

To Be or Not to Be – Identity Formation in a Post-Human World

By **Glenn Loughrey**

The Adolescent Problem

Quentin Crisp once quipped: “The young always have the same problem – how to rebel and conform at the same time.”¹ Thomas Merton lived out his own version of this problem when he left Oakham and entered Cambridge. Here he felt he had gained the freedom to be the fully modern man he imagined a university student of nineteen to be.² He lived a life of “wine, women and song”³ and paid little attention to his classes and studies, albeit enough to be able to enter Columbia on his arrival in America. With the death of his father, the final connection to his childhood disappeared, cutting him free to find his own way in the world.

Was this problem a Cambridge matter, or was this problem already present? Merton had lived a seemingly dysfunctional and unsettled life throughout his childhood, always on the move, with the loss of his mother at 6 and then his father at 15, his disconnection from his grandparents and family, an apparently uneasy relationship with his little brother, thrown into the harsh world of boarding schools on two continents and more. Mott refers to the cold and aloof manner of his mother and the manner in which he found out about and experienced her death (Mott 20). Merton, if assessed through the paradigm of such as Erik Erikson,⁴ may have had more than the usual unreasonable adolescent crisis with him when he entered Cambridge.

One could argue that he spent the rest of his life in search of the solution to Crisp’s “problem.” When discovered, behind the walls of a Cistercian monastery, his solution was offered to, and appropriated by, an American Catholicism on its own journey from childhood to maturity. And it was not just the Catholic community that was seeking to discover its place in a society ravaged by two world wars, racial issues, the Cold War and more. Those who had had their childhoods truncated by the horror of conflict and death, along with the teenagers growing up in a post-war environment, were also searching.

Salinger & Caulfield

Jerome David Salinger was one of those. His emblematic best seller, *The Catcher in the Rye*,⁵ gave voice to the adolescent quest for identity and place through the angst-ridden 16-year-old, Holden Caulfield. Salinger entered the Second World War as a sheltered 25-year-old and returned home five years later suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. He took with him into the battlefield the emerging story of Holden Caulfield which was given life on the battered typewriter he carried with him into battle.⁶

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Holden Caulfield personifies the problem of adolescence, the search for self and for a set of ideas and values worthy of their fidelity. At 16 he has been to four schools, is uneasy in relationships, is uncomfortable around his peers and is critical of the phoniness of others, both young and old alike. He alternates between cynicism and innocence, reality and fantasy. His desire to run away to the country to live an idyllic life is an example of a teenager's search for Utopia. At the same time he enters the adult world of raunchy city nightlife, unable to commit he remains a rebellious spectator not a participant. His vision of the catcher in the rye speaks of a desire to maintain innocence, as long as possible, and to rescue the young from the phoniness of the adult world he is not yet ready for.

Shields and Salerno suggest that *Catcher* is Salinger's war novel and as such it speaks of a generation who have become stuck somewhere between adolescence and adulthood (xvi) – as it can be argued Salinger was. He entered the world with the success of his bestseller and then retreated, rebelling against the publicity and the acclaim. In some ways he sought the accolades of the adult world only to avoid entering fully into it when the door opened. He remained with his friends, the characters of his books such as the enigmatic Glass family and was unsuccessful in relationships including family and friends. He was harsh in his treatment of others who did not live up to his standards. He did, however, maintain contact with those with whom he had shared the experience of war, the only time he could, perhaps, say he belonged. He remained, in some ways, an adolescent with an identity crisis, in search of himself and his place in the world.

Merton refers to the impact of war as being a significant impetus for the influx of postulants who entered monasteries after the Second World War (see Mott 230-31). These were men who had lost their adolescence and were searching for their identity and for something big enough to give themselves to after the violence of war. In some way, Merton's story of his own journey resonated with that need, and the solution he discovered, deep self-reflection and metanoia, became the solution for others.

Holden became the symbol of adolescent angst for generations of teenagers, both in America and across the western world from the moment he appeared on our bookshelves. *The Catcher in the Rye* sold 65 million copies and continues to sell at half a million copies per year (see Shields & Salerno xiii). While it was an American novel written at a seminal period in American history, it became not only an anthem for local teenagers but for teenagers worldwide, and is still read by them. Shields and Salerno suggest that Salinger merged with the character of Holden as someone "too sensitive to be touched, too good for this world. He would spend the rest of his life trying and failing to reconcile these completely contradictory versions of himself: the myth and the reality" (Shields & Salerno xiii).

Like Merton's, Salinger's search to find a solution for his problem was appropriated by others. Unlike Merton, whose solution spoke to a broad audience, Salinger's search became the voice for teenagers struggling with myth and reality, identity and belonging. Merton, like Salinger, made that search a lifelong journey, and like Salinger it involved separation from the world, privacy and silence. Unlike Salinger, Merton was able to find in spirituality what seemed to elude Salinger, a way to reconcile the problem and to re-enter the world as an active participant (see Shields & Salerno xv). Tom the searching adolescent became Louis the monk. Salinger remained forever tethered to Holden who is still relevant to young people living in what appears to be a very different world, the world of the post-human.

Post-Human

It appears we have entered fully into the ever-changing, ever-challenging world of the post-human and post-humanism. The world of the human and humanism was understood as the place where human beings were recognized as the pinnacle of all creation, the finest and most perfect of all beings, able to think, reason and create inside a body specifically designed for the task. Humanism said humans did not need God as, by virtue of being, they possessed all that was required within to achieve greatness. In other words, they were capable of all that was necessary within their being to achieve greatness. They were capable of taking over the tasks normally identified with God and to get on with saving the world.

It can be argued that that world is disappearing, or at least being transformed into the post-human. Beginning somewhere back in the 1900s thinkers such as Merton, Jung, Derrida, Foucault, Levinas and others recognized the changing project of humanity. No longer is it about humanity and its possibilities and limitations; it is about possibilities without limitations. It is about redefining what it means to be fully human. Post-humanism suggests that to be fully human is to live in many worlds at once, beyond the normal limitations of the human body and psyche.⁷

We are indeed seeking to be more than humans, perhaps more than gods. We have travelled back in time to the myth of Prometheus,⁸ a god who was concerned for the welfare of humanity and sought to share the power of the gods with them by stealing fire from Zeus, the ruler of the heavens. He recognized the parlous state of humanity and wished to share the capacity for creation and light found in the power of fire. He sought to augment the human experience by taking power from the gods. Unfortunately it failed to go according to plan for both him and humanity. As a god, his punishment was to be shackled and punished for eternity, watching as humanity failed to use his sacrificial gift to its fullest potential. The post-human world can be likened to stealing fire from the gods.

The world of the post-human is an augmented world. Humans are not just a body, mind and soul, but now come with, depending on where you live in this world, a range of augmentation. You can indeed have fries with that. There is a basic model but you can option up the human being according to need, income and influence to create a specifically unique, more than human individual.

Growing up in the 1960s, the only wearable technology I saw was Dick Tracy's watch!⁹ Seven years ago the iPhone¹⁰ appeared, untethering us from the landline, allowing us to communicate anytime and anywhere, and introducing us to the world of apps – applications or augmentations. The first iPad¹¹ appeared on April 3, 2010, revolutionizing how we communicate and giving us another world of apps. We began discovering how to make friends on Facebook,¹² how to ask and answer questions on Quora¹³ and ASK.fm,¹⁴ and how to monitor almost every moment and action of our lives. Apps on my iPhone and iPad monitor my sleep, remind me of my to-do list, train my brain, entertain me, allow me to follow incoming storms live, book accommodations, research academic papers and studies – much of this happening while I sleep. Twelve months ago the smart watch appeared.¹⁵ I now can get all the above and more on my wrist without anyone here knowing. I can control my sound and take photographs of you from my phone just by touching my wrist. If you are a teacher or a lecturer, in twelve months time you may have students sitting in your classrooms wearing both smart watches and Google Glass,¹⁶ augmented prescription glasses with a built-in computer able to do almost everything your iPhone or iPad can do.

Young people spend much time inside virtual contexts, completely distinct from what we may describe as the real world, immersed in identities devised primarily for the context they are engaged in such as role-playing games, social media, instant messaging and more. These contexts have their own rules of engagement and practice, many of which do not translate well into the outside world. What you are allowed to say and do in these particular worlds, which is accepted as the norm, is not so outside. Outside, local communities, families and schools set standards of responsibilities and practice that cannot be bypassed. Young people are playing many roles every day of their lives, and one melds easily and quickly into another, and it can be challenging for them to know when one set of rules and behaviors stops and another starts.

With the explosion of the scientific model and research into the brain and how it operates we are appropriating and contextualizing Prometheus. We are on the cusp of unlocking the language of the gods, or at least we think we are. Like Prometheus, who perceived being fully human as being the same as a god, we believe we can become fully human by vaulting across the barriers and boundaries of humanness by unlocking the secrets of our brain. Again like Prometheus, I fear that we have forgotten the glory of being a limited, fallible sensory being and have been bemused by the possibilities of having it all.

Living with the first generation of fully signed up card-carrying post-humans is a challenge. According to Sherry Turkle: “The anonymity of MUDS [multiple user dungeons or real-time virtual worlds] . . . gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. . . . [I]n MUDs, one can be many.”¹⁷ How do we engage with young people who transit a number of different and extremely foreign worlds, to some of us anyway, everyday? While they may be digital natives,¹⁸ the original inhabitants of this post-human world, that does not mean they understand the world and the augmentation in which they find themselves. They are digital natives by fact of birth and history, not by knowledge or skill.

How do these “digital natives” discover their true selves and forge a unique personal identity in a world of virtuality, fluidity and multiplicity? How do they participate in the adolescent project exemplified by Crisp, Erikson, Merton, Salinger and Caulfield? In the words of one teenager,¹⁹ how do they develop the capacity to separate themselves from their machines and become a fully engaged person, connected to themselves, to others and to that which is more than the individual? Perhaps by returning to Prometheus, this time as translated by Aeschylus, who is the complete opposite of the first Prometheus (see *RU* 81-83). This Prometheus comes complete with the fire necessary to be fully human. He is the Christ who as a human being possessed the fullness of God and shared that fullness with human beings. He lived fullness in such a way that Thomas Merton suggests, “Prometheus startles us by being more fully Christ than the Lord of our own clichés.”²⁰

Merton

For Merton, the Christ is the essential person, the person who we are before we are born and who remains at the center of our being despite the vagaries of modern life. He is the true self whom we travel inward to discover. Instead of capturing fire from the gods out there, we sit by the fire deep within and begin to burn with the purity of personhood, not individuality.²¹

Merton understood this as he lived in what he described as the post-Christian era²² and had experience in experimenting with personalities, languages and philosophies. Mott, in his biography of Merton, devotes almost a whole page to a list of the various names Merton used or was known as by friends and others over his life (see Mott 7), including his time in the monastery. His mother christened him Tom, but at his baptism he became Thomas. In the monastery he became Louis. His friends such as Robert Lax wrote to him using a range of names, and in Lax's case, they explored a made-up language which Merton also used in writing his book *My Argument with the Gestapo*.²³ Merton understood himself to be primarily French and therefore European. It was where he was born and where he returned in his youth (see *SSM* 3, 28-29). He found great companionship and philosophical solace in European writers and thinkers and yet the same time was able to engage and embrace Eastern culture, thought and practice such as Zen and Hinduism.

He saw himself primarily as a monk but could never shake the writer who came with him into the monastery. He spent much of his time early on in his monastic life attempting to rid himself of the writer and may have had a breakdown as a result. Yet he continued to hold the two vocations in tension and to add others including philosopher, Zen practitioner, social activist, non-violence advocate and humanist, to name just a few. He carried with him the conflicts and failures of his youth and struggled with intimacy and relationships culminating in his romantic relationship with the student nurse late in his life. His dreams often had an erotic flavor, laced with images of young women who played a role in both his spiritual and emotional life. Like the young people of today, he crossed over from his virtual world into reality, and while it was interpreted as a positive experience for his spiritual life, it was also about the inability to separate the imagined world from the real world. What was okay in his dreams may not have been okay in the real world.

William Shannon's and Christine Bochen's book of Merton's selected letters²⁴ reveals a man who was able to engage the literate and illiterate, the elder statesmen of philosophical and religious thought and teenagers asking questions, issues of personal significance to an individual and issues of significance to society and the world. He was able to rearrange ideas and thoughts and hold conflicting ideas in tension without letting go of his own person. He made others feel as if he was the only one who understood their ideas while holding a completely different set of philosophies and ideas. He was, in Anderson and McCabe's definition, post-human.

He held to, and experienced, an emerging ontology, often being accused of being inconsistent, sometimes of being inconsistent within the same chapter or book. Merton was fearful of those who were consistently consistent and, in his words, sane. His observations on the Eichmann trial cemented that fear (see *RU* 45-49). The thought that Eichmann, the man responsible for the gruesome crimes of the Holocaust, was sane, was too much for him. It left him unsure of all in authority who, he argued, were perceived to be the sane ones on which we relied for the future of society.

His own life attested to the idea of becoming. His primary theme was discovery – discovering your true self, discovering your vocation, discovering the truth for the world around you, discovering other philosophies and ideas. He died in the midst of one of those journeys of discovery, his journey to the East. Merton was never stuck in one place or idea but was always open to something else, something that would augment and enhance the experience of being a person, for himself and for others.

How was he able to do this? He had learnt to live on his own, to discover who he was and then to live out from the center. Merton's premise was that at our core we are united with the Creator of all things, that this light at our center never goes out and when we return to it, it burns away all the superficial encumbrances we have gathered and allows us to be sure of who we are as a person. Merton's learning was not definitive. His journey never ended, but he was more and more comfortable with himself at that still place within that he was able to explore the world and others without fear of losing himself. He was centered.

A Teenager's Response

Chris Steadman, a 17-year-old student at a local high school, agreed to discuss this matter with me via Skype. His observations of the current state of the real and the digital world are revealing:

Technology is a tool.

Personal relationships are key to self-identity.

Corporations have marketed technology as the solution to a problem they have created. How do people make sense of all of this?

What is the social impact of technology, augmentation and "becoming your machine"?

Those under 20 have always had technology but not the personal relationships to make sense of it all, nor the space to discover their true self [his words]. Digital natives by birth only!

This generation is a spiritually focused generation. In some sense technology has become redundant as the answer to the problem of identity in favour of personal relationships with people you trust and respect.

What do I see as important in this post-human age:

Personal relationships in the real world:

Parents

Key adults (teachers)

Space/Spirituality

In Conclusion

In the post-human era of augmentation, virtuality and conflicting personalities, Merton challenges us to make a choice – not the choice of not becoming post-human, but to do so by recognizing the false masks which may arise in this world and to maintain our center, to maintain our relationship to that which makes us a person, regardless of the world in which we live. It is this true self which makes us fully a person, not the embracing of new ideas, philosophies or practices. He challenges us to center ourselves through contemplation, solitude, silence and discipline – to continue the quest for personhood within the post-human drive to become more than human; to remember, as we experience the full range of experiences available to us, that at our center we are connected to the source of all that is, including creativity, imagination and courage as we innately have to go where human beings have not gone before.

The quest is to meet the unmet need for silence and stillness, not as an instrumental practice but a personal experience that transforms and informs. Much of the research on silence and stillness has

centered on the scientific measurement of outcomes. The scientific model has been used to measure how meditation helps us to focus, study and achieve. What is needed is an approach allowing us to experience for ourselves, without the preconditions of science, the transformation of becoming a person. The experience is the measurement and the evidence itself and needs to be undertaken without preconceived ideas of what we want to see.

1. Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968; New York: Penguin, 1997) 126.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 118; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
3. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 74; subsequent references will be cited as “Mott” parenthetically in the text.
4. Erik Erikson was a professor of Human Development at Harvard University who identified eight distinct stages in the development of an individual’s personality; the fifth stage was identified as the adolescent search for identity and can be applied to Merton and his experience at Cambridge. See Erikson’s “Youth: Fidelity and Diversity,” *Daedalus* 117 (Summer 1988) 3.
5. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).
6. See David Shields and Shane Salerno, *Salinger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) 116; subsequent references will be cited as “Shields & Salerno” parenthetically in the text.
7. See Laurel Anderson and Deborah Brown McCabe, “A Co-constructed World: Adolescent Self-Socialization on the Internet,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 31.2 (Fall 2012) 240-53.
8. See Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 79-80 (subsequent references will be cited as “RU” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961) 24-29.
9. The 1960s comic strip of an undercover policeman with a watch that was also a two-way radio: see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dick_Tracy.
10. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/iPhone>.
11. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/iPad>.
12. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>.
13. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quora>.
14. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ask_fm.
15. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smartwatch>.
16. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Glass.
17. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 12.
18. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
19. Skype conversation with Chris Stedman, senior student at Lindisfarne Anglican Grammar School, Terranora, NSW, Australia.
20. 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) 370.
21. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 55.
22. See Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
23. See Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).
24. Thomas Merton, *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper One, 2008).