

Damaged Goods: A Monk's Public "Inner Work"

By **Jonathan Montaldo**

[If you] attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening [your] own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, [you] will not have anything to give others. [You] will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of [your] own obsessions, [your] aggressiveness, [your] ambitions, [your] ego-centered delusions about ends and means.¹

According to the late Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq, monks have always loved learning with intensities that matched their desire for God.² I would surmise that monks love learning more. Scholarship, after all, offers the satisfactions of small but significant closures of understanding, whereas desiring God is an open-ended heart project, an experience of an elusive Presence that never fully discloses itself. Since God is at core hidden and transcendent, desiring God's presence is in the same genre of never-to-be-completed human tasks as is ridding one's experience of evil. Whoever takes up either of these projects without being grounded in humility will have begun in delusion to reach an end in dismay.

Monks love learning. Willful ignorance of the world for the Christian monk is a sin against the Holy Spirit whose activities are everywhere. Yet speculation is not the primary monastic office. The monk seeks to ground theoretical reflection in experience. Any academic enterprise, all delicious toying with ideas, must for monks be embedded in practice and experiment. Any monk who elaborates *theoria* without a personal *praxis* is suspect. An unlived monastic theology is vain. Thus, Christian monks – ambiguously and not ideally since they are like us in all things – can provide a cautionary footnote for anyone tempted to discuss the mystery of evil only in the abstract, at arm's-length from the necessity to acknowledge the *mysterium iniquitatis*³ securely nested in human hearts and behaviors.

I can speculate on the deeper meanings of Eucharist without ever giving myself the liberty to discover what could happen were I to celebrate it as my daily bread. I know the delight of reading book after book on meditation while ignoring the imperative to sit my ass down on a cushion. And, *mea maxima culpa*, I daily slide along a web of deceits about myself out of ignorance or conscious neglect of my mendacious tendency to ignore the contradictions between my private and my public behavior, between what it is I preach and what



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it is I do. I effortlessly confine my activities to separate compartments that do not communicate. I withhold my private self from dialogue with the sanitized self I present in everyday life. I am amazed how easily I descend from the altar of God to the gutter in the space of an afternoon and can afterwards sit down to a quiet supper without thinking I have traveled far at all.⁴

I admire Thomas Merton but my reading of his text is that, no matter what those who love him or who perceive his wisdom might claim for him, he was not and never considered himself a “spiritual master.” He might certainly from the evidence of his text have been “mastered by the Spirit.” His honesty with himself and his readers in regard to his erratic struggles truly to seek God is continuously evident in his extant personal journals, now published in seven volumes that begin in 1939, when he was living in Greenwich Village in New York City, and end two days before his death in Bangkok in 1968. Merton’s making himself ever more transparent to his readers when writing his journals, giving clear evidence that he knew himself unworthy of laurel and emulation, was, in my opinion, a conscious attempt to undermine his guru status. He compassionately sets his readers free from hero worship. He punctures any illusion, at least in his own case, that one truly leads a good spiritual life simply because one writes beautifully about the spiritual life.

In twenty-nine years of writing journals Merton bequeaths to his readers traces of his inner work. He exposes his life-long task to understand himself, to be free, to act with integrity and increase his capacity to love his neighbor. His transparency in his journals pierces the corporate veil of an institutionalized monasticism that superficially presents to the unincorporated a beautiful tableau, but whose enclosures hide the struggling humanity within them that surrenders itself to the slow heart-work of fleeing evil and trying to do good one day and one night at a time.

Merton indeed had a literary gift for artful self-disclosure. He thought his best writing was a literature of “confession and witness.”⁵ Reading over his shoulder, we have access to an essential mode of progress on the human journey toward self-transcendence to neighbor and to God: we get up and fall down, we get up and fall down, and we struggle to get up over and over again.

Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is a romantic document, a good read, a self-idealizing confession of a floundering young roue’s having found a monastery as the perfect life raft on his youth’s angry sea. A lot of people love *The Seven Storey Mountain* and recollect their reading of it with shining eyes. Among Merton’s literary gifts was his ability to have his reader identify with him. His autobiography was and, being still in print since 1948, remains a life-changer. But Merton, even before the publication of his story, knew he had distorted its Hollywood-toned presentation of himself as the hero on a stairway to paradise.

Writing journals after the publication of his autobiography, Merton conscientiously refocused himself and disclosed to his journals’ future readers the more visceral truths about his struggling monastic practice. Writing journals began to function as a discipline of honesty with regard to the crooked road his life had taken by his split-hearted pursuit of both monastic vows and the exigencies of a literary and public career. His journals became, as he himself characterized them, “part of a documentation that is demanded of me – still demanded, I think – by the Holy Ghost.”⁶ And what Merton documented carefully were the states of mind he could easily have hidden which, once being disclosed to journals, could and do damage his publicly professed religious life.

Merton knew he had placed himself in the occasions of sin endured by many a spiritual writer who, having publicly brought attention to themselves as spiritual seekers and having reached their goal – perhaps unconsciously – of being sought after as “sages,” experience pride to be as debilitat-

ing a sin in their spiritual lives as unchecked lust. Their self-righteous criticism of others tempts them to sin against their communion with the saints. Their excessive self-concern and self-analysis becomes for them a form of unbelief in the forgiveness of sins. Ambition in “spiritual masters” poisons everything they once achieved with good will. The Chinese Taoist Chuang Tzu warned those who came to believe their own press that public good works placed them above other human beings: “Achievement is the beginning of failure. Fame is the beginning of disgrace.”⁷

There are few journal entries that so transparently document Merton’s understanding that his spiritual life and his monastic vocation were being compromised by the temptations of his literary success as that for January 19, 1961:

Someone accused me of being a “high priest” of creativity. Or at least of allowing people to regard me as one. This is perhaps true. The sin of *wanting to be a pontiff*, of wanting to be heard, of wanting converts, disciples. Being in a cloister, I thought I did not want this. Of course I did and everyone knows it. St. William, says the breviary this night, when death approached, took off his pontifical vestments (what he was doing with them on in bed I can’t imagine) and by his own efforts got to the floor and died. So I am like him, in bed with a miter on. What am I going to do about it? . . . I have got to face the fact that there is in me a desire for survival as pontiff, prophet and writer, and this has to be renounced before I can be myself at last.⁸

Merton was always first to admit that any treasures of spiritual insight embedded in his autobiographical writing were a harvest from poor soil. His journals expose real fissures in his character. They archive the playing out of his quintessentially human fate to stand with feet straddling a divide between who he longed to be and who he actually was. Merton’s acknowledged limitations illuminate. The deep significance of Merton’s confessions for our own spiritual practice might well be his self-exposed errors and failures. I take a line from theologian Karl Barth in his *Epistle to the Romans* on the apostle Paul to suggest an analogy for the value of Merton’s autobiographical transparency for our own struggles with evil today:

A man [Barth speaks of St. Paul] may be of value to another man, not because he wishes to be important, not because he possesses some inner wealth of soul, not because of something he is, but because of what he is not. His importance may consist in his poverty, in his hopes and fears, in his waiting and hurrying, in the direction of his whole being towards what lies beyond his horizon and beyond his power. The importance of an apostle is negative rather than positive. In him a void becomes visible.⁹

All his false steps, his continual backsliding, his being caught in the same old compulsive thinking that Merton regularly confesses to readers of his journals should be placed in the context of his authentic and dedicated pursuit of the evangelical monastic goal of attaining “purity of heart.” Merton’s personal integrity, especially in his later journals, is missionary. “I am thrown into contradiction,” he wrote in his journal at his hermitage in 1966, a year that found him at fifty-one in love with a student nurse of twenty-four. “I am thrown into contradiction: to realize it is mercy, to accept it is love, to help others do the same is compassion” (LL 355).

As Merton elaborates the paradox of his seeking purity of heart, while witnessing in himself the ability to evade the self-disregard necessary for its procurement, he places before the eyes of his

readers their own struggle with conflicting desires that attends their own inner and public work. By writing journals Merton discloses first for himself the deep layers of his heart's deceits so that he might assume and incorporate them. His practice of writing journals is thus akin to the ancient asceticism of rigorous self-disclosure practiced in the Egyptian desert by early Christian monks and reported to the West by John Cassian. Of the need for constant self-examination and self-disclosure to an elder in monastic practice Cassian passed on this word of advice from the desert that Merton heeded well: "He who manifests his thoughts is soon healed; he who hides them makes himself sick."¹⁰

As Merton writes journals so as to incorporate his heart's dark cellar rooms, he is also inviting his readers to incorporate their own hearts' dark rooms into their own biographies. Gregory of Nazianzen in the fourth century is another source for this psychological and religious practice: "That which has not been incorporated [and accepted, and made flesh] cannot be healed."¹¹ In his journals for October 2, 1958 Merton writes resonantly with Gregory's teaching:

Finally I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. That I will never fulfill my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself – and if I accept myself fully in the right way I will already have surpassed myself. For it is the unaccepted self that stands in my way – and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted. When it has been accepted – it is my own stepping stone to what is above me. Because this is the way [human beings have] been made by God – and original sin was the effort to surpass oneself by being "like God" i.e. unlike oneself. But our Godlikeness begins at home. We must first become like ourselves, and stop living "beside ourselves" (*SS* 220-21; inclusive language added).

Professor Edward Kaplan of Brandeis University has written an article about a seminar he offered there utilizing the writing of Thomas Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel. He entitled his article "To Keep the Pain Awake: Learning about Faith."¹² Among his seminar's methodologies, he presents neither himself nor the authors as magisterially having all the answers to questions to be raised in the class. He emphasizes instead the importance of the depth and quality of the questions we ask on the religious journey, questions that arise out of foundational human discontents that never allow us to settle without deep anxiety for easy, unexamined answers. Kaplan reports that his students hate this aspect of his methodology. Like all of us, his students want answers in black and white transmitted by a professional expert; they insist the heroes and villains be clearly delineated, that the right and the wrong ways to approach religious questions be clearly exposed. But insecurity is the guardian angel at the continuing presence of mysteries that attend our experience of being alive. These foundational mysteries, to paraphrase Gabriel Marcel, can never be reduced into solvable problems. They remain painful despite any efforts to anesthetize our seemingly primal mental wounds.

Anyone who takes up serious inner work in order to discover the truth about herself and her predicament, anyone who struggles to accept that she shares these same painful predicaments with all her neighbors, anyone who strives for a modicum of human integrity, will always find her experience as having an edge of being in exile from any supposedly settled questions (traditionally defended by corporate entities for whom settled questions preserve their own power), especially when she learns through experience that these settled questions systemically continue to reproduce evil effects.

I confess that my work in preparing for this Conference has been painful and made me discontent. I hope my anxieties are salutary and a sane response to my not finding easy explanations for the origins of evil in the face of continuing horrendous events of present human history. Perhaps one of the aims of our conference's organizers has been fulfilled in all of us, if it has provoked us to "keep the pain awake."

Merton needs to have a last word and there would be many at hand that would convey the tone of his thinking on the persistence of evil in human experience. One of his statements, and I hope my reading it in closing will direct you to the entire article from his book *Faith and Violence*, is his letter to a Southern Churchman in the mid-sixties that he entitled "Events and Pseudo-Events":

I have publicly stated that I would no longer comment on current events. People ask why. There are many reasons, and I might as well say at once that they are reasons which may possibly be valid for me only, not for others. In any case I did not make this decision for anyone but myself. Nor would I have made it unless I had previously made my position clear in the areas of greatest urgency – [on questions of] race and peace.

First of all, I mistrust an obsession with declarations and pronouncements. While silence can constitute guilt and complicity, once one has taken a stand he is not necessarily obliged to come out with a new answer and a new solution to insoluble problems every third day.

After all, was it not [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer himself who said it was an "Anglo-Saxon failing" to imagine that the Church was supposed to have a ready answer for every social problem?

When one has too many answers, and when one joins a chorus of others chanting the same slogans, there is, it seems to me, a danger that one is trying to evade the loneliness of a conscience that realizes itself to be in an inescapably evil situation. We are all under judgment. None of us is free from contamination. Our choice is not that of being pure and whole at the mere cost of formulating a just and honest opinion. Mere commitment to a decent program of action does not lift the curse. Our real choice is between being like Job, who *knew* he was stricken, and Job's friends who did not know that they were stricken too (So they had answers!).

If we *know* that we are all under judgment, we will cease to make the obvious wickedness of "the others" a fulcrum for our own supposed righteousness to exert itself upon the world. On the contrary, we will be willing to admit that we are "right-wised" not by condemning others according to our law or ethical ideal, but by seeing that the real sinner whom we find abominable and frightening (because he threatens our very life) still has in himself the ground for God's love [That] ground is the sinful heart of sinful [human beings] just as [they] really [are] – as we really are, you, and I, and our disconcerting neighbor.¹³

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- 1 Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 164 [inclusive language added].
 - 2 See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1977).
 - 3 I am using the Latin phrase to allude (perhaps too obliquely) to its use by the writer of Pope John Paul II's Easter "Letter to Priests" that appeared two weeks before our conference in which the writer refers to those priests who had succumbed "even to the most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis* – the mystery of evil at work in the world." In a century that has witnessed holocausts and gulags this reference to pedophilia as "the most grievous form" of evil invokes the depths of personal evil as opposed to the historical manifestations. My aim to present Merton as another witness to the "evil within us" hopefully becomes clearer in succeeding paragraphs. Cf. Melinda Henneberger, "Pope Says 'Shadow of Suspicion' Has Been Cast Across All Priests," *The New York Times* (22 March 2002): A1.
 - 4 A friendly critic of this address wrote that he thought here I was being too hard on myself. I replied: "I am afraid I am not being as 'hard on myself' as I should be." I am more only using a rhetorical device of self-accusation so as to have the listener identify with my critique of our common human behavior before raising her defenses. While the dilemma of being able to vacillate between the altar of God and the gutter is true of my experience, I'm not publicly grieving here only for myself. I don't consider myself more deeply caught in this awful dilemma than anybody else. And, while I indeed sin through my own fault, I don't think I suffer "uniquely and exquisitely" the *karma* of my sins. The evil in me, like any good, is communal and experienced with everybody else. Thus this paragraph is not about my particular pathologies but about our shared disease.
 - 5 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 371; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.
 - 6 Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 20; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.
 - 7 Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 115.
 - 8 Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 87.
 - 9 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, E. C. Hoskyns, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 33-34.
 - 10 John Cassian, quoted in Paul Evdokimov, *The Ages of the Spiritual Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1998) 194.
 - 11 Gregory Nazianzen, quoted in Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 77 [paraphrased].
 - 12 Edward Kaplan, "To Keep the Pain Awake: Learning about Faith," *The NICM Journal* (National Institute for Campus Ministries) 2.2 (Spring 1977) 63-73.
 - 13 Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press) 145-46, 164 [inclusive language added].