'Work is a Prayer'
Merton and Manual Labour

Peter Ellis

Introduction

The well known passage about Gethsemani being the centre of America, the place that holds the country together, was written on 7 April 1941 when Merton made his week-long Easter retreat there.[1] The next day Merton developed the idea of Gethsemani as an earthly paradise. His argument was an interesting one about work. Monastic work, he wrote, is a 'complete metaphysical freedom from physical necessity that makes it, ontologically speaking, a kind of play'.[2] Work of course produces results – but Merton's argument was that it has produced a paradise at Gethsemani precisely because the monks who do the work are free of the necessity of doing it. Their work is like play in that in doing work they are detached from the outcome or product. Manual work changes everything, as Merton perceived: 'What a thing Mass becomes, in hands hardened by gruelling and sacrificial labor.'[3]

Merton may be echoing here Marx's thinking about work in terms of alienation from our real selves. Originally, Marx argued, specific tasks were unnamed and unallocated – we could hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening and criticize after dinner, but under capitalism we have lost a more natural relationship with work through ownership of its outcome or product by others.[4] Because we know of his flirting with Communism this was, for Merton, an intellectual commonplace. People produce but have been dispossessed of the product. This basic idea lay at the core of communism which was, as Marx said, 'the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence ... between freedom and necessity, between individual and species ... It is

the solution of the riddle of history.'[5]

Well, that turned out not to be the case. Wholly against Marx's vision, the idea of work, of universal labour as some sort of mystical panacea to the question of competing with capitalism, was introduced into the thinking of such as Stalin and Mao, resulting as we now know in the terrible death of millions. Marx's vision fired the idea that liberation from religious constraints allowed humans, the true creators, to enter into their inheritance. But in a bizarre twist these ideas saw the rise of labour as punishment across politics of the left and of the right, from the Soviet gulags to the slogan 'Arbeit macht frei' at the entrance to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, despite all this, Marxist ideas about work and alienation also entered more generally into philosophy, creating new radical strands which have, in my opinion, changed our general ways of thinking for the better.

Merton's thoughts about Gethsemani and work on 8 April 1941 retained the core centrality of work – of ordinary manual labour – in our lives, but he displaced the muscular triumphant humans as depicted in the posters of the Third International and of Mao's Great Leap Forward, or in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*, and gave us instead ordinary searching human beings like ourselves. Of course Merton was in an elevated state of mind during his retreat at Gethsemani but I see his thoughts as making an important contribution to our recovery of the meaning of work in our lives.

The next day Merton dissected the whole process of having an idea, like the one about why Gethsemani was a paradise, and of how that initial idea falls apart but then works its way through us. He wrote:

> We think we possess some idea; then, by a series of accidents, through a long desert of difficulties, we come upon little scraps of intuition and dialectic with great labor, and all these are only part of the same old idea. But we never begin to understand the idea really well until this arduous and discouraging process also is under way. And in this, we are really living that idea, working it out in our lives, in the manner appropriate to our own sad contingent and temporal state where nothing is possessed but in scraps and pieces, imperfectly, successively.[6]

This thought from that first retreat at Gethsemani, as Merton foretold,

was to work itself out in him over the next decades; and his own manual work in the monastic daily round was a vital part of that slow laborious process. The development of the idea years later is one of the gifts he has left us.

Work – an Historical Perspective

Marx's writings on labour turned the basis of the European west on its head. For the European west, work over the last two millennia was something done by the lower classes, the doing of manual work defining the person at the bottom of the heap. This goes back to the classical view that working was not compatible with civilised thought.[7] Those who work with their hands were therefore necessarily below a level of concern about what they thought or felt. Work barred them from any possibility of self-awareness, of art, of reflexive thinking, of culture, of participating in civilisation. There is the story of the emperor Domitian hearing of a Jewish family from whence the ruler of the world was to spring, who sent for them in alarm, but quickly dismissed them when he saw that they had the hands of working people. From classical times until quite recently everyone was positioned in orders of power and patronage. Who you depended on and who depended on you made up the totality of your world. Working with your hands increased as you went down the vertical scale from a life of leisure at the top to endless manual labour at the bottom.

In modern times revolutions have overthrown the vertical hierarchy, but the basis remains in the allocation of manual work to a class simply named the 'working' class.

But there is another strand that says that manual work is an essential part of being human, one that runs through Judaism and Christianity. The parallel story to that of Domitian is that of the Rabbi who stood waiting at the gate of Rome confident that the Messiah would only be found there coming in with the poor and destitute. This is the strand that inspired the Benedictine monastic rule which Merton followed at Gethsemani, committing the monk to a life of manual labour both in the day to day running of the community indoors and to working in the fields outside. This simple, backward-looking and ascetic impulse, the desire that underlies all Christian yearnings to follow Jesus' words and live the Gospel, was what Merton and so many others followed and continue to follow.

Of course it would be a mistake to idealise manual work, but

nevertheless this distinction of whether or not we work physically can be seen as absolutely central to our cultural heritage. By choosing to follow the view that manual work is demeaning to the higher life, and so to separate thinking from working, we have fed the mind/body divide that has fired both our creativity and our destructiveness ever since. This is the world that Merton escaped from and that from which we too are now emerging, as more and more of us reject dualistic thought and modernity's devotion to the idea of the central primacy of the mind.

Merton's Response to Work

Merton loved outdoor work at Gethsemani, declaring it: 'one of the things that makes me happiest' [8] and exclaiming 'Manual labor!! What has been most lacking in my monastic life.' [9] Further examples can be selected from his journal entries. In 1947, spreading manure, he was 'so happy I was ready to laugh out loud'.[10] In 1948, of picking apples he could write that 'the best thing of all is that at last I can get out to work'.[11] Breaking rock the same year he 'let a few phantasms fly away into the trees' [12], and digging mud out of a ditch gave him a 'big blister on the palm of my hand' but 'everything was beautiful'.[13] This was also the year when he went out and blessed the fields along with the calves, pigs, sheep, chickens and rabbits.[14] In 1958, cutting grass, he 'enjoyed sweating and getting tired with a scythe yesterday'.[15] In 1959, picking up hay, 'I thought "this is all you need" '.[16] In 1960 cutting brush with the novices and the professed brothers was 'a joyous occasion'.[17] In 1965 he described splitting logs as 'very good for me'.[18] Other outdoor tasks he recorded were hoeing, raking leaves, turning hay, harvesting and storing the corn, clearing ground, burning brush, planting vegetables; and for his forestry work in the latter decades, sawing planks, planting saplings, felling trees, spraying young trees and chopping wood. He mocked any heroic features about his work, and in the same year he recorded that, felling trees with an axe, 'today at work I nearly cut off both my legs'.[19] And then there was the time two years later when he took the jeep out on his own, never having driven before, and after many adventures returned it and stood in the choir at Vespers dizzy with the thought 'I have been driving the jeep'. But Father Cellarer 'just made me a sign that I must never, never under any circumstances, take the jeep out again'.[20]

In contrast, indoor work is something Merton wrote little about. He often noted when it was his turn for the various monastic roles but details are few: waxing the floor, serving the food, dusting the chapel are

the sum of it. In his talk to the novices about work discussed below, talking about his working in the refectory, he pictured a brother monk putting his elbows into some strawberries 'because I got strawberries all over the table which he doesn't see'.[21] This seems so specific that it may have happened. Perhaps in passing over indoor work in his journals Merton was unconsciously downplaying 'housework' as not real manual labour.

In the *Sign of Jonas* Merton developed some of his journal entries more profoundly. In 1941 he repeated his initial idea of it as a kind of play, stating that 'work in the fields helps contemplation'.[22] In 1949 Merton discussed the chapter in Ecclesiasticus where farmers, and by implication monks under the Rule of Benedict, 'pray that their work will turn out successfully and they do not have a higher end – but it seems to me one could also take it to mean that their work is a prayer'.[23] In 1951 he admitted to feeling upset after spending the day breaking rock with a sledge hammer but went on to discuss the monks' feelings about penances, that they enabled God 'to take undisturbed possession of the soul'.[24] This is a really interesting point: God, Merton suggested, is able to approach us more easily when we are most in our bodies and least in our heads. The God who is able to approach us, Merton wrote, 'when we are uncomfortable and hot' is God 'at rest'. Also in 1951 Merton talked of outdoor work and its conditions as 'our spiritual directors and our novice masters. They form our contemplation. They instil us with virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in.' [25] The next year he wrote about prayer that 'when you are doing some work ... then you are paradoxically much more free to pray'.[26]

Another theme about work running through the journal entries was that it was becoming more mechanised and more alienating. So, instead of cutting and gathering the corn sheaves by hand as in his first years, by 1949 there was a combine harvester and all the monks had to do is 'to cut a few stalks that have blown down and are lying too low for the monster to cut with its knives'.[27] The same year produced the D-4 Traxcavator and ditches were no longer cleared by hand.[28] Also, by then, pesticides presumably were make hoeing redundant. Throughout the 1950s he bemoaned the noise of the machines and the commercialisation of the farm including the Gethsemani advertising strapline in 1959: 'Many porkers are called but few are chosen.' [29] In 1963 Merton greeted a new machine 'looking like an Ohio riverboat ... what is it? an atomic powered river gun-boat? an agricultural pagoda? can be heard a mile away chews

up grass and leaves it shredded – what for?' [30] What happened at Gethsemani, of course, happened all over North America and much of Western Europe. Our poet/monk was witness to it from the point of the view of the actual worker in the field, and is among the few authentic voices we can hear from these decades of radical change. Merton was one of the last people in North America to have hoed a field, stacked corn sheaves in stooks, one of the last to do things in the age-old way.

The fact that Gethsemani suffered the same changes that had swept away the old order of things everywhere else in the West played a major part in the collapse of the vision of Gethsemani as an earthly paradise that Merton had experienced in 1941, as everywhere the new buildings that went up at the monastery imposed their depressing presence for him. Already by 1947 Merton criticised them: 'the best buildings are the Hog House and the horse barn.' [31] By 1958 he was talking about the new chapel as looking like 'a semi-genteel cocktail lounge'.[32]

Merton and the Shakers

Merton's engagement with the meaning of work continued. A major development of the idea from the 1941 retreat came 23 years later in 1964 when Merton spoke about work and the Shakers at a conference for the novices.[33] By the 1960s the empty standing buildings of the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill had come to replace the Gethsemani of 1941 as his vision of paradise on earth. The deceptively simple talk to the novices was the fruit of all his own manual work as much as of analysis of the Shakers. The talk focused on what Shaker work might have to tell monastics directly rather than being solely an exploration of the Shaker way of seeing and being. It started with underlining how the Shakers had returned to the way of working that Marx had praised where everyone had four or five trades. The same idea governed Benedict's emphasis in the Rule on rotating tasks so no one should get attached to a single trade. Merton then made the point that everyone in the monastic life 'should have something that he is really good at and he really put their hearts into, he does it, and that is well done and is part of his life of prayer'.[34] He emphasised that what is a penance is not doing work but not doing it well – even if what is done well is just an individual's best effort rather than a major skill. Next Merton turned on its head the monastic idea that work is for the good of the monk. Instead he advised that when they work, they follow the Shakers and think about the work and look for its needs

'almost as a mother considers a child'. The monk is there for the good of the work not vice versa. So they (and we) should ask ourselves: What does the work want? What do the materials used need? What do the objects around us need? What kind of thing is being brought into being?[35] This would lead on to nurturing the conscience of the worker, a conscience that attends to the primacy of the moment of work and that looks for the truth of a thing and sees it in its use. He noted that Shaker objects are subtly different from each other and suggested that this is because each one is made to relate to a specific place, a specific room, where it would stand in relationship to other objects.[36] Merton intuited here something very important about how things are not just our products but, like us, come to exist in relationship with each other in the same way as the elements of the natural world.

Merton then returned to what the monk might receive from work, quoting the Shaker maxim, 'Labour until you bring your spirits to feel satisfied', as an invitation to see work as art which Merton defined as 'the right reason for making a thing'.[37] His definition of art here was determinedly grounded in the everyday. For us, seeing this connection between the conscience of the worker and the object, and then seeing the subsequent social life of things, tends to be limited to the rectangle of high accomplishment and other worldly traces that we call 'art' and bind within a frame in a gallery. Thereby we miss that aspect of reality which appeared so frequently in his letters and journals when he described the world around him in such immediate and striking terms – as though it was a work of art. This is a passive not an active attribute: 'What's involved here then is a certain inner satisfaction, an inner peace that comes from conforming your mind to the truth that is asked for in the thing outside.'[38]

Throughout the talk Merton argued that work remains connected to prayer and to God. He had to wrestle with the inner reluctance he sensed in the novices to let go of the concept that mundane work separated them from God, thus making them feel guilty if they became too involved with their work. He urged the monks to recognise that work is linked with contemplation – having things done right makes the contemplative life easier. What the Shakers exemplify is this connectedness of the spiritual and the worldly. Their houses and objects take on their spiritual aura because making them was attended to on a level of meaning far distant from the utilitarian. Finally Merton told the novices that for the Shakers, 'as a result of careful work a man would gain

a gift ... so we should also aim to gain a gift through our work'.[39] The gift was not a material one but the gift, as Merton put it casually, of 'something like simplicity or humility or something like that'. It is interesting that Merton ended with this Christian emphasis on what has been called the aspiration downward taught by Jesus – it is often in throwaway asides that Merton hides his truest thoughts.[40] For the novices all this would have been far distant from the traditional view of work as essentially involving penances and perhaps also rousing feelings of inadequacy and guilt. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote about surviving the summer heat at Gethsemani and how this was the season that saw many of the novices leaving.[41] How many of them came from farms where work would have been a constant demand from childhood, unlike Merton for whom Gethsemani was a saving gift? Yet we can be sure that when Merton gave his talk on the Shakers he was aware of how radical his words were, and this was because of his immersion in work over the decades at Gethsemani. He knew what he was talking about. Of course the idea of penance remained, for manual labour must involve humility; but Merton stressed how, for the Shakers, it was seeing the product of their work as having an aesthetic and ethical dimension that allowed the term 'manual labour' to change into the more meaningful term 'working with one's hands'. It is the latter that has produced, until the modern era of mass production, the objects that surround us as things consciously striven for. But working with our hands has also unconsciously produced landscapes – hedges, fields and tracks, and townscapes – buildings and the public spaces they lie in, so that we live in effect in unintended spaces which are the products of many generations. These conscious and unconscious elements combined in the Shakers. As Merton wrote in a letter to Edward Andrews:

> The Shakers remain as witnesses to the fact that only humility keeps man in communion with truth, and first of all with his own inner truth. This one must know without knowing it, as they did. For as soon as a man becomes aware of 'his truth' he lets go if it and embraces an illusion.[42]

The idea of paradise on earth had now, sadly, been transferred from Gethsemani to a place empty of people, the abandoned Shakertown. One might think the original idea had died, but the focus had shifted from places to people. Now that Merton had abandoned the static and

grandiose picture of Gethsemani as sustaining America, the idea could really come to life. Instead of work and place, the emphasis could now be on work and ourselves, and on using it to attain that humility that 'keeps man in communion with truth, and first of all with his own inner truth'.[43] Work, existence and spiritual meaning could now come together.

The Influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty may have influenced Merton's talk on the Shakers and given it its surprising depth. In 1963 Merton read, in French, his *In Praise of Philosophy* [44] and in 1964 his *Signs*[45]. A journal entry in 1963 quoted approvingly Merleau-Ponty's statement that 'Nothing can be explained by way of man', and that he was a 'radical and welcome discovery – he is like Zen'.[46] A few days later Merton noted Merleau-Ponty's words, 'I am myself as I exist in the world'.[47] Realising that this was the exact opposite of what he had been thinking for 20 years, he now said 'I agree with him profoundly' and asked 'What is with me? What am I *in*?' He also noted with approval Merleau-Ponty's vision that 'The interior and the exterior are inseparable. The world is created from within and I am always outside myself'.[48] And then, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is 'a living instrument of its own life, *making sense*, by all its acts, of the world in which it is. The whole body is art and full of art.' Merton called all this 'a deeply (religious) spiritual concept!!'[49]

Why was Merleau-Ponty important for Merton's understanding of the Shakers and of manual labour? To him our beings are centred on our bodies in the world and so the way to perceive the world is through living and acting in it – working is the royal road to knowing our being. Scientific observation stands back from the world, analyses it objectively, and sees ultimately what it wants to see, but the world only reveals itself to us when we engage with it, when we literally and figuratively get our hands dirty with it. Merton's response to Merleau Ponty's questions 'What is with me?' and 'What am I *in*?' captured the essence of the philosopher's thought. It is a way of seeing the world anew not from that analytical distance but from within it and so being struck by its mystery. It was this realisation of our embededness in creation that fired St Francis. What is revealed is very often opened up to our passive selves rather than to our questing intelligence. Our pre-reflective unconscious world is lodged, according to Merleau-Ponty, in our bodies and so our full sense of meaning contains more than what we think or are conscious of

now – we are, though we don't conceptually know it, already open to other creatures and to the life of things. Merton's ecological vision shows us how closely he identified with the former, and his talk on the Shakers to the latter. This leads us to a mysterious sense of being on the edge of something much more.[50]

All this is what communal work with our hands can sometimes surprisingly reveal. Then we are understanding with all our senses – tasting and smelling sweat, hearing anew, seeing close at hand not at a distance as we concentrate on the work, and especially connecting with the world and with one another through touch. It is the great antidote to the modern concentration on the visual. Merton recalled the moments when the monks stopped work at the end of the long summer afternoons and remained for a while fully sensory beings. He wrote: '... when the undermaster claps his hands for the end of work, and you ... take off your hat to wipe the sweat out of your eyes, in the stillness you realize how the whole valley is alive with the singing of crickets.'[51] His love for his fellow monks was surely born as much from working with them as from sharing the liturgical daily and yearly round. Thus although the vision of paradise on earth disintegrated – as he predicted in 1941 in his realisation of our sad and contingent state – he came, through manual labour, to share himself with the world and let the world take its share of him. In this Merton's study of the Shakers and of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of being opened important windows for him.

Conclusion

Abraham Heschel wrote that the purpose of prayer is not to know God but to *be known* to him and to sense his presence.[52] He wrote about mitzvah, a sacred act, a prayer in the form of a deed.[53] This concept, bringing together our own interior thoughts and exterior acts, our relationship through action with others, and our relationship through prayer with an active God, seems to encapsulate what manual labour might give us if rescued from its lowly status. Merton intuited something very important about the mind/body split in that April retreat in 1941. He saw that it was wrong that the mind demands that work should be subordinate to the mind and should produce outcomes that are logical and conceptually explicable. He saw that a place – Gethsemani – had by chance come to act very forcibly on him, and that it was there because it was a result of work undertaken by monks whose minds were on God. He then embodied this intuition, this mitzvah, in his life to let it become a

living idea about work. That way he became known to God and received the gift that the Shakers saw that came from a person's work, 'the gift of simplicity or humility, or something like that.'

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, Journals Vol 1, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 333.
2. *Run to the Mountain*, p. 336.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1948), p. 388.
4. T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel, *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 111.
5. *Karl Marx*, p. 250.
6. *Run to the Mountain*, p. 339.
7. For an examination of how work and labour have been understood throughout Western history see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
8. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer*, Journals Vol 2, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 253.
9. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, Journals Vol 3, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 315.
10. *Entering the Silence*, p. 38.
11. *Entering the Silence*, p. 233.
12. *Entering the Silence*, p. 158.
13. *Entering the Silence*, p. 199.
14. *Entering the Silence*, pp. 203-4.
15. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 212.
16. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 300.
17. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 371.
18. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, Journals Vol 5, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 298.
19. *Entering the Silence*, p. 38.
20. *Entering the Silence*, pp. 387-8.
21. Thomas Merton, *Seeking Paradise, The Spirit of the Shakers*, ed. P.M. Pearson (New York: Orbis, Maryknoll, 2003), p. 100.
22. *Entering the Silence*, p. 45.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 212.
24. *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 312.
25. *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 313.
26. *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 334.

27. *Entering the Silence*, p. 371.
28. *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 201.
29. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 339.
30. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, Journals Vol 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 337.
31. *Entering the Silence*, p. 151.
32. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 212.
33. For a transcript of the complete talk see *Seeking Paradise*, pp. 90-105.
34. *Seeking Paradise*, pp. 91-2.
35. *Seeking Paradise*, pp. 94-5.
36. *Seeking Paradise*, pp. 96-100.
37. *Seeking Paradise*, pp. 100-1.
38. *Seeking Paradise*, p. 101.
39. *Seeking Paradise*, p. 105.
40. For a recent exploration of these ideas see Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), which, though fiercely secular, is an excellent exploration of what our modern townscapes lack.
41. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 468-9.
42. Edward Deming Andrews (1894-1964) was a leading scholar and expert on the Shakers. This letter is dated Dec 21, 1961. See *Seeking Paradise*, p. 113-4.
43. *Seeking Paradise*, p. 113.
44. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans J. Wild *et al.* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ Press, 1988).
45. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs,* trans and introduction R.C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern Univ Press, 1964).
46. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 47.
47. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 48. Merton quotes the original French: 'Je suis à moi au étant au monde.'
48. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 48.
49. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 63.
50. In his reading of Merleau-Ponty Merton noted this sense of being on the edge of understanding something but not quite grasping it, and asked why speech should necessarily force us to be comprehensible (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 61-2.). Textual ambiguity exasperates the Anglo-Saxon mind but is shared by European thought and, of course, by mystical writers.
51. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 471.
52. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Quest for God, Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 10.
53. *Quest for God*, p. 69.

Peter Ellis was one of the editors of the Society's recent *Universal Vision*, and has contributed papers to previous TMS conferences. He is now exploring Merton's response to the French existentialist intellectuals of the 1940s to 1960s.