

Merton's Imaginal World: Liminality and the Lived Experience of Wisdom in the *Fire Watch*

By Jeffrey Cooper, CSC

*Sincerely I learned about Wisdom, and ungrudgingly do I share –
her riches I do not hide away; for she is an unfailing treasure;
those who gain this treasure win the friendship of God.*

Wisdom 7:13-14

Thomas Merton writes in his “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952,” in a prayer to God: “While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question. This night, and every night, it is the same question.”¹ St. Augustine once wrote, “*Quaestio mihi factus sum*” – “I have made a question of myself.”² In the following discussion I suggest that Merton could not answer the question posed by God because he himself *was* the question, and that becoming a question to one’s self, discovering the self as question, is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom, as a lived experience, begins when we no longer recognize our “self” as a fixed entity, but rather as a fluid reality. In the “Fire Watch,” Merton articulates this wisdom as lived experience, especially through the language of liminality, including “darkness” and the dissolution of self. The spiritual journey expressed in the “Fire Watch” traces Merton’s discovery, not only of liminal space, but what it means to discover one’s self as liminal space – a dynamic, fluid and tensive site where limitation and limitlessness collide. Let me first begin with some words on method and approach.

Thoughts on Methodology

My own area of academic discipline is Christian Spirituality. In this field of study, “self-implication” is given pride of place, and engagement with a spiritual tradition outside Christianity is expected. My own abiding interest in Thomas Merton includes both reading my “self” in his text³ as well as exploring resonances between his spirituality and that of the Sufi tradition within Islam. Both of these provide a creative lens for interpretation that I believe offers some specific insight into how Merton strives to articulate the lived experience of faith in his “Fire Watch” text. So first let us begin with self-implication.



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According to biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders, researchers fascinated by the human adventure with God need not disown their personal investment in their desire to study spirituality. She writes: “one’s own spirituality provides emphatic access to the phenomena spirituality studies,” and goes on to state: “Spirituality, in other words, is intrinsically self-implicating. The question today among scholars is not *whether* the personal religious experience of students plays a role in their work but *how* it can be appropriately integrated.”⁴ Self-implication means that one’s own lived experience of faith, appropriately examined and reflected upon, can provide a means by which to interpret the thought of a spiritual writer such as Merton. In terms of the topic of this essay – Merton, liminality and the lived experience of wisdom – my own encounters with darkness and the dissolution of self provide a context and impetus for this study.

So with that let me implicate myself as a man reading Merton’s “Fire Watch” situated at midlife. It seems that from the day of my fortieth birthday until the midst of my now forty-ninth year, I have encountered darkness in my own spiritual journey. This darkness first welled up from within as an overwhelming need to grieve the years gone by, the ideals not achieved, the sense of self shattered and unmasked as a lie. Next the darkness came from without: my grandmother died, my father died, my own dream of becoming a monk was seemingly dashed by God himself. I wondered: does anything matter? I questioned why life seems made up of a long line of shattered illusions. I have felt self-less, not as in other-centered but in terms of *no* center. That which I thought was my center seemed to have completely collapsed. The search for a fixed and certain self has been upended by the manifestation of self primarily as question. So I have read my “self” within Merton’s own struggle with questions in the dark and the questioning of a once-thought firmly fixed self suddenly revealed as fluid. My own lived experience and particular situated-ness thereby provides a lens through which to read the “Fire Watch.”

Now in order to further pursue these resonances between my experience and what Merton articulates in the “Fire Watch,” I also want to utilize two concepts stemming from Sufism, namely the “*barzakh*” and the “imaginal world.” *Barzakh* is an Arabized form of the Persian word “*pardah*,” which signifies a hidden barrier between two things. *Barzakh* appears in the Qur’an in three places, and in all of them it signifies a limit or barrier that separates two things while at the same time providing for their unity.⁵ The “*mundus imaginalis*” is directly related to the *barzakh*, which is sometimes referred to as the “imaginal *barzakh*.”⁶ Imagination here is understood not as the realm of fantasy or the unreal but rather in connection with its “outstanding characteristic, its intermediacy, the fact that it combines the attributes of the two sides, such as spiritual and bodily, absent and witnessed, intelligible and sensory, subtle and dense” (Chittick, *Self-Disclosure* 332). Therefore the imaginal world is that place where the corporeal is spiritualized and the spiritual is corporealized.⁷ This imaginal world, or *barzakh*, then is a concept related to the notion of liminal space which I suggest here is connected directly with wisdom. These terms then, along with my own experiential knowledge, will serve as tools by which I will seek to construct a meaningful interpretation of Merton’s text and uncover what he has to teach us today about living with and in wisdom.

Naming Wisdom: Living with Liminality

The definition of wisdom I am employing here is firmly rooted in biblical spirituality. Biblical scholar Kathleen O’Connor writes: “In wisdom’s view the struggle and conflicts of daily life are not to be escaped but embraced in full consciousness of their revelatory and healing potential.”⁸

Wisdom is primarily encountered in the ordinary courses of life and is by nature inclusive, accessible to anyone who chooses to embrace rather than escape the monotonous struggles and conflicts of daily living, and is directed toward healing. Wisdom is revealed in our willingness to consciously struggle with paradox, and one of the fundamental paradoxes we encounter, especially as we age, is the experience of how our very real, and sometimes seemingly mounting, human limitations collide with an interior sense of limitlessness which then renders our sense of self as liminal. Let me seek to explore this here via the concepts of the “strategic mind”⁹ and the “wisdom mind,” with the help of the contemporary poet David Whyte.

We tend to live most of our daily lives under the sway of what is sometimes referred to as the “strategic mind.” This is the mind that plots, plans, organizes and seeks desperately to impose order on our selves, our lives, our environments, on others and on God. But when we live exclusively by the strategic mind we discover what Whyte has pointed out: we make the world too small for ourselves. The strategic mind is convinced that night, or the experience of darkness, is a time of obscurity and stasis because it hides the light needed to exert control. Our vision is limited in the darkness so we dare not move about but instead wait for light. The wisdom mind, on the other hand, realizes, as Whyte writes:

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.
You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.¹⁰

Wisdom mind teaches that darkness is the entrée into limitlessness. Wisdom unfolds when our doomed sense of self enters into night and confronts the paradox at the heart of our very selves. Perhaps one way to reflect on this in relation to Merton and wisdom would be via a biblical passage from the Book of Wisdom itself: “For while gentle silence enveloped all things and the night in its swift course was now half gone, Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed” (Wisdom 18:14-15 [NRSV]). In the Christian context we might recognize this as a description of the event of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, the grand, transformative God and human collision. The Word, Christ, the living paradox, comes down in the midst of night into a land that is doomed. Wisdom is born when human beings recognize “night” and a sense of self as “doomed land” – not as experiences geared toward one’s destruction (though it may feel like destruction) but rather geared toward one’s own deepest freedom. As Merton writes: “The night, O My Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In the night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me” (*SJ* 349). The night, rather than a place of stasis and obscurity, according to the strategic mind, is instead the site of paradox, the turning of beginnings into ends and ends into beginnings. It is the entry point into the world as created for freedom rather than confinement. Night is where sight becomes obscurity and obscurity the mode of sight. It is where one’s most deeply felt limitations transform through limitlessness into liminality. And the wisdom born there is not spectacular, but rather quite ordinary, perhaps even inherent to the human person. It can perhaps even be discovered in the ordinary and mundane task of a monk providing the necessary fire watch for his monastic community’s well-being. It can be any routine task that, if attended to, can give the imaginal room to play in paradox.

Merton and the Imaginal *Barzakh*

At the heart of Merton's "Fire Watch" is the deeply destabilizing presence of the profound paradox of being and non-being, self and no-self, or in gospel language, finding one's life only by losing it. Merton seeks to articulate in his text the profound realization of the liminality of self as the beginning of wisdom. And the primary means by which he seeks to engage and express the experience of that paradox is through the concept of night, darkness, the language of unsubstantiality and the dissolution of self. As previously mentioned, Merton identifies night with the time of unanswerable questions, the time of freedom, the site where all things begin and all things end. He also writes: "All things stir by night, waking or sleeping, conscious of the nearness of their ruin. Only man makes himself illuminations he conceives to be solid and eternal" (*SJ* 356). The night is where one realizes the unsubstantial nature of the self-made self and therefore the inherent instability of self. Night is liminal space, it is where "God blows our decisions out, . . . and the holiest buildings burn to ashes while the watchman is composing a theory of duration" (*SJ* 356). In order to grapple further with this paradox I now want to more fully introduce our concepts arising from Sufism.

One very concise and enlightening way to consider the term "imaginal *barzakh*," especially how it might provide a lens here for interpreting Merton, is through a reflection on the Arabic word "*kun*," which translates as "be" or "to exist," as presented in the work of the Sufi mystic and philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabi, described here by Salman Bashier:

In the context of discussing the encounter between Khadir, one of God's saints, and Moses, his prophet, Ibn al-'Arabi emphasizes that the saint possesses knowledge that is not available to the prophet. The knowledge that Khadir knew and Moses did not is knowledge of nonmanifestation. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, this is the knowledge of the nonmanifest letter *waw* (U), which is between the manifest letters *kaf* (K) and *nun* (N) in the divine word *kun* (Be!). (Bashier 3)

Bashier continues: "The word *kun* therefore represents all that is manifest and nonmanifest. Thus it signifies God, the Real, who is the liminal entity that brings the aspects of nonmanifestation and manifestation together" (Bashier 3). For Ibn al-'Arabi then the experience of the *barzakh* is both a form of specialized wisdom (given by Allah) and yet radically inclusive. It is the barrier that at once separates *Haqq* (the Real) from *khalq* (the created) as it also unites them, providing for their interpenetration.¹¹ In the Qur'an the divine command given by Allah is "Be!" (*kun*). Existence, as the interpenetration of manifest and nonmanifest, is then understood as fundamentally liminal. Human beings are inherently living in between the limited and the limitless and, in the incarnational Christian context, between the human and the divine as the site of ongoing transformation. From this reflection on *kun* we can understand this liminality therefore to be inherent to human existence and therefore ordinary and inclusive. It is accessible to anyone who might take up the disciplines of prayer and attention, as Merton certainly did. Learning to live in that liminality then is also the gift of an inclusive wisdom given by God to those who choose not to "escape but embrace in full consciousness [its] revelatory and healing potential."

In the "Fire Watch," Merton is attempting to give voice to his own struggle to embrace this liminality of being, and thereby open himself up to both its deeply destabilizing and its transformative healing. As Merton makes the very ordinary journey through what was for him perhaps a very familiar edifice, the Abbey of Gethsemani, he gives expression to his own *barzakh* or *mundus imaginalis*

experience. He attempts to articulate the “corporealization of the spiritual and the spiritualization of the corporeal” in the space of imagination that opens up the human soul to certain possibilities of perceiving and understanding not available to the rational mind.¹²

Merton’s Journey: From Fixed to Fluid

Thomas Merton, in the “Fire Watch,” brilliantly constructs a mystical itinerary, keeping within the rich Christian tradition of spiritual cartography. This is especially a journey rooted in the ordinary and routine as he fulfills the necessary and mundane task of checking for fire danger throughout Gethsemani, from foundation to bell tower. It is an ordinary journey by which he reflects on the conflicts of his daily monastic life to that point and step by step chooses to embrace the lessons they have to offer. It is therefore a wisdom journey he embarks on and, both literally and figuratively, a night journey moving between limitation and limitlessness. It is a journey into an imaginal world, where Merton experiences the collision between beginnings and ends, time and eternity, darkness and light, fixity and fluidity, self and no-self. Gethsemani also serves as a metaphor, not just for his own ongoing spiritual journey, but also as a projection of his self that begins in the certainty of firm foundations and progresses to the reality of a “ridiculously large and unsubstantial tower” (SJ 355). Now I want to reflect a bit on Merton’s *mundus imaginalis* journey by focusing on a few select stations along the way.

The journey begins with Merton describing himself as the “watchman, in the house that will one day perish” (SJ 349). His journey starts in darkness, which he terms the “eloquent night,” as he muses: “some people act as if the night and the forest and the heat and the animals had in them something of contagion, whereas the heat is holy and the animals are the children of God and the night was never made to hide sin, but only to open to infinite distances to charity and send our souls to play beyond the stars” (SJ 350). Merton here recognizes the nighttime as the birthplace of Wisdom rather than a place to be feared, confined in, and held in stasis. He seems to be making an allusion to Proverbs 8:30-31, where Wisdom, personified, speaks: “I was [God’s] delight day by day playing before him all the while, playing over the whole earth, having my delight with human beings” (NAB). The strategic mind’s experience of night, or darkness, as stasis and confinement is reversed as it becomes the site of eloquence and playfulness, steeped with the potential for holiness. But the wisdom, born in this night, only holds the promise of life through the reality of death. The “self,” held so dear and thought so final, must be let go and lost. Merton later states in the text, as he reaches the belfry door, reflecting on death certainly in its one-time finality, but perhaps also in its daily reality for the spiritual seeker, and perhaps here extending the allusion to Proverbs: “The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death? Will You open a door upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars?” (SJ 360).

Night, or darkness, in Merton’s imaginal world becomes the site for perceiving and understanding not available to the rational mind. In the night he senses the “spiritualization of the corporeal and the corporealization of the spiritual” as the night is no longer confinement but expansiveness which gives way to “infinite distances,” “a horizon further than [one] can see.” Limitation collides with limitlessness, just as the temporal intersects with the eternal, death with life, *Haqq* with *khalq*.

And as Merton finds himself increasingly moving between limitation and limitlessness, and being rendered liminal, he begins to confront his desire to hold on to the fixed self in his need to find answers to questions:

God, my God, God Whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer. . . . While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question. This night, and every night, it is the same question. (*SJ* 352-53)

Merton seems to realize that God's question is unanswerable because it is a questioning that transcends his own practice of seeking answers as a means to build up the fixed and certain self. God's question is designed to utterly undo that ego-self and reveal the human self as fluid, expansive and in many ways inaccessible to human probing. Merton cannot answer the question because he *is* the question God asks. The monk begins to realize, through experience, the intersection of Being and being, Real and created, in himself as an ongoing unfinished and unfinishable business.

Here then in the heart of darkness where God isolates and searches the soul, Merton is given the opportunity to touch, ever so lightly, the very heart of himself. He begins to realize the increasing sense that answers to questions can never satisfy, and a life, a spiritual journey, or a self based on such an approach is doomed. He begins to realize the unreality of everything and painfully conjectures that perhaps "the things I never thought about, the things I was never able either to measure or to expect, were the things that mattered" (*SJ* 353). Merton realizes he must renounce all questions as the most urgent and practical renunciation. And as he renounces questions and his need to build a solid self based on answers, concurrently he begins to realize the limitation of the self he thought was so foundational, on which he assumed his life was firmly fixed. Merton prays: "Your Reality [*Haqq*], O God, speaks to my life as to an intimate, in the midst of a crowd of fictions [*khalq*]: I mean these walls, this roof, these arches, this (overhead) ridiculously large and unsubstantial tower" (*SJ* 355).¹³ He sees through the seeming fixity of Gethsemani's walls, roof, arches and soaring tower, the unsubstantiality of it all, the unsubstantiality of his self. "Lord, God," he prays, "the whole world tonight seems to be made out of paper. The most substantial things are ready to crumble or tear apart and blow away" (*SJ* 355). The liminality of self arises in Merton here, both as frightful, destabilizing revelation and promise of infinite freedom.

As the journey continues, Merton seeks to articulate this experience of liminality in the language of dissolution of self. As he makes his way to the bell tower, he writes: "From here on the building has no substance left" (*SJ* 359). So as he finally bursts through the bell tower door he states: "Lord God of this great night: do You see the woods? Do You hear the rumor of their loneliness? Do You behold their secrecy? Do You remember their solitudes? Do You see that my soul is beginning to dissolve like wax within me?" (*SJ* 360). And within the context of this experience of dissolution, born of the collision between limitation and the limitless which has rendered him liminal, Merton concludes his journey, and his text, with "The Voice of God . . . heard in Paradise" proclaiming: "*What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am*" (*SJ* 362). And the precious,

simple, free, liminal self touched upon appears like “drops of dew that show like sapphires in the grass as soon as the great sun [God?] appears, and leaves stir behind the hushed flight of an escaping dove” (*SJ* 362) as the very Real, yet elusive, self appears and disappears all at once.

Conclusion: Living in Conflict without Resolution

Wisdom, in a very real way, is learned through the ordinary but arduous journey of surrendering the fixed and certain self in order to receive the self that can only be given by God and through others. It is to let go of what one believed matters and is of substance and discover instead “greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question” (*SJ* 361). The “Fire Watch” is Merton’s expression of the lived experience of Wisdom which begins in the night, in the loss of certainty of self. It requires entering into the imaginal or *barzakhi* world where darkness and light, Real and created, divine and human, self and no-self collide and substance is found in the unsubstantial. The spiritual journey and struggle that Merton maps out for us concerns how to stay in the paradox of self/no-self; how to stay standing amid the profound existential shock that reverberates at the root of one’s being when his or her foundation is revealed as unsubstantial. The Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson once wrote concerning the journey of midlife that the challenge is to live in the existential tension without giving in to the desire to prematurely resolve it. The conflict without resolution itself, according to Johnson, is the direct experience of God.¹⁴ Thomas Merton’s “Fire Watch” offers us the necessary guidance we all need to let our own imaginations (imaginal *barzakhi*) lead us beyond the controlling security of the strategic and rational mind into the realm of that playful and playing wisdom, which is God’s all-inclusive, ordinary and generous gift.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 353; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.
2. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50.
3. Here when I write reading my “self” in the text I am specifically thinking of the ancient tradition and practice of “*lectio divina*,” where it is understood that the scripture “reads” us as we read the scripture. As Duncan Robertson writes in reference to St. Bernard of Clairvaux and experience: “It is ourselves that we have to read when we read with experience leading the way” (see Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Studies 238 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2011] 231).
4. Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in Arthur Holder, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 29.
5. Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004) 11; subsequent references will be cited as “Bashier” parenthetically in the text.
6. William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) 331ff.; subsequent references will be cited as “Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*” parenthetically in the text.
7. See William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) 71-72.
8. Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*, Message of Biblical Spirituality 5 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988) 16.
9. I am taking the concept “strategic mind” from David Whyte, *Midlife and the Great Unknown: Finding Courage and Clarity through Poetry* [CD] (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2003).
10. David Whyte, *The House of Belonging* (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 2011) 23.

11. See Bashier 69-78, and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn al-'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1993) 173.
12. See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989) 15.
13. I have inserted into this passage the terms *Haqq* and *khalq* for emphasis and to make my point more explicit.
14. See Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 107.