

# JOB & THOMAS MERTON: Their Experiences of God & the Realization of Integrity

By **Anne Page Brooks**

Through their experiences of God, both Job and Thomas Merton gained a new understanding of self and a greater sense of integrity. Experience of a higher reality opened their minds to new ways of thinking that enabled them to transcend old concepts by transforming them into new meaning. The transcendence and transformation both followed intense experiences of suffering that reduced the egos supported by material wealth and physical pleasure, thereby making spiritual growth possible. Job, as a biblical figure in the Old Testament, and Merton, as a Trappist monk at Gethsemani, were different, but their lives are linked metaphorically by their growth toward integrity through their experience of God.

Both Job and Merton had a capacity for growth. Job's growth developed out of his refusal to ignore the inconsistency between his conventional view of God and his experience of undeserved suffering. According to the conventional wisdom of his day, God caused the good to prosper and the wicked to suffer. Job's friends never let go of this dogmatic view in spite of Job's experience of undeserved suffering. One of them, in fact, accused the "blameless" Job of getting less than he deserved. Job, however, knew that his suffering was undeserved; so, he insisted on arguing his case before God whom he believed would exonerate him. In other words, Job refused to ignore the experience of his suffering and the questions it raised about his understanding of God.

It is perhaps useful at this point to recall the suffering that Job experienced. We are told that Job was a blameless, upright, God-fearing man. He had done all that was required of him by divine law. Therefore, his life was described in terms of perfection: "He had seven sons and three daughters; and he owned seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred asses."

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Unexpectedly, however, his life changed. First, all of his cattle were taken away from him. Then, his children were killed in a windstorm, and finally his body broke out in sores. Throughout all of this, we are told that Job did not utter one sinful word. That is, he never accused God of injustice. For seven days and seven nights, he sat with three of his friends who had come to comfort him, but no one said a word because his suffering was very great. Then, Job broke his silence and cursed the day of his birth. His friends urged him to be patient for, as they said, no one had ever seen an innocent man perish. Job refused, however, to ignore the inconsistency between the theology of his day and the reality of his suffering. His life had been shattered in spite of the fact that he had lived according to the accepted wisdom of the day. So, Job despaired of finding any meaning in life. He described his despair in terms of terror that stalked him:

Every terror that haunted me  
 has caught up with me,  
 and all that I feared has  
 come upon me.  
 There is no peace of mind  
 nor quiet for me;  
 I chafe in torment and  
 have no rest.

NEB 3:25-26

As it turned out, however, Job's physical and spiritual anguish enabled him to overcome the image of God that no longer held true for him. In one sense, the loss of material possessions reduced the ego supported by material wealth so that Job's mind could be opened to reach beyond the material level toward the possibility of a new image of self. By reducing the ego supported by material wealth, the God of established views who was understood in terms of rewards and punishment could be transcended by a new understanding of God. Because Job refused to close his mind to the reality of undeserved suffering, he was ultimately able to transcend his experience of the God of conventional wisdom. By refusing to ignore the reality of new experience, Job transcended his old experience of God as lawgiver and thereby opened his mind to the possibility of a new image of God. God as lawgiver was thus transformed into a new image of God as creative presence. Thus, a closed-ended static theology was transcended by an open-ended theology of creative process. This transcendence was achieved through integrative thinking by which the old image of God as predictable lawgiver was not eliminated. Instead, it was integrated with a new meaning that transformed the old image. Upon realizing a newly integrated image of God, Job discovered that the good life is not found in material wealth but in creative relationship with God.

Through the process of integrative think-



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ing, Job's realization of a new image of God led to a new understanding of self and a greater sense of integrity. In the beginning, Job's integrity was a matter of uprightness or righteousness, and he maintained it by his refusal to ignore the experiences that brought into question his old ways of thinking. Through the discovery of a new image of God, his integrity was expanded to include a new understanding of self. In other words, Job transcended his concept of self based on material wealth when he experienced a higher idea of self which he discovered in relationship with the creative presence of God. This is revealed in Job's response to the speech God made to him:

I know that thou canst do all things  
and that no purpose is beyond thee.  
But I have spoken of great things  
which I have not understood,  
things too wonderful for me to know.  
I knew of thee then only by report,  
but now I see thee with my own eyes.  
Therefore I melt away;  
I repent in dust and ashes.

NEB 42: 4-6

Thomas Merton also gained a new understanding of self and a greater sense of integrity through his experience of God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton tells his story of how he discovered his authentic self, was transformed by experiences of a higher reality. Like Job, Merton transcended his old self through a process of integrating experiences of the higher reality of God.

Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* gave Merton a metaphorical understanding of the nature of his old self. Becoming acquainted with Dante was the greatest benefit Merton said that he derived from Cambridge University. At the time, however, none of Dante's ideas took firm root in his mind nor did he apply any of those ideas to himself. "No," said Merton, "it seems to me that I was armored and locked in within my own defectible and blinded self by seven layers of imperviousness, the capital sins which only the fires of Purgatory or of Divine Love (they are about the same) can burn away."<sup>1</sup> The hardening of Merton's will against any higher reality than the drives and passions of his ego occurred in the months following the death of his father. When his father died, no barriers remained to prevent his "own will to do as it pleased" (*SSM*, p. 85). As he recalled:

It was in this year, too, that the hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for any God in that empty temple full of dust and rubbish which I was now so jealously to guard against all intruders, in order to devote it to the worship of my own stupid will. (*SSM*, p. 85)

Merton would come to see this freedom from authority as "a frightful captivity." Captive to his own selfish will, his mind was closed to any higher reality. He would look back on these years while his soul was a corpse as life in hell lived according to the standards of a stray dog (*SSM*, p. 6). Climbing the seven storey mountain of Purgatory was made possible, however, by the gradual opening of his mind to the higher reality of God.

When Merton was eighteen years old, two experiences in Rome opened up his mind to the higher reality of God and helped him come to realize the possibility of a new self. The first was the experience of the ancient mosaics in the churches of Rome. Those mosaics, as he said, told him more than he had ever known "of the doctrine of a God of infinite power, wisdom and love Who had yet become Man, and revealed in His Manhood the infinity of power, wisdom and love that was His Godhead" (*SSM*, p. 110). "Of course," Merton recalled, "I could not grasp and

believe these things explicitly. But since they were implicit in every line of the pictures I contemplated with such admiration and love, surely I grasped them implicitly . . ." (SSM, p. 110). Seeking to discover something of the meaning of the mosaics he had seen, Merton turned to a Vulgate text he had bought and began to read the New Testament. As he read more and more of the Gospels, his love for the old churches and their mosaics grew. Soon he began visiting them not merely for their art. He said:

There was something else that attracted me, a kind of interior peace. I loved to be in these holy places. I had a kind of deep and strong conviction that I belonged there: that my rational nature was filled with profound desires and needs that could only find satisfaction in churches of God. (SSM, p. 110)

The opening of Merton's mind to the realm of the higher reality of God through the experiences of the mosaics coalesced that night with a vision of his father that brought him face to face with the inauthenticity of his life. Merton's father had been dead for more than a year, but as Merton recalled, "his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me" (SSM, p. 111). Neither parent had given Merton any formal religious training. After his mother died when he was six years old, the only valuable religious and moral training had come from his father. Merton recalled:

Father never applied himself, of set purpose, to teach me religion. But if something spiritual was on his mind, it came out more or less naturally. And this is the kind of religious teaching, or any other kind of teaching that has the most effect. (SSM, p. 53)

In his room that night in Rome, the experience of his father's presence gave him "sudden and profound insight" into the misery and corruption of his life. Recalling that moment, he said:

I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before. And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray . . . . (SSM, p. 111)

The sudden appearance of Merton's father coalesced with the reality of God discovered in the mosaics, and for the first time, Merton experienced the humility necessary for opening his mind to the experiences that would lead to the discovery of his authentic self. Merton began to pray for liberation from the dark corruption in his life revealed by the light of the higher reality of God. Later on, he compared receptivity to this reality to the effect of a ray of light striking a crystal:

The soul of man, left to its own natural level, is a potentially lucid crystal left in darkness. It is perfect in its own nature, but it lacks something that it can only receive from outside and above itself. But when the light shines in it, it becomes in a manner transformed into light and seems to lose its nature in the splendor of a higher nature, the nature of the light that is in it. (SSM, p. 170)

The integration of the image of God discovered in the mosaics with the vision of his father opened Merton's mind to the possibility of transcending his old self. The humility that enabled this integration to take place was, however, only the first stage in his growth toward the integrity that eluded him. The ideas of influential thinkers also helped Merton transcend his ego-centered self.

Merton read widely. Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* convinced him that there is a supernatural order and that there is "the possibility of real, experimental contact with God" (SSM, p. 186). Most importantly, he learned from Huxley that the way to this experience of God was to liberate the ego from self-love by prayer, faith, detachment, and love. His major problem was the fact that he did not want to deny the passions that drove him. Intellectually, however,

Merton believed that it was necessary to practice prayer and asceticism if human beings were to live like anything but wild beasts.

The poetry of William Blake also convinced Merton of the necessity for a vital faith. By the time he completed his thesis on Blake, Merton became conscious of the fact that the only way to live is to live in a world that is "charged with the presence and reality of God" (SSM, p. 191). This was still, however, only an intellectual realization. The integration process had not yet liberated his will from subjection to the selfish passions that continued to drive him.

*The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson, however, motivated Merton to take the necessary steps to achieve a new life (SSM, p. 204). Under the influence of Gilson's work, Merton not only accepted intellectually the full range and possibilities of experiencing higher reality, he began to desire it. He decided to be baptized. Baptism, however, did not change his interior life remarkably. In spite of his intellectual commitment to live a new life, Merton continued to live as before, preferring to satisfy his own desires before all else. Because he had publically professed his belief in God and in the teachings of the Church, he thought that he had begun a new life, but he discovered that he was still blinded by his appetites. Even the good that he sought as a writer fed his "ancient selfishness" to see himself externalized in a public and printed and official self which he could admire at his own ease (SSM, p. 236). With his inner life still bound by his selfish desires, Merton described himself as follows:

This was what I really believed in: reputation, success. I wanted to live in the eyes and the mouths and the minds of men. I was not so crude that I wanted to be known and admired by the whole world: there was a certain naive satisfaction in the idea of being only appreciated by a particular minority, which gave a special fascination to this urge within me. (SSM, p. 236)

In other words, Merton's problem was only half solved by baptism. The spirituality of the mosaics, the self-examination motivated by the "appearance" of his father, as well as the ideas of thinkers like Huxley, Blake, and Gilson opened his mind to the higher reality of God, but his will remained fettered to the passions of self-love. The problem that remained was to transcend self-love by transforming it into love for God.

Merton came to realize that the integrity he had come to desire would continue to elude him unless his will were integrated with his intellect. This would not be possible, he thought, until he yielded his will completely to God. So, he came to see the need for solitude and a Rule:

What I needed was the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be simplified out under the gaze of God more or less the way a plant spreads out its leaves in the sun. That meant that I needed a Rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God. . . . (SSM, pp. 260-261)

With these thoughts in mind, Merton decided to spend Holy Week 1941 with the Trappists at Gethsemani. He was impressed by the absolute simplicity of the monks. "It was all utterly simple and unvarnished and straightforward and I don't think," he said, "I had ever seen anything, anywhere, so unaffected, so un-self-conscious as these monks" (SSM, p. 329). It became clear to him "that the monk in hiding himself from the world becomes not less himself, not less of a person, but more of a person, more truly and perfectly himself" (SSM, p. 330). At Gethsemani, Merton saw in the lives of the monks the integrity that had eluded him. Through this experience, he came to realize the roles of solitude and contemplation in preparing him for the integration of his intellect and his will.

Merton decided that he would seek a vocation in the monastery. It had been three years since the time of his baptism when he had started the hard climb up the mountains of purgatory. Many experiences had coalesced in his mind to reveal to him the higher reality of God in the light

of which his life was seen to be filled with pride and self-love. Through the integration of a variety of experiences, his intellect was first opened to the higher reality of God, but his will was not transformed until he chose a life of contemplation. Solitude and contemplation would cause him to give up all things that kept him from realizing the integrity he sought — the self he was meant to be.

Solitude and contemplation in Merton's life connect metaphorically with Job's loss of material possessions. For each, the reduction of material things was essential for the discovery of new meaning. Job lost all of his material possessions before his old image of God as lawgiver was transformed into a new image of God as creative presence. Merton had to choose a life of solitude and contemplation before his old self of selfish drives and ambitions could be transformed into the authentic self that he was meant to be. In order to find new meaning for their lives, both Job and Merton had to transcend their old concepts of self by transforming them in the light of the higher reality of God. This transcendence was made possible through the integration of new experiences. Before the transcending process could take place, however, both Job and Merton experienced intense misery that opened their minds to the possibility of new meaning. Through physical suffering and spiritual anguish, Job's old self defined by material wealth was reduced and then transformed into a new concept of self determined by creative relationship with God. Intense personal misery impelled Merton to break his idolatrous attachment to his old self. Having broken it, he began in earnest to search for his authentic self. Through a process of integrating experiences of a higher reality into a life humbled by self-examination, Merton gradually climbed the seven-circled mountain of Purgatory toward the summit where final integration would begin to take place in the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani.

Through the two case studies of Job and Thomas Merton, I have endeavored to demonstrate the process of transcending old concepts by transforming them into new ways of thinking through the integration of new ideas and experiences. The barriers that stood in the way of this transformation were Job's conventional view of God that supported a deceptive sense of self and Merton's self-love that blinded him to the self he was meant to be. Job and Merton, however, overcame these barriers. After intense physical and spiritual suffering they both discovered God in the light of which their former selves were transformed. These two case studies demonstrate how old ways of thinking are transformed into new meanings through a process of integrative thinking that begins with openness to a higher reality.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they illustrate how it is possible to work toward the integrity of persons through the process of integrating old concepts with new ones in the light of an ever-higher understanding of God.

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#### NOTES

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / A Harvest Book, 1978), pp. 122-123. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.
2. I am indebted for the theoretical framework for this essay to the published and unpublished works of my colleague, Professor Un-chol Shin. See, especially, "The Structure of Interdisciplinary Knowledge: A Polanyian View," *Issues in Integrative Studies* 4 (1986), pp. 93-104.