

Merton and Masterpiece Making

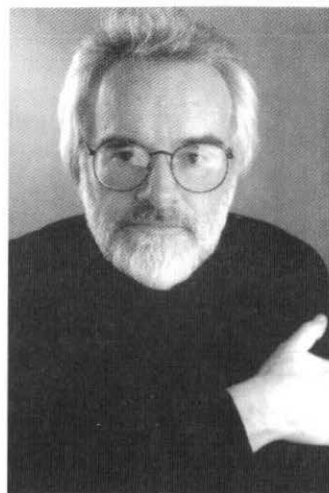
By Padraic O'Hare

Merton and the Young Adult

In March 2000, with ten college students and an Augustinian Friar who also works at Merrimack College, north of Boston, Massachusetts, I went to the Benedictine Priory in Weston, Vermont. We lived with the community for the better part of four days, rose for morning prayer at 5:00 a.m., worked alongside the brothers, ate healthily for a change (two young men booked themselves back into one of the hospitality houses on the monastery grounds, solely so they could have more home-baked bread, or so they said!). The risk of inviting, corralling and keeping ten young adult collegians focused (from the previous October) on this March commitment, when many "take the last offer they get" on their way to something they committed to six months earlier, was taken in order to share with my students the peace and the challenge of compassion and justice which I experience in renewed intensity whenever I am at this my "spiritual home." The larger context of this experiment (which was a spectacular success) is the course of practice of contemplative or meditative prayer which I have offered year-round for seniors at our college, for almost a decade now, and which the students show the wisdom to flock to and engage in with considerable seriousness, though no solemnity.

On the third of our four days at the priory, we had a gathering and conversation with five of the brothers, the central questions at which came down to this: "Why did you enter a monastery?" "Why are you here visiting a monastery?" One of the brothers, a member of the community for about thirty-five years, started by saying that when he was a young man, he read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. And one of the students, a woman, said she had read Merton's classic at my suggestion while engaged in the meditation course, devoured more of Merton thereafter and therefore was highly disposed, despite being virtually the platonic idea of the type-A temperament, to spend four days at a monastery in the middle of a busy semester of her senior year. And then, somewhat like W. H. Auden saying "How can I know what I think till I see what I say," I realized that in large part my work in contemplation education with collegians over the last decade, for all the diverse elements in it, has been in significant measure an invitation to young adults to take a look at Father Louie as a worthy "witness" – an exemplar for them in their work: making their masterpiece.

The vocabulary that has emerged over the last decade, even while subordinate to the actual practice of meditation and contemplative prayer which always fills the brunt of our semesters to-



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gether, is that of seeking clues to how to live well. The reference to Merton as a “witness,” is beholden to Rabbi Heschel, who said, “A teacher is either a witness or a stranger.”¹ Who is less a stranger than Merton? Who more than Merton discloses a life’s work of masterpiece-making – who is more an incarnation of honesty, who less willing to settle for pseudo-identity? Heschel is also the source of the idea of the masterpiece, urging “young people” in one of his last public appearances, in 1972, to think of themselves as a “work of art.”² To be true to their vocation, as Sharon Daloz Parks puts it in *The Critical Years*, the young adult must come to say: “I am aware that I am responsible for who I am becoming.”³ In the vocabulary my students and I employ, this is “faithfulness to my human vocation” – to work on my masterpiece, to become ever more grateful, reverent, creative, silent, joyful, courageous, hopeful, compassionate, forgiving and just. Erik Erikson calls fidelity the “cornerstone of identity.” Who that knows Merton is not struck by the affinities, as Erikson says that fidelity “verifies itself in a number of ways,” among which he counts the “sentiment of truthfulness, as in sincerity and conviction, the quality of genuineness, as in authenticity; the trait . . . of ‘being true’.”⁴

The great contrary pull in young adulthood, and surely beyond, is that between what Jung called “psychic birth,” “the establishment of the ego in the world,” with all its noisy and necessary self-assertion, and the cultivation of “inner solitude,” so that, in Nhat Hanh’s words, one does not “lose oneself in dispersion and in your surroundings.”⁵ Nietzsche is right when he speaks of these “lions in the desert” encountering the dragon: “In the loneliest desert, however, the second metamorphosis occurs: here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert. Here he seeks out his last master: he wants to fight him and his last god; for ultimate victory he wants to fight with the great dragon. Who is the great dragon whom the spirit will no longer call lord and god? ‘Thou shalt’ is the name of the great dragon. But the spirit of the lion says, ‘I will’.”⁶ But Merton is also right:

no man who seeks liberation and light in solitude, no man who seeks spiritual freedom, can afford to yield passively to all the appeals of a society of salesmen, advertisers and consumers. . . . Keep your eyes clean and your ears quiet and your mind serene. Breathe God’s air. Work, if you can, under His sky. But if you have to live in a city and work among machines and ride in the subways and eat in a place where the radio makes you deaf with spurious news and where the food destroys your life and the sentiments of those around you poison your heart with boredom, do not be impatient, but accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul. If you are appalled by those things, you will keep your appetite for the healing silence of recollection. But meanwhile – keep your sense of compassion for the men who have forgotten the very concept of solitude.”⁷

(And if you work with young adults or consider what young Merton and his friends first offered one another at Columbia, and beyond, you will surely recognize and be cheered by the truth of Erikson’s further observation that young adults “affiliate” with one another in very special ways, literally adopt one another, to navigate this spiritual work: “in friendship and partnership young adults become sons [daughters] of each other, but sons by free choice which verifies a long hope” [Erikson 128]). So I think Merton is a very fine witness for the work of masterpiece making. And the art becomes what of Merton’s life and of his teaching to highlight.

Merton's Life

I have come to hone the presentation of Merton's biography, emphasizing these seven features: 1) that Merton experienced pain and suffering; 2) that he was something of a "screw-up"; 3) that he yearned for significance of being, just like you and me and Hamlet; 4) that he experienced a conversion, entered the monastery and what sort of life it was that he embraced; 5) that he remained oh so "human" as a monk; 6) that he was a man of enormous humor; 7) that he accomplished much. This may seem, in part, platitudinous, but it reveals one approach to sharing Merton's life with young adults. And, too, I think the aspects chosen have some resonance with young adults.

Chief among the facts of Merton's life that reveal its suffering are of course the early loss of both his mother, Ruth, and his father, Owen, his orphaned status at the age of fifteen, as well as the loss of his brother, John Paul, during World War II, in response to which Merton wrote the wrenchingly sad and beautiful poem "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943."⁸ The story of his relatively dissolute life while at Cambridge and Columbia, where, as Lawrence Cunningham says, "His love for hanging out in bars with his friends had evidently not been slaked, despite his unhappy experiences in England,"⁹ together with the rich and abiding friendships first forged at this time, flirtation with the Communist party, passion for jazz and deep appreciation of the Black culture flowering in Harlem in the 1930s, portray an enormously attractive model of the "lion" seeking to say "I will."

Cunningham's capsule assessment of the spiritual and theological resources which came to feed and channel young Merton's yearning for meaning offers rich topics for discourse with young adults considering Merton as witness. As Cunningham notes, toward the end of his Columbia days, Merton began taking instructions and became a Catholic. He was deeply affected by Jacques Maritain's evocation of genuine Catholic humanism: that the natural and the supernatural – especially the human and the divine – are related intimately; by Etienne Gilson's retrieval of the idea of God "as Being itself"; and by the great Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins' "fusion of deep love for beauty with an intense awareness of the presence of God in the world" (Cunningham 9, 11).

Engaging young adults in discourse about Merton in the context of a course of study and practice of contemplation or meditation also provides the opportunity to explore the universal human relevance of the monastic life. The evolution of Merton's own understanding, together with an experience, like that at Weston Benedictine Priory, of monastic practice of simplicity, creativity, silence, compassion and joy is part of the study and conversation. It is also important, and really gets the contemporary collegians' attention, to evoke the Trappist regime that Merton entered on December 10, 1941. Abbot Flavian Burns' picture is expressive:

We rose at two in the morning and spent long hours in the choir. There was no central heating, and we wore heavy clothing; that was the hardest thing for me at first. After I received the habit, I felt all the weight of those woolen garments and I thought to myself, after the first day, I will never be able to spend the rest of my life weighted down by this clothing. And I suppose it was hard for most people to come in and have no chance to speak. The food was not that plentiful, but work was. Eating two pieces of bread and a cup of not quite coffee in the morning and then going down and splitting logs in the winter weather, that was pretty rough.¹⁰

Recounting how the middle-aged Merton falls so deeply in love with M. is simply there to be reflected on together. This feature of Merton's life is not to made over into a superficial "teaching point": "so, it just goes to show you how human the monk was"; or, "see, Merton was just very true

to himself.” The young adults with whom I work do not yet have a full intuition that there is much that we come to love which we cannot have. Still, they experience, I think, some resonance in Merton’s “pain of love,” his candor, his relative honesty and certainly his ardor: “This love of ours – very joyous today, very sure of itself . . . is still an immense reservoir of anguish But I don’t care. Now I can accept the anguish, the risk, the awful insecurity, even the guilt I hope I am not lying to myself anywhere.”¹¹

Merton’s humor, indeed his regular hilarity, is enormously engaging for so many of us and “plays” wonderfully with young adults. And since it is certainly true, as Merton knew, and Randall Patrick McMurphy said in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, “Man, when you lose your laugh, you lose your footing,”¹² it is an important piece of the clues for living spiritually that Merton holds. In a “short course,” among my favorite entrées to the comic and humorous Merton is Abbot Burns’ picture of him mugging in the church, chattering in Trappist sign language, teasingly (hypocritically but ironically) accusing the student brothers of doing just what he did and undermining quiet during reading at meals or chapter: “He was a master at visual commentary, like during the readings in the refectory or during the chapter talks. Just with the raise of his eyebrows or a facial expression of horror at what was being said or proposed, he could bring down the house in laughter” (Wilkes 104).

Examples abound; the mocking of monastic mercantile activity in the poem “Chee\$e” is classic (CP 799-800). One of my favorites is the entry in his journals during the hermitage times about going to the outhouse where a king snake liked to be resident: “Rituals. Washing out the coffeepot in the rain bucket. Approaching the outhouse with circumspection on account of the king snake who likes to curl up on one of the beams inside. Addressing the possible king snake in the outhouse and informing him that he should not be there. Asking the formal ritual question that is asked at this time every morning: ‘Are you in there, you bastard?’” (IM 246-47).

There is, finally, the accounting of Merton’s accomplishment and of his fame. This begins with *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Framing this with young adults is first of all a matter of getting them to read it. James Laughlin’s and Lawrence Cunningham’s contextualizings, among many others, are especially helpful. In Paul Wilkes’ *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*, Laughlin says: “*The Seven Storey Mountain* was a great best-seller because it had things to say that people – and not just Catholics – were, at that moment in our social history, waiting to hear. It was 1948, and the book presented an answer to spiritual problems that many were confronting – particularly the young, who were upset by the way things were going in the country, by the threat of an atomic holocaust, and all the rest of it. Merton voiced their concerns, so simply and directly. He was responding in his personal terms to a general angst” (Wilkes 6). Cunningham speaks of the book in this wonderfully droll way:

The Seven Storey Mountain was a book of pilgrimage and conversion. . . . Christian readers enjoyed a certain *frisson* in reading about the life of a person who turned from sin and evil to a life of graced conversion. The converted sinner (the worse the sin, the better) was a staple of the evangelical tent meeting, and the theme was equally popular in the penny press of Catholicism. Evangelicals loved converted drunks; Catholics were enamored of converted communists. Catholic popular piety produced copious amounts of such literature What distinguished Merton’s book from the lot was that it told a tale that was so thoroughly modern. Here was the story of a hard-drinking, cigarette-smoking, jazz-loving, left-leaning, poetry-talking, bilingual, New York intellectual with European roots

who chucked it all for the monastic life. The only thing missing was any specific details about his sex life. The Trappist censor had enough problems with the picture of his rather bohemian life in the final version of the manuscript, and the romantic dalliances were blue-penciled out as lacking in edification (Cunningham 33).

I emphasize that in the twenty-seven years from his entrance to Gethsemani till his accidental death in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, Merton became: 1) the single most profound and important Catholic voice recalling the ancient Catholic practices of contemplation and meditation; 2) the single most profound and important Catholic voice urging that Western Christians appreciate and learn from the great spiritual riches of other religious traditions: Muslim mysticism (Sufism), Judaism and, especially, Zen Buddhism; 3) a singularly important voice in the 1950s and '60s for justice and peace – a powerful source of inspiration supporting the Black Civil Rights movement (with whom Martin Luther King, Jr. intended to spend retreat time just before being assassinated) and a deeply affecting inspiration for anti-war protestors in the 1960s and for the Catholic Church leadership to disassociate itself from war (stances for which he was reviled by conservative Catholics); 4) a nurturing figure for some of the leaders of the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America; 5) a significant influence in the repudiation in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council of the Church's centuries of anti-Jewish theological teaching; one who wrote to Rabbi Heschel of "my latent ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin";¹³ 6) a notable poet associated with the Beat movement whose prose-poem on Auschwitz is the first entry in the first issue of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*; 7) the great Catholic spiritual master of the twentieth century instructing generations, then and now, in contemplative prayer and its intimate relationship to compassionate action, a man of whom the Dalai Lama said: "When he died, I felt that I had lost personally one of my best friends, and a man who was a contributor for harmony between different religions and for mental peace. So we lost one, it is very sad. I think if he remained a longer period, I think if he remained still today, he would be one of my comrades to do something for mental peace When I think or feel something Christian, immediately his picture, his vision, his face comes to me. To the present day. Very nice" (Wilkes 147-48).

Merton's Message (Or, Clues for Masterpiece Making)

I emphasize ten features of the inexhaustibly rich wisdom of Merton in my work with young adults in a collegiate setting. First, like them, Merton seeks with enormous courage, hope and gusto to affirm the significance of being: "Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest opening out into the infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. Beyond all and in all is God" (*IM* 113).

Merton's God, who is "beyond all" but "in all," beyond all but never angry or distant, does not seek the shedding of blood in sacred violence or prefer Christians to Jews or Hindus. The God experienced as "*interior intimo meo*," Saint Augustine's God more intimate to me than I am to myself, which Merton experienced and retrieved for us in reviving apophatic practice and recommending to us Zen, is a God we should put before young adults without fear of narcissistic distortion, untroubled by cynical dismissal of "new age" spiritual yearning. In his outstanding work in the

study of young adult faith development, John Shea, OSA contrasts the “Superego God” with the “Personal God”: “Perhaps the most crucial element in the transition from the ‘Superego God’ to the ‘Personal God’ of young adulthood is the opportunity to give expression to one’s unique, inner experience of God. Up till this point the emphasis has been on ‘Who God is,’ and now there is shift to a concentration on ‘Who God is *for me*’” (Shea 16). In a vein consistent with Shea’s, Merton writes: “At the center of our being is . . . a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives. . . . This little point of nothingness and *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us.”¹⁴

Another clue from Merton invites the young adult to consider simplicity while surrounded by a technology which liberates, to a point, but also carries vast distractions. Erikson again speaks of the young surrounded by “an ethos of a technology so self-righteous,” that the question, especially for young adults now, in the work of art they are making themselves, is “what man can afford and decide *not* to use, *not* to invent and *not* to exploit” (Erikson 126). In Thomas Del Prete’s excellent study of the educational practice implicit in Merton’s life and thought, the idea of this simplicity is judged a singular fruit of humane educational practice. We know Merton admired it above all in Mark Van Doren who “looked directly at the quiddity of things.”¹⁵ And we have, to share with the young, Merton’s words in the wonderful “Rain and the Rhinoceros”:

Can’t I just be in the woods without any special reason? Just being in the woods, at night, in the cabin, is something too excellent to be justified or explained! It just *is*. There are always a few people who are in the woods at night, in the rain (because if there were not the world would have ended), and I am one of them. We are not having fun, we are not “having” anything, we are not “*stretching our days*” and if we had fun it would not be measured by hours. Though as a matter of fact that is what fun seems to be: a state of diffuse excitation that can be measured by the clock and “stretched” by an appliance.”¹⁶

For Merton the spiritual life itself is, as he says, “first of all a life.” It is effort to cooperate with the Holy One is finding and holding and cultivating a true self and doing so through many practices prominent among which is the cultivation of silence or “inner solitude.” These three, the spiritual life, the self, silence, are the next three elements proposed in making Merton’s thought available to young adults. He writes: “The spiritual life is first of all a life . . . first of all a matter of keeping awake. We must not lose our sensitivity to spiritual inspirations. . . . Meditation is one of the ways the spiritual man keeps himself awake. . . . If you want to have a spiritual life you must unify your life. A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all. No man can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by the end you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire.”¹⁷ And of the self: “The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls” (NSC 25).

It is, above all, of silence that Merton speaks with the most profound eloquence: silence as the source and refuge of the spiritual being, silence as the fountain of compassion. (In this Gustavo Gutierrez follows, in *Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, speaking of the “first moment” as one of silence: the silence of contemplation, the silence of praxis.) It is not so hard as some might think to “sell” young adults on silence, to invite them to cultivate what Merton calls “inner solitude”

– the Buddha’s “better way to live alone” (Nhat Hanh 65). “[T]he truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you: it is an abyss opening to the center of your own soul” (*NSC* 80). And: “In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. And yet we find that the nakedness of reality which we have feared, is neither a matter of terror nor for shame. It is clothed in the friendly communion of silence, and this silence is related to love . . . for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it” (*TS* 85-86). And, finally, “When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively, no distraction” (*TS* 93).

This last sentence leads to Merton’s witness to young adults about debilitating self-consciousness and self-doubt. Merton’s spontaneity, simplicity and vitality express themselves in the wonderful sentiment: “Futile? Life is not futile if you simply live it. It remains futile however, as long as you keep watching yourself live it. And that is the old syndrome: keeping a constant eye on oneself and on one’s life, to make sure that the absurd is not showing, that one has company, that one is justified by the presence and support of all the others.”¹⁸ (In this key, reading “Rain and the Rhinoceros” is essential).

That all this feeds compassion, we who to some extent know Merton have no doubt. In sharing him with young adults, there should be no doubt that the contemplative life, as Eckhart said, compels the contemplative being to compassion: “What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion*. There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid, and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that will truly flourish like the lily. It shall become a pool. It shall bud forth and blossom and rejoice with joy. It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things” (*IM* 86).

Equally urgent is the necessity to link Merton the witness to Merton’s witness, Jesus Christ from whom he took his clues. Christ on the cross (and at the table and in the poor), animates all that is “masterful” in Merton. And here we have an opportunity to “clean up” some operant christology. For Merton’s Christ on a cross is not triumphant exclusively for the salvation of some but not others; neither does he satisfy an angry God or validate an equally triumphant Church. Christ on a cross means that there is courage, hope and joy beyond suffering and fear; that there is self-giving despite pain and anxiety. “Christ forms Himself by grace and faith in the souls of all who love Him. . . . Therefore if you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on earth . . . [e]nter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross” (*NSC* 157).

It is humbling to care so much for Merton and to be so grateful to him and yet always to confront, as I do, how elusive he is because there is so much to come to know and understand of him. This said, for myself and for my students, the summary of his witness is that which Jim Forest captured in this remark in 1984: “Over the years, as I’ve thought back on Merton, his life, his legacy, the very rationale behind his life, it’s come clearer and clearer that he was a man of remarkable fearlessness about life. . . . I think he helped many of us to become less afraid. . . . He helped us see that the root of our parochialism is unvarnished fear” (Wilkes 60). A healing witness for those of any age: “Do not be afraid.” Or, what comes to the same thing: Live!

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- ¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 46.
- ² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996) 296.
- ³ Quoted in John Shea, OSA, "The Emergence of a Sense of Self: Transformation From Late Adolescence into Young Adulthood," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 2.2 (Summer 1984) 15; subsequent references will be cited as "Shea" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964) 125; subsequent references will be cited as "Erikson" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988) 42; subsequent references will be cited as "Nhat Hanh" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1953) 138-39.
- ⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 84, 86-87; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁸ Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 35; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁹ Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 7; subsequent references will be cited as "Cunningham" parenthetically in the text.
- ¹⁰ Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 105; subsequent references will be cited as "Wilkes" parenthetically in the text.
- ¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999) 287; subsequent references will be cited as "IM" parenthetically in the text.
- ¹² Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962) 65.
- ¹³ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Spiritual Experience and Social Concern*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 434.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Del Prete, "Thomas Merton and Sincerity in Teaching," *Professional Approaches for Christian Educators [PACE]* 20 (1990) 4. Del Prete's book is *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990).
- ¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 13-14.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958) 47-48, 56; subsequent references will be cited as "TS" parenthetically in the text.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 322-23.