

Living in the 'unliveable' world

Fiona Gardner

Introduction

Ernesto Cardenal's work *To Live is to Love* is a series of meditations written whilst a novice monk at Gethsemani from 1957-1959. Thomas Merton, then master of novices, wrote the introduction, and in this Merton writes that Cardenal's reflections invite us to really look at the world around us:

The lucid and 'Franciscan' simplicity of Father Cardenal shows us the world not as we see it, with fear and distrust in our hearts, but as it is in reality. Love is not a dream. It is the basic law.... Love is life itself in its state of maturity and perfection.¹

This loving world is contrasted with a world that Dorothy Day called the 'rotten, decadent, putrid industrial capitalist system' with its usual payoffs, constraints, and rewards of business-as-usual.² For both Merton and Cardenal this is a world in crisis where everywhere violence threatens and where there is what Merton calls 'immense rottenness'. He writes of the US as 'mad with hatred, frustration, stupidity, confusion. That there should be such ignorance and stupidity in a civilised land is just incomprehensible.'³

However, it is not about comparing the good love-infused world of the monastery with the bad hateful world outside, for paradoxically, over the two years of his novitiate, it became clear that it was not physically possible for Cardenal to continue to live at Gethsemani. As Merton writes, whilst Cardenal was 'a good poet, a good artist and one of the few genuine contemplatives in the place', the life was giving him 'headaches and ulcers.... [T]his so-called contemplative monastery ruins real

contemplatives, or makes life unbearable for them.'⁴ The creative life of love turned out also to be destructive. For Cardenal the monastic life at Gethsemani was unliveable. Merton, too, had many critiques of the Gethsemani world, chronicling his restlessness, his dissatisfactions, his desire to find a better monastery, a quieter monastic order, or to be somewhere more challenging.

When Cardenal left Gethsemani and re-entered the world he was shocked and dismayed by what he found, and wrote back to Merton that '[the world] is a living hell,' that 'my experience of the world is that it is unliveable.'⁵ It was a communication that Merton reported to the other novices, and that 'they received it with awe.'⁶ In this paper I am going to take Cardenal's phrase, 'the world is unliveable', as a koan. I shall look at what a koan is, and what it demands as a spiritual practice before looking at some of the experiences of Cardenal and Merton. Finally, I shall take one contemporary dilemma that we are all experiencing – the climate emergency where for many the world is or is becoming unliveable – and how we can live with the awareness of that terrible contradiction.

The koan - baffling language, pointing to ultimate truth

The renowned eighteenth century Zen master Hakuin remarked that we must come to regard all of existence as one great koan – in other words 'a formulation, in baffling language, pointing to ultimate truth'.⁷ Koans cannot be solved by logical reasoning but only by awakening a deeper level of the mind beyond the intellect. In the koan are two opposite concepts, a paradox; the phrase is a meeting of opposites that cannot be resolved by reasoning. The purpose of the koan is to disclose through the subversion of logic, the 'ultimate truth' that lies beyond the opposites in what has been referred to as the no-man's land of spiritual freedom beyond all conceivable dualisms.

McCort defines koans as 'supra-logical spiritual projects to be worked on full-time. Even when ... not formally meditating, the koan continues to resonate sometimes just below consciousness, suffusing every thought, word, and behaviour with what has been termed its impenetrable mystery.'⁸ It draws one's attention to something we have but might not have valued. The Zen masters tell us that it is worth struggling with partly because we have to learn to live with all sorts of contradictions, and to resolve one contradiction is to resolve them all, since the distinction between the one and the many is itself a delusion.

There are also plenty of Western koans to struggle with – some in the

bible. For example: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Or William Blake:

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.⁹

The way out of the paradox that itself causes mental suffering, leads through further suffering; in other words, the way out of one's own mind leads more deeply into, and not away from, the trap of trying to work it out. It is partly then a lesson in understanding one's limitations and a letting-go of one's position, 'indeed one's very world'. Renouncing one's conceptions is to stand in 'darkness', and out of this comes insight where all contradictions are resolved. This is not just a personal quietist endeavour. Hakuin urged meditating in your daily life in midst of distractions: 'Just as you cannot learn to swim in the ocean by sitting in a tub, you cannot relate your Zen to the world's pressures, stress, and tensions if it is forever sheltered in silent, lonely isolation'.¹⁰

Cardenal's and Merton's experiences

For Cardenal the life at Gethsemani led to periods of increasingly incapacitating ill-health, which meant that with such physical and emotional suffering he could not stay. Merton in a letter to Cardenal, after he had left in July 1959, tries to help him understand:

You came here under ideal conditions, and everything was of a nature to make you happy and give you peace. You had given yourself completely to God without afterthought and without return, and He on His part had brought you to a place where the life was unexpectedly easy and pleasant.... The first real cross you met with, in your response to God's call, was the necessity to *leave* this monastery, under obedience, after having been told that it was not God's will for you to stay here.... It is a step in your spiritual maturity, and that is why it is difficult for you.¹¹

In a letter to Merton, Cardenal laments having to leave, and experiences

mental suffering from the day of his departure:

When I arrived in Louisville, I went to a restaurant to eat some sandwiches because it was already noon, but as soon as I opened the door, I turned around and left, horrified by the earthshaking jukebox music. It was horrible, and so loud, that I thought it better to starve to death than to eat with that music. From the outside, behind the glass windows, there appeared to be a profound silence, but the inside was hell. I decided to enter another restaurant, but only after reassuring myself that there would be no music; but just as soon as I ordered my food, the jukebox began to blare. I had no choice but to resign myself. In this, I have seen a preview of the world. From the stillness of the monastery, it can appear to be calm and serene, but once we enter, it is a living hell.

In the same letter he writes:

I have no desire to return to the world.... I cannot live in the world because I do not belong to it.... [T]he world is a truly horrible and inhospitable place.... On the street, there are only shops, restaurants, and movie theaters. Wherever you fix your eyes, all you see are ads for sex and food. There is nothing more boring ... once you have lost all interest in such things.

There were many moments in Gethsemani when I thought that our lives were monotonous, but there is no comparison between that exterior monotony, which is accompanied by a very intensive internal life, and the horrid monotony of modern city streets – all horrifically identical with absolutely nothing interesting to do.¹²

Merton knows that the world of the monastery often appears so attractive and alluring but that there is always the shadow. At times Merton questions the institution of Gethsemani, describing it in 1967 to Cardenal as 'just confused, too big, lacks real cohesion and spirit, and leaves a lot of individuals just hopelessly running around looking for something – they don't know what.'¹³ Earlier, back in 1959, he writes that whilst life in the monastery is 'a pleasant and harmless existence', there is also a 'sense of nullity and falsity that underlies the façade'. He urges

Cardenal, who had just left Gethsemani, to trust in God to lead him towards what Merton describes as 'a new and strange reality':

Your life now will be serious and even sad. This is as it should be. We have no right to escape into happiness that most of the world cannot share. This is a very grim and terrible century, and in it we must suffer sorrow and responsibility with the rest of the world.¹⁴

For both monks, the world within the monastery walls and the world beyond the walls can feel liveable and then unliveable, depending on each one's own emotional equilibrium and state of mind. Thoughts create the feelings which then affect perceptions. So, for example, Merton has *his* contrasting experiences of the world outside the walls, namely in Louisville. We read of his Fourth and Walnut experience where he felt connected to the human race and thrilled by the 'incomprehensible beauty' of the women he saw. Yet in contrast a few months later Merton is appalled by what he sees there:

The overwhelming welter of meaningless objects, goods, activities – The indiscriminate chaotic nest of 'things' good, bad and indifferent, that pour over you at every moment – books, magazines, food, drink, women, cigarettes, clothes, toys, cars, drugs. [*note here that Merton on this visit classes women as things*]

I thought that never, never could I make sense of life outside the monastery. I am a solitary and that is that. I love people o.k., but I belong in solitude.¹⁵

It is in silence and solitude that Merton finds his psycho-spiritual equilibrium – where the opposites are held in balance. Although restless and at times questioning his vocation at Gethsemani, Merton states: 'Being out "in the world" would really be nothing and an awful waste. The "waste" of one's life in a monastery is the fruitful thing; or at least it is for me.'¹⁶

The suffering remains, that at any one time the world – wherever and whatever that world is – is liveable, but can then feel unliveable. In wrestling with such a paradox one Rinzai Zen master put it like this: '[You must reach the point where you feel] as though you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot disgorge despite your every effort.'¹⁷

However, this sense of entrapment by the issue, or being repeatedly disturbed by it, the sense of feeling utterly unable either to advance towards it or to retreat from it, whilst at the same time compelled to do *something*, is fertile ground for the lightening flash of insight.

When insight comes

According to Zen teaching, struggling with apparent opposites involves giving up the belief that the paradox can be resolved through reason. Then solving the koan constitutes a process of dying – giving up one's most fundamental thinking or rather seeing it for what it is and how it formulates feelings. Stripped of such security, and realising one does not exist as this or that there is freedom. As McCort puts it: 'once released from being something in particular, one is free to be everything without exception.'¹⁸

We can read how Merton resolved such a paradox in his own life - his opposing feelings about joining Cardenal in Nicaragua. In early correspondence Merton writes: 'I think there is considerable hope of a really constructive answer and solution to everything.'¹⁹ Both are highly invested in the idea, but the initial plans come to nothing. There is then an idea for a place on an island on Lake Nicaragua. This foundation would be rooted in the Indian and Latin cultural complex.

Merton expresses his longing in late October 1959:

I just want to look and learn and be quietly receptive for a very long time, and become integrated in the whole cultural atmosphere.... It is not a question of building a great edifice, but of living a simple life and preserving as much as possible the values we already have found.²⁰

In December 1959, Merton writes to Cardenal to explain that he has been refused permission to leave Gethsemani:

I can only accept and obey. ... I can only wait in darkness and in faith... I received the decision of Rome without emotion and without the slightest anger. I accept it completely in faith, and feel a great interior liberty and emptiness in doing so. This acceptance has completely liberated me from Gethsemani, which is to me no longer an obstacle or a prison, and to which I am indifferent.... I know we will always be united in prayer, and I assure you of all my affection and the joy I have had in our association.²¹

It seems that at this point Merton's view that the world of the monastery is at times unliveable has been transcended, interestingly through his vow of obedience. There has been a letting go of the struggle about going with Cardenal; the insight leads to something new and unexpected, so that later Merton can write:

For my own part, in strange unforeseen ways I have suddenly found myself in a kind of hermitage. ... My life is one of deepening contradictions and frequent darkness, the chief effect of which is to produce much interior solitude. I try as far as I can to see and do God's will, which certainly leads to solitude.²²

He counsels Cardenal:

Things cannot help sometimes being filled with anguish.... Life is never in any way as simple as it ought to be: there are so many conflicts, not between good people and bad only but between the good and the good. This is worse, and produces unending confusion. We must seek peace in the underlying simplicity that is beyond conflict: and here we seek the naked presence of God in apparent nothingness. If only we find Him, the emptiness becomes perfectly full, and the contradictions vanish. But in order to do this we must be faithful to a will that is inscrutable, which does not reveal itself in simple and clear-cut decisions as we would like to think.²³

This conflict arises again a few years later towards the end of 1965 when Cardenal visits Gethsemani, and urges Merton to come to the Solentiname community on Lake Nicaragua. Once again, in his journal, we can read how Merton grapples with opposing thoughts. If he goes, he would be participating in the love of Christ, '*true agape*', in contrast to 'being simply held in cold storage here'. On the other hand Merton lists some of the arguments against going including the question of dysentery, his stomach problems, a book to finish, and needing more time to explore the solitary life as a hermit at Gethsemani. But among the advantages he lists 'exile – poverty – solitude – risk greater simplicity' and 'contact with abandoned and primitive people – reparation for sins of colonial isolation and injustice to the Indians, etc.'²⁴ But could he live in that world? Merton ruminates further: 'Last month I had an attack of what was practically

dysentery. I decided it was no use even thinking of going to Nicaragua, ... but today a letter came urging me to come anyway.'²⁵ Merton is faced with two opposing options – both 'unliveable worlds': Merton reaches a third position: 'I decided I would maintain my consent and trust completely in God. ... And I resolved not to play around with my imagining of Solentiname – good or bad – but simply to pray that I may do God's will whatever that is.'²⁶ Through faith he transcends the struggle, yet the dilemma continues. The following year when Merton concludes neither the situation at Gethsemani nor going to Lake Nicaragua is satisfactory – both worlds seem unliveable – he reaffirms his position in a letter to Cardenal: 'More and more I see that there is no hope whatever but in God. Everything else fails us completely.'²⁷

Our contemporary koan – the world is unliveable

So to the present day where our world is, or is rapidly becoming, unliveable through the destruction we have inflicted. The despair and suffering has the added aspect that, although the situation of the earth's destruction is clear through logical, rational scientific facts, humanity appears irrationally, illogically and absurdly unable to halt the path to its own destruction. Here is a dangerous paradox that leads to no-life. Merton's prophetic statement is entirely appropriate: 'The world situation becomes more hazardous at every moment because of the incompetence and the irrationality of all men and the subjection of the powerful to the instruments of their power.'²⁸ In a letter to Catherine de Hueck, Merton writes how the state of the world grips us and will not set us free: 'We must realize that the tyranny of worldly power today holds people precisely by continual anguish and torments them with insecurity, in order every day to get a little better grip. ... One must weep for the world, like Staretz Silouane, whom I love as you do. One must even, as he did, keep our souls in hell without despairing'²⁹ – in itself another koan.

The Zen Buddhist Philip Kapleau writes that to breakthrough into insight means that all conceptions of what one presumes to know of the way the world works are to be renounced. And thus one stands in darkness and despair – the more oppressive the dilemma, the more favourable the conditions for true insight, for the mystical breakthrough. As it is said in Zen: 'The grand round mirror of wisdom is as black as pitch.'³⁰

The solution to any koan is an accommodation of the opposites that takes us into a deeper consciousness than the logico-rational, insight grounded in experience, that leads us into a universal mystical truth. We

then experience a different level of consciousness. In the words of the writer Tom Robbins: 'I believe life is a Zen koan, that is, an unsolvable riddle. But the contemplation of that riddle - even though it cannot be solved - is, in itself, transformative. And if the contemplation is of high enough quality, you can merge with the divine.'³¹ Then one sees directly into the truth of Reality and confronts a world which is new and yet not at all new.

Letting go of the anguish over climate disaster does not mean one stops changing one's behaviour or stops campaigning, but allows a letting-in of the meditative mind from which detached action arises. In February 1966 Jim Forest wrote to Merton with a sense of weary desperation, in a 'bleak mood', asking what more could *he* do. Merton's response is that bleak moods are part of life. 'And then this: do not depend on the hope of results. ... You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all.' What matters is the value, and the rightness, the truth itself, which all becomes more real including the reality of personal relationships. Big changes can suddenly happen, but they are out of our hands. The way is through prayer, poetry, silence, solitude. He sees that, then as now, the risks are terrible, but that God will not abandon us:

The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do his will, we will be helping in this process.³²

Concluding thoughts

Finally, there is something further to learn from Merton and Cardenal, that the wrestling with the paradox, and the realisation of the meeting of the opposites can be understood and broken through viscerally, not intellectually, by becoming a poet. One of the deepest aspects of their relationship was through poetry where, following silence and solitude, dualistic thought becomes what has been described as a 'seamless sacerdotal identity of opposites'.³³ The poet is the one who is somehow able to grow up while yet remaining a child, beholding things by becoming them, and so opposites are transcended and a new experience is created.

This poem extract by Cardenal, translated by Merton, encapsulates the necessary letting-go:³⁴

I do not know who is out in the snow
All that is seen in the snow is his white habit
And at first I saw no one at all:
Only the plain white sunlit snow.
A novice in the snow is barely visible.
And I feel there is something more in this snow
Which is neither snow nor novice, and is not seen.

Post script

Cardenal continued to struggle with contradictions after setting up a flourishing community on Solentiname as priest, encouraging sustainability and celebrating the artistic gifts of the peasants. When this was destroyed by the forces of the dictator Somoza, Cardenal then joined the Sandinistas in their fight against the regime, and in 1979 joined the government of Daniel Ortega as the Minister of Culture. He was stripped by the Pope of his ability to administer the sacraments partly for supporting liberation theology. Later, feeling that the original revolutionary ideals had been compromised by Ortega's government, he left the party in 1994, but continued to write and work on the causes he championed including the relationship of the Christian gospel and religious spirituality to the demands of modern-day political, ecological, and social movements. He was reinstated as a priest in February 2019. He died on March 1st 2020.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, introduction in *To Live is to Love* by Ernesto Cardenal (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 8.
2. Dorothy Day, 'On Pilgrimage', *The Catholic Worker* (September 1956), <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/710.html> accessed 14/01/20/
3. *From the Monastery to the World - The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*, trans. & ed. by Jessie Sandoval (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2017), letter to Cardenal, March 15, 1968, p. 239.
4. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), entry for July 30, 1959, p. 312.
5. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Merton, August 9, 1959, pp. 13, 12.
6. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, August 17, 1959, p. 17.

7. Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 76.
8. *Going Beyond the Pairs*, p. 118.
9. William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', ll. 1-4.
10. Hakuin, Master of the Zen Koan – see <https://dharma.net.org/coursesM/27/zenstory32b.htm> accessed 14/01/20.
11. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, August 17, 1959, p. 15.
12. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Merton, August 9, 1959, pp. 11-13.
13. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, July 28, 1967, p. 231.
14. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, August 17, 1959, p. 17.
15. *A Search for Solitude*, entry for December 13, 1958, pp. 238-239. Merton's journal entry describing his experience at Fourth and Walnut can be found in his journal entry for March 19, 1958, pp. 181-182.
16. *A Search for Solitude*, entry for December 13, 1958, p. 238.
17. *Going Beyond the Pairs*, p. 122.
18. *Going Beyond the Pairs*, p. 88.
19. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, September 12, 1959, p. 30.
20. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, October 24, 1959, pp. 41, 42.
21. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, December 17, 1959, pp. 54-55.
22. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, March 11, 1961, p. 64.
23. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, March 11, 1961, p. 65.
24. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life - The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 'Some personal notes – end 1965', pp. 343-345. Cardenal visited Merton on October 23, 1965.
25. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), entry for January 3, 1966, p. 3.
26. *Leaning to Love*, entry for January 3, 1966, pp. 3,4.
27. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, March 11, 1967, p. 225.
28. *From the Monastery to the World*, letter to Cardenal, no date, 1962, p. 112.
29. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love, The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), letter to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, January 12, 1966, p. 22.
30. *Going Beyond the Pairs*, p. 123.
31. Interview with John Balzar, *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-04-06-vw-773-story.html> - accessed December 18, 2020.
32. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, letter to Jim Forest, February 21, 1966, pp. 294-297.
33. *Going Beyond the Pairs*, p. 130.

33. Ernesto Cardenal, Selections from "Gethsemani, KY", stanza 11, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 853.

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The Stations of the Resurrection

The Stations of the Resurrection were proposed by Father Sabino Palumbieri in 1988. They are based on the events around the Resurrection and the following events, from Jesus being raised from the dead until the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The first major public celebration of the Stations was in 1990. Unlike the Stations of the Cross, all are based on events recorded in the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles.

The cover image by the artist and hermit Rachel Denton, is inspired by the penultimate Station, 'Mary and disciples wait in prayer', based on Luke 24:49: 'And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.'

The artist writes:

'The Stations of the Resurrection, also known by the Latin name *Via Lucis* (Way of Light), are a form of Christian devotion, encouraging meditation upon the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and some of the Resurrection appearances and other episodes recorded in the New Testament. They complement the Stations of the Cross or *Via Crucis* (the term *Via Lucis* is intentionally reminiscent of this). The illustrations I have used are derived from Eric Gill's Stations of the Cross. They are reverse images (negatives) of tiny slices of the originals. It was a thought-provoking experience to take the stuff of sorrow, violence and desolation associated with such a controversial artist, and to "redeem" it into the transformative joy of Easter.'

Editor