

Merton as Contemplative Catalyst

Review of

Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton

Booklet 1: *Entering the School of Your Experience*

Booklet 2: *Becoming Who You Already Are*

Edited by Jonathan Montaldo and Robert G. Toth

Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006

64 pages / \$5.95 paperback (each)

Reviewed by **Michael Brennan**

The voluminous landscape of Merton materials has, at long last, been bridged. These little booklets, which one might call “Merton for the People,” fill a void in the canon of writings by and about Thomas Merton. They offer a concrete spiritual formation program from lived everyday experience. Designed for small groups, the series promotes the practice of “contemplative dialogue” by helping participants create a safe place for sharing and listening. It is not a method of problem-solving. No academic credentials are required, and there are no levels of perfection to be attained.

The mere appearance of a flyer in the *National Catholic Reporter* announcing the publication of these two booklets caused quite a buzz at the monthly meeting of our ITMS Chicago Chapter. While such a response may be predictable in a roomful of Merton aficionados, this series of eight primers on contemplative life and dialogue does not require familiarity with Merton’s writings. However, they provide an engaging biographical sketch of Merton and a diverse selection of his material.

Entering the School of Your Experience and *Becoming Who You Already Are*, the first two of the eight booklets to be published, are challenging yet accessible. An amazing amount of material is packed into 64 pages. Each booklet opens with the same eight-page introduction, which defines contemplative living as “a way of responding to our everyday experiences by consciously attending to our relationships” (6). The short biography of Merton describes him as “a scholar who distilled the best thinking of the best theologians, philosophers, and poets throughout the centuries, from both the West and the East, in the context of the Christian worldview” (8). Compilers Jonathan Montaldo, former ITMS president and former director of the Bellarmine University Merton Center, and Robert G. Toth, director of the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living (formerly the Thomas Merton Foundation), honor this assessment by providing us with their own distillation of Merton’s finest insights, followed by compelling selections from a variety of spiritual guides who provide “Another Voice.”

“*Bridges* works best with small groups of four to ten that meet on a regular basis (at least once a month) and in which the members participate consistently,” say the authors. “‘Open’ groups that

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allow individuals to come and go frequently will not likely do well with this series. The depth of conversation that *Bridges* seeks to establish requires stability and commitment” (Leader’s Guide 7). The introduction offers guidelines that govern entering into contemplative dialogue and nurturing a hospitable environment for discussion. Eight principles are outlined (11-12), from advising participants to keep comments rooted in “lived experience,” to “trust the group” and “expect periods of silence.” The focus is on listening to others, staying with the topic, taking turns, and being patient as one grows in the process. Ideally, the group creates a safe place to discuss “the life experiences and spiritual depths” of its participants. The structure is not unlike that which is cultivated by 12-Step groups, and may for some be an excellent adjunct program. Sessions can last from 90 minutes to two hours, but there is no set length.

The rest of the booklet is divided into eight sessions, each with an opening psalm, introduction to the texts, “Merton’s Voice,” and “Another Voice.” Sessions conclude with six questions for reflection and dialogue, and a closing prayer from the back of the booklet (or a period of quiet reflection). There is also a bibliography and biographical sketches of the other “Voices.”

Using Merton as a starting point, the series “seeks above all to mine the life experience and spiritual depths of those who use it” (Leader’s Guide 1). The readings are designed to “move participants in and out of four dimensions of contemplative living – *Awakening* to an ever deepening awareness of ‘true-self,’ *Contemplation* of a life experienced from a God-centered perspective, *Compassion* in relationships with others, and *Unity* realized in our undeniable and essential inter-connectedness” (9). The sessions carry intriguing titles, such as “Trusting Life, Nature and God” (1.4); “Praying through Your Changing Image of God” (1.5); “Finding God in the Company of Our Life’s Best Friends” (2.3); “Revering Your Life’s Teachers” (2.7); and “Waking from a Dream of Separateness” (2.8).

In session three of the second booklet, Merton, in an excerpt from *Entering the Silence*, marvels at the index someone prepared for *The Seven Storey Mountain*, “the most peculiar collection of names you ever saw.” He imagines the names listed – friends, authors, saints and entertainers – at a banquet to celebrate the book’s publication. “I think this index is a partial, optimistic preview of the General Judgment with the four Marx Brothers among the sheep” (25). *Bridges* expands and celebrates this preview. The authors juxtapose Merton’s words with spiritual authors of the present day, including Karen Armstrong, Pema Chodron, David Steindl-Rast and Eckhart Tolle. Merton’s startling freshness and relevance is highlighted as he mixes effortlessly at this banquet. Other authors include Wilkie Au, Stephen Batchelor, Fr. Pierre-Marie Delfieux, Anthony de Mello, SJ, Paul Evdokimov, Abraham Heschel, Shaul Magid, Naomi Shihab Nye, Rainer Maria Rilke, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Bishop Kallistos Ware. The chosen passages sometimes echo Merton, sometimes harmonize with him. They also offer perspectives from other cultures and faiths.

There are a few ironies. A passage from *The Hidden Ground of Love* in session three of the first book reveals that in 1967, Pope Paul VI asked Thomas Merton to participate in writing a “message from contemplatives” for the people of the world. “Merton resisted at first but wrote the following message that was not included in the published statement” (23). Why was it not included? Merton’s writes that in his solitude he has become “a searcher in realms which you are not able to visit – except perhaps in the company of your psychiatrist.” He has been summoned “to explore a desert area of the human heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and . . . only experience counts.” He describes an “arid, rocky, dark land of the soul, sometimes illuminated by strange fires which we fear and peopled by specters which we studiously avoid except in our nightmares” (24). Perhaps

this was not the message they expected.

In session one of booklet two, *Entering the School of Your Life*, Merton says, "Meditation enables the monk to *enter deeply into the school of life itself*, to make the monk's whole life a meditation, a learning from God" (16). For "Another Voice," the editors choose a passage from Anthony de Mello's *Wellsprings* that begins, "I imagine that today I am to die. I ask for time to be alone and write down for my friends a sort of testament for which the points that follow could serve as chapter titles." The 16 points include "things I have loved," "experiences I have cherished," "convictions I have lived by," "lessons life has taught me," and persons "enshrined within my heart" (16-17). One of points is "These insights I have gained in the school of life." Like Merton, Anthony de Mello died young, at 56, the victim of a sudden heart attack in 1987. Like Merton, he learned and shared much from Eastern religions, being a native of India, and like Merton he was criticized for it. Indeed, his writings were scrutinized by no less a Vatican official than Cardinal Ratzinger, the present Pope Benedict XVI, who found that de Mello took positions "incompatible with the Catholic faith" and that his writings can cause "grave harm" to the faithful. The "Notification," still posted on the Vatican website, came eleven years after de Mello's death.

Though much less drastic, one is reminded of the decision by U.S. bishops to remove a profile of Thomas Merton from the new *American Catholic Catechism* because "the generation we were speaking to had no idea who he was," according to Donald Wuerl, now the Archbishop of Washington, DC. "Only secondarily did we take into consideration that we don't know all the details of the searching at the end of his life."

In these booklets, bridge-builders Montaldo and Toth have found a dynamic way to present Thomas Merton's writings in concert with a wide variety of (mostly) contemporary spiritual guides. They offer specific ways to create community and practice contemplative dialogue. They say that Merton's writings "take people into deep places within themselves and offer insight into the paradoxes of life" (8). They have honored this legacy by practicing it very beautifully in these booklets, which may prove to be a great new resource for a multitude of small groups, parish adult spirituality programs and ITMS chapters.

A Leader's Guide and a Series Sampler can be downloaded from www.avemariapress.com. The sampler includes the full text of sessions one and six. The booklets can be ordered directly from the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living at www.contemplativeliving.org.