writing and the contemplative life when he describes some of his writing as 'egotistical junk'.²⁸ The tension can be thought of as follows: writing can be motivated by ego whereas the contemplative life requires the letting go of ego and a surrender to God. Ego can interfere with surrender and hence with the contemplative life. Merton expresses this conflict clearly: 'How could I love God, when everything I did was done not for him but for myself, and not trusting in His aid, but relying on my own wisdom and talents?'²⁹ He was aware that his wish to be admired was a large part of his motivation in writing: 'For me communication is not communication but a narcissistic gesture of some sort at which I happen to be quite clever'.³⁰

Thus, one part of Merton wanted to be 'forgotten and unknown'³¹ while another part of him craved attention. He recognised this need for attention in himself: 'I still depend too much on being accepted and approved'.³² I think that writing played an important psychological function for him. It provided him with the admiration and affirmation that he did not receive in his childhood. Merton sums this up by saying that, 'I have acquired the power to be heard'.³³ Acquiring the power to be heard was important to him precisely because, I would argue, he had not felt heard as a child. The emotional neglect that he experienced when young meant that in

adult life he was trying to compensate for this, which he did largely through his writing.

The strength of his compulsion to write is illustrated when he describes it as being like an addiction. He ends a passage in which he has been talking about the demands that his writing places upon him by saying: 'The awful thing is that I can't stop'.³⁴

Merton acknowledged the psychological aspect of his writing when he said that it acted as 'a safety valve for my neurosis'.³⁵ In developmental terms the infant 'finds' himself in the eyes and face of his mother. If the mother responds to the infant with love and joy the infant will internalise a sense of being loveable and alive. If the mother is severe or depressed the infant will internalise a sense of deadness and unlovability. In a poem in response to Graham Greene, Merton likens Gethsemani to a dead mother:

You have written, Greene, in
your last book
The reasons why I so hate
milk
You have diagnosed the war
in my own gut
Against the innocence, yes,
against the dead mother
My famous refuge.³⁶

A recent book by Colm Toibin is entitled *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and their Families*.³⁷ However, I suspect that Merton wrote, not to kill his mother, but to find a

living mother. Rather than being a severe, dead mother, his readers became an interested, engaged and admiring audience. In this sense, Merton's readers could have been said to have been fulfilling the role of being a living, generous and encouraging mother.

Merton comments on the way in which writing and seeing himself in print helped him to feel real and alive: 'My chief concern was now to see myself in print. It was as if I could not be quite satisfied that I was real until I could feed my ambition with these trivial glories, and my ancient selfishness was now matured and concentrated in this desire to see myself externalised in a public and printed and official self which I could admire at my ease'.³⁸ Seeing himself in print helped him to feel alive and this perhaps countered his sense of an internalised dead mother.

Love for M

When Merton was fifty-one he went into hospital for a back operation. Whilst he was there he was cared for by a nurse, whom he refers to as M in his journals. Merton and M subsequently fell in love and I suggest that Merton's relationship with M was evidence of his increased ability to allow himself to love and be loved.

Early in his writings Merton speaks of his fear of intimacy: 'I spend most of my time rejecting everybody and telling myself that they are rejecting me'.³⁹ I believe

that this fear is linked with his shame: shame interferes with the capacity to love and be loved. The shame-filled person feels himself to be unlovable and unworthy of love. His fear of love was probably also a result of the many losses and abandonments that he experienced in his early life: to love risks loss and abandonment.

I would suggest that Merton was continuing the pattern that had begun in childhood in which he had to care for himself and not become dependent on anyone else. As he said: 'I don't cry on people's shoulders, I just pretend to because I think they like it ... I am probably too proud to cry on anybody's shoulder, yet at the same time I need to'.⁴⁰

I believe that whilst at Gethsemani this pattern of rejecting others and relying entirely on himself slowly began to change. In his journals Merton describes a series of dreams about women. These dreams display a development in which he increasingly becomes able to think of women, not as severe and depriving, but as loving, nurturing and caring.

In writing about M, Merton says: 'In her, I now realize, I had found something, someone, that I had been looking for all my life'.⁴¹ I would suggest that he was talking of love: of the experience of loving and being loved, of being loved by a warm, empathic woman.

Pennington describes Merton in his early days at Gethsemani as a

'world-despising young monk'.⁴² In despising the world, I think that he was transferring some of his highly critical views about himself on to the world. By becoming kinder and more compassionate to himself he was able to withdraw his projections onto the world and feel love and compassion, rather than criticism, towards the world. As his shame decreased he developed an increasing ability to allow himself to love.

This love for the world was expressed in an oft quoted passage: 'In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.⁴³ I believe that this experience was evidence of Merton's greatly reduced shame about himself and his ensuing ability to love and be loved.

Conclusion

Part of the appeal of Merton's writing is that the power and honesty with which he writes of his own struggles resonates for many of us in our own lives. Many of us can identify with his dilemmas and find comfort and inspiration in his writing. I think that Merton's life raises two important questions in terms of monastic vocations: is the choice of a celibate lifestyle based on a shame based flight from sexuality? Sec-

ondly, by choosing a contemplative life, is the person repeating a pattern of emotional neglect which was established early in life?

I suggest that Merton experienced emotional neglect as an infant and young child. He seems to have experienced his mother as being severe and 'dead'. The impact of this would have been compounded by the death of both his parents and his maternal grandparents. One of the consequences of this neglect and trauma was that he developed a strong sense of shame about himself in which he thought of himself as 'stupid' and unworthy of love. The birth of his child whilst he was at Cambridge and its subsequent abandonment when he moved to America could have intensified his sense of shame.

In choosing to join the Trappist Order, the strictest and most austere of monastic orders, he was treating himself severely, as his mother seems to have treated him. However, in time Gethsemani seems to have functioned as a secure base for him in which he felt safe and contained. His writing gave him an audience who admired him and helped his self-esteem to grow. Gradually his sense of shame diminished, he became kinder to himself and he developed the ability to allow himself to become close to others. He changed from being a 'pious, rigid, opinionated young monk into a vulnerable human being' with the capacity to love.⁴⁴ His love for M, whilst no doubt an extreme embar-

assment for his order and the Catholic Church, was evidence of an increased ability to allow himself to love and be loved.

In time Merton was able to give us a vision of the monastic and contemplative life that was based, not on shame and deprivation, but on love, trust and surrender. The young monk who was initially filled with hatred of himself and of the world was able to change and become full of love both for himself and for others. One of his final pieces of writing bears witness to this change:

Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen'.⁴⁵

Notes

1. *The Intimate Merton, His Life from his Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), p.76.
2. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, ed. William Shannon and Christine Bochen (New York: Lion Hudson, 2009), p.16.
3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p.297.
4. *The Intimate Merton*, p.190.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK Classics, 2009), p.5.
6. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, My Brother* (London: New City, 1996), p.19.
7. Robert Daggy, *Thomas Merton and the Search for Owen Merton* (Notre Dame: Ave Marie Press, 2003), p.32.
8. S. Pattinson, *Shame Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
9. J. Walker, 'The relevance of shame in child protection work', *The Journal of Social Work Practice*, Vol. 25, No.3, 2011.
10. *The Intimate Merton*, p.119.
11. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.131.
12. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.132.
13. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.17.
14. *ibid.*, p.72.
15. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.221.
16. *ibid.*, p.221.
17. *ibid.*, p.398.
18. *The Intimate Merton*, p.40.
19. *ibid.*, p.33.
20. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.316.
21. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.16.
22. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.296.
23. *ibid.*, p.334.
24. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.5.
25. *Thomas Merton, My Brother*, p.59.
26. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.viii.
27. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.410.
28. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.69.
29. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.236.
30. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.73.
31. *ibid.*, p.16.
32. *The Intimate Merton*, p.251.
33. *ibid.*, p.161.
34. *ibid.*, p.219.
35. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.68.
36. *ibid.*, p.71.
37. Colm Toibin, *New Ways to Kill your Mother* (New York: Scribner, 2012).
38. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.236.
39. *Thomas Merton, A Life in Letters*, p.69.
40. *ibid.*, p.73.
41. *The Intimate Merton*, p.294.
42. *Thomas Merton, My Brother*, p.26.
43. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), p.140.
44. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p.437.
45. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Patrick Hart, James Laughlin, Naomi Burton Stone (New York, New Direction Books, 1975), p.319.

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