

Taking Merton to Work

By David Lee

Introduction

That a person's spiritual life can be integrated into the time spent in a hectic working environment is, to some, a revolutionary idea. The workplace of America – whose business is business – has become an environment to which we only invite a portion of our selves. As our job descriptions become more specialized, greater and greater sections of the totality of our beings are underdeveloped or abandoned altogether. As recent events have shown us, the profit motive can become its own justification for almost any behavior, resulting in our making decisions completely at odds with the values we profess in our “real” lives. The corporate lifestyle in particular has become one that defies strength, power, and success as material wealth. Our business lives in general, and the corporate landscape in particular, have become a broken world, where brokenness is not tolerated. It is my contention that people should not be expected to abandon their spiritual existence once they go to work. In fact, the workplace could be one of the most fruitful areas of spiritual practice and exploration, if it were integrated with the rest of our lives, and if we were given a few tools to use along the way.

Merton as Guide

This point of view has not surfaced out of thin air. It is the product of personal trials, and the rescue found in the words of Thomas Merton, who was at once a monk and a man intimately familiar with the workings and foibles of “the world.” My story began as a career-driven 31-year-old, whose profession as a commercial pilot was snatched away in a moment by forces beyond my control. Having set my sights on a career in aviation from the age of six, I was utterly unprepared to embrace a different career path, passion, or self-image – all of which were laid waste when a previously undiagnosed epileptic seizure knocked me flat one sunny Saturday afternoon. The FAA didn't care that I had never thought of myself as anything other than “pilot.” Taking a dim view of what they called “unpredictable losses of consciousness while in the cockpit,” they revoked my medical certificate early the following Monday – by mail. I was still a little fuzzy-headed when I was discharged from the hospital, but knew that I was going to want something to read that didn't have to do with airplanes, so I stopped at a used book store on my way home and grabbed a book, seemingly at random. It was *No Man Is an Island*,¹ a book I'd never heard of, by a guy I'd never heard of, named Thomas Merton.

That was followed by *New Seeds of Contemplation*,² which was followed by *The Seven Storey Mountain*,³ which was followed by everything by Merton I could get my hands on. His writings showed me an existence that was bigger than my problems, and helped me to see beyond my limiting self-image – indeed, beyond the idea of self-image. Now, well over a decade later, he's still teaching – even at work.



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Merton as Mentor

Christian contemplative traditions, especially as represented in the writings of Thomas Merton, teach us that God is among us always, and that we are to listen for the voice of divine guidance in all that we do. Merton taught that a person's spirituality is not only supposed to impact a person's life when they are at church or on the meditation bench. Rather, a person's spirituality is supposed to inform and integrate the whole of the human person: physical, mental, psychological, emotional, as well as spiritual. If it doesn't, we're missing the point. The time a person spends at work need not be divorced from their spirituality; indeed, they need to be integrated. An exploration of Merton's examination of the true self/false self model is especially useful in exploring this dynamic.

True Self / False Self

One of Merton's great gifts was his ability to penetrate the paradoxes inherent in deeper spiritual understandings and to communicate possible ways to accept them, rather than to be swept away by them. One of these paradoxes is the nature of being as non-being, and how that which we think we are (superficially) is nothing compared to our deeper reality:

There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self . . . and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. We must remember that this superficial "I" is not our real self. It is our "individuality" and our "empirical self" but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The "I" that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true "I" that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown "self" whom most of us never discover until we are dead. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney. It is utterly frail and evanescent. (*NSC* 7)

Put another way: "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. . . . All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered" (*NSC* 34-35). Three basic points surface in these excerpts. The first is that the self we truly are – our deepest reality – is not the one we show to ourselves or others on a daily basis. Second, if we are to become more deeply connected with that self which we truly are (and thereby birth it into the world in which we live) we cannot rely on our baser natures and instinctive reactions with no effort being required on our part, but must actively work to bring this true self to the fore. Finally, the true self is united with the Divine without fail. "To assume that my superficial ego – this cramp of the imagination – is my real self is to begin by dishonoring myself and reality."⁴

Because the false self does not exist, it can only evaluate itself through comparison with other false selves. As it can only find itself through opposition to the rest of the world, it creates an atmosphere of competition – a casual malevolence – around itself simply because it sees this as a requirement of its continued existence. "I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get. Therefore you suffer and I am happy, you are despised and I am praised, you die and I live; you are nothing and I am something, and I am all the more something

because you are nothing” (NSC 48). In this, our “modern world,” we have bamboozled ourselves into believing that this “competition falsity” is the *modus operandi* for our entire understanding of reality. We have accepted competition as the way we are supposed to engage with others; we have an unexamined acceptance of it, and we cling to this spuriousness by refusing to choose the alternative: collaboration of our gifts for the common good, which may be harder but which is much more life-giving for all.

Merton saw many of the problems resident in the “modern world” as springing from over-identification with the false self. As this self is most concerned with its own glorification through action and achievement, it is this self that gets most engaged in the modern work environment, to the detriment of us, our colleagues, and friends. Ironically, it is by trying to escape from the dissatisfaction created by this over-identification that we create lives of greater enslavement to things and values that do not endure. Earlier in his monastic life, he wrote of his absolute rejection of the society that modernity had created and of its unfulfilled self-aggrandizement. This rather harsh view developed over time into one of compassion for society’s built-in inadequacies.

Today more than ever, man in chains is seeking emancipation and liberty. His tragedy is that he seeks it by means that bring him into ever greater enslavement. But freedom is a spiritual thing. It is a sacred and religious reality. Its roots are not in man, but in God. . . . In other words, for man to be free he must be delivered *from himself*. This means not that he must be delivered only from another like himself: for the tyranny of man over man is but the external expression of each man’s enslavement to his own desires. For he who is the slave of his own desires necessarily exploits others in order to pay tribute to the tyrant within himself.⁵

In this passage, Merton’s thoughts are made relevant to the life of work. Firstly, the true self is a being of the Divine, whereas the false self that we rely on day in and day out is mere illusion. Furthermore, “emancipation” from our self-imposed limitations cannot be achieved through the machinations of the world, but is a “spiritual thing.” Another jet ski, another promotion, or a grander vacation – none of these will help us live out of our true selves. Finally, he situates these internal realities and projects, as well as their effects, in the world as a whole: “for the tyranny of man over man is but the external expression of each man’s enslavement to his own desires.” They cannot be avoided, but must be faced, both in ourselves, and in others.

Meditation as a Way to the True Self (Even at Work)

A growing number of people are actively pursuing the integration of their spiritual lives by practicing meditation and prayer at work. The disciplines take a variety of different forms, but usually include an unobtrusive form of meditation (following the breath, Centering Prayer, even the Rosary) that can be practiced during breaks and lunch periods. I’d like to think that Merton would approve. From Merton’s writings, we see meditation as “the idea of *awakening* our interior self and attuning ourselves inwardly to the Holy Spirit, so that we will be able to respond to His grace. . . . We must be ready to cooperate not only with graces that console, but with graces that humiliate.”⁶ This last distinction is an important one, as it identifies the idea that we do not practice meditation as a way of getting what we want. Rather, it is meant to help us see clearly, and respond authentically, even if that is not what our superficial self would prefer. “Meditation is then ordered to this new insight, this direct knowledge of the self in its higher aspect.”⁷

Meditation, therefore, is not just a method for focusing attention and establishing control over the rampant mind, but acts to create an active desire to be constantly and more deeply aware of the Divine's presence in one's life. Meditation begins with discipline of the mind so that one may become more aware of the Divine working in all of life. Once that awareness dawns, the pursuit deepens. As it does so, however, the demands for authenticity on the part of the practitioner redouble: "By meditation I penetrate the inmost ground of my life, seek the full understanding of God's will for me, of God's mercy to me, of my absolute dependence upon him. But this penetration must be authentic. It must be something genuinely *lived* by me. This in turn depends on the authenticity of my whole concept of my life, and of my purposes" (*CP* 84). As the practice of meditation and contemplation deepens, the practitioner is drawn closer and closer to his essential unity with Spirit. This is a fundamental part of the human animal, but one that our ego forces us to forget. "The fall from Paradise was a fall from unity. . . . Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of an active, worldly existence" (*IE* 35). This "fall from unity" was the catalyst for the expression of the superficial, false, self. Often we have walled off who we are in favor of who we want others to think we are. However, if we are to authentically follow the guidance of Spirit, we have to allow the walls between these compartments to fall away, especially during our meditations. This is a particularly important thing for people practicing meditation, and pursuing a life of spirit, while at work, where we are so habitually compartmentalized already. As Merton warns, "The worst thing that can happen to a man who is already divided up into a dozen different compartments is to seal off yet another compartment" (*IE* 3).

Once these compartment walls begin to come down, the true essence of meditation and contemplation begins to show in the life of the meditator. As one's conscious familiarity with the true self increases, reliance on the false self slowly falls away.

Contemplation is not and cannot be a function of [the] external self. There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. . . . Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this "I" is really "not I" and the awakening of the unknown "I" that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself. (*NSC* 7)

The importance of this reunification cannot be overstated. The false self has nothing of lasting value to offer the world. It is each person's true self, through unity with the Spirit, which can effect authentic change. Merton said, "According to the Christian mystical tradition, one cannot find one's inner center and know God there as long as one is involved in the preoccupations and desires of the outward self" (*IE* 15). It is through meditation and contemplation that Merton comes to the conclusion that every person's task is to become a coworker with God in the creation of the world. Merton writes that the contemplative's "mission is to be a complete and whole man, with an instinctive and generous need to further the same wholeness in others and in all mankind" (*IE* 148).

Today's workplace is in desperate need to Merton's wisdom and guidance. By taking his teachings on meditation and the true self with us to work, we could create a new movement in American business: Take Your Self to Work Day – every day.

1. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as "NSC"

parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 242.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 153; subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text.

6. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960) 98-99.

7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 84; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.