

Thomas Merton: Soul of the Age

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Having crossed the threshold to the third millennium of Christian faith, believers have a new vantage point for assessing the legacy of one of the great spiritual masters of the last century. Retrospective, however, is hardly appropriate for gauging the phenomenon of Thomas Merton, for we do not look back to recover his significance for our tradition. Rather we look more deeply toward him to discover the profound wisdom yet to be appropriated for our liberation and enlightenment.

Merton continues to precede us into the twenty-first century. Since his death on December 10, 1968, we have witnessed his resurrection as a great and abiding teacher of the spiritual life. Dom Jean Leclercq has honored Merton as a modern Father of the Church, a luminary who took up the challenge of excavating the cavernous recesses of modern consciousness and illuminating its darkness with the light of a renewed and vibrant Christian faith. He had anticipated our journey and suggested an itinerary to take us beyond the confines of creed and confession. In his own search he opened a new frontier of spiritual life for a new age. In this he mirrors the deep existential and mystical challenges and longings of post-modern persons, and is himself one of the 20th century's most realized spiritual masters. It is to honor Merton in this aspect as *Soul of the Age* that we attend to his enduring wisdom.

It has been said that the great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is "loss of soul." When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning (Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*, xi). As our spiritual ancestors knew so well, only one who had recovered from such soul-loss could help others do the same. Only one who found a route to salvation could act as shaman for the tribe, guiding lost souls back from their wasteland wandering to their original, authentic homeland.

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the border with Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God yet hating Him; born to love him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers. (Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 11)

With these words Thomas Merton introduced himself to the lost souls of the twentieth century. A lost soul himself, Merton found recovery in the monastic desert of a Cistercian monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. From that wilderness of sanity and wholeness Merton's prophetic voice cried out to souls of this age. In time its sonorous influence deepened to become one of the most significant religious voices of the century. At times it would whisper words of consolation and insight to the heart of a solitary reader. At other times it would bellow its thunderous critique toward the Vatican or the U.S. State Department. It even echoed in the zendos and temples of Asia. The voice of Thomas Merton sounded from his seven storey mountain with challenge and promise for nearly a quarter-century during his life. Even now, more than three and a half decades after his death, it resonates with uncanny relevance with the universal anguish and the inescapable condition of mortal humanity.

That I should be born in 1915, that I should be a contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved. (Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 164)

Probing the human dilemma, Merton sought to understand the person's existential predicament in the world. With his finger on the pressure points of his own spiritual life he took the pulse of the twentieth-century American soul and found it weak, disoriented by the counterfeit posturing which passes for living in our culture; in fact he found the soul of the age death-bound. With exquisite subtlety and unyielding sobriety he voiced the crippling condition of humanity in our time: "alienated, void, internally dead, . . . [having] in effect no capacity for God" (Thomas Merton, Introduction to *The Prison Meditations of Father Alfred Delp, S.J.*, xiii).

In an age when totalitarianism has striven, in every way, to devalue and degrade the human person, we hope it is right to demand a hearing for any and every sane reaction in favor of [the person's] inalienable solitude and . . . inner freedom. The murderous din of our materialism cannot be allowed to silence the independent voices which will never cease to speak: whether they be the voices of Christian saints, or the voices of Oriental sages like Lao-Tse or the Zen masters, or the voices of [people] like Thoreau and Martin Buber, or Max Picard. (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 12)

It was this soul-searcher's conviction that the first and only duty of anyone hoping to address humanity's root crisis is to defend us against ourselves: to defend against that extraordinary temptation toward inhumanity to which almost without being aware, so many human beings mindlessly yield. Echoing the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, Merton challenges us to be human in this most inhuman of ages, and to guard the image of man for it is the image of God. (Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 6). With the demands and burdens of the age weighing so heavily on him, Merton understood his mission in the modern world to be to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open "for modern technological [persons] to recover the interiority of [their] own inner depths" (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 317).

This is Merton's most radical diagnosis of contemporary soul-sickness, his assessment of our deepest trouble as it arises in a host of symptoms from the very ground of that trouble: our incapacity for God and the inner deadness consequent to that fact. He insists that the problem of our age is our failure to mature as spiritual beings and realize that the infinite God is living within us.

[We] remain unaware of the presence of the infinite source of being right in the midst of the world and of [persons] . . . What is required of Christians is that they develop a completely modern and contemporary consciousness in which their experience as men [and women] of our century is integrated with their experience as children of God redeemed by Christ. (Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 222)

Where other prophets, poets, and philosophers deal with the symptoms of human soul-sickness in the economic, political, social, or psychological structures of human making, this mahatma—this great soul—goes to the roots of our dis-ease in the formation and structures of consciousness itself. Recalling the metaphor of the shaman, he is effective because this healer intimately knows the wounding and the forms of its cure. For the thousands who have read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton's is the story of the soul of our age. His narrative echoes and mirrors the spiritual condition of the contemporary person: a wounded orphan-child, rootless and restless, narcissistic and creative, vexed and tormented by the specters of evil under which he came into the world, suffering a kind of spiritual starvation that gnawed at him for the first half of his life. Merton even reflects our penchant for exposé, going public with his disorientation and hungers, his every love and conflict and struggle. We get to witness the drama of conversion and transformation played out in the voluminous documentation of his soul process. We get to explore with him that terrain of depth, mystery and jeopardy that is our own nature:

I have sought only to speak the truth as I see it, and to bear witness to what I have discovered by living in the world of the twentieth century, both without the light of Christ and with it. There is a

difference, and I have experienced the difference, and I have endeavored to say so. That is all. (Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 245)

Merton felt a deep compulsion to undertake a mission to assist in the great task of restoring the person for a state of fitness for God (see Gerald Twomey's introduction to *Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*, 2). His monastic choice—a choice of solitude and silence and stability—relocated Merton on a new ground where he could recover a new center of gravity for his own life by destroying all the escape routes from God and his true self:

You can't just immerse yourself in the world and get carried away with it. That is no salvation. If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support yourself. Suppose somebody is drowning and you are standing on a rock, you can do it; or supposing you can support yourself by swimming, you can do it. There is nothing to be gained by simply jumping in the water and drowning with him. (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 341)

So, fixed on the terra firma of Gethsemani he determined to address the soul of the age, saying that when speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to try to speak (Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 170-71). And speak he did, potent words out of potent silence. His vow of conversation committed him to decades of dialogue with a host of post-modernity's other voices: Pasternak, Suzuki, Heschel, Marcel, Maritain, Berrigan, Nhat Hanh, Day, King, Ruether, Baez, avant-guard beat poets of the 50s, protesters of the 60s, mystics and Zen masters, and lamas of endless incarnations—in dialogue with whom he gave voice to a culture's self-reflection and understanding. Merton spoke in a variety of languages and idioms on a vast array of subjects, from art and literature to philosophy and politics, engaging simultaneously high culture, pop culture, counter-culture, and spiritual culture. But his most distinct and original voice was the utterance of his own soul, which bore an elegance and subtlety that was almost revelatory of the elusive mystery about which it spoke.

. . . technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average [person] and does not convey what is personal and most universal in religious experience. Since my focus is not on dogma as such, but only on their repercussions in the life of the soul in which they find a concrete realization, I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul. (Thomas Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 18)

The quality of Merton's soul talk was, however, markedly different from the often narcissistic, self-absorbed, wound-talk of our generation. So often our contemporaries reveal their juvenility, supposing a license to whine, granting themselves permission to abdicate responsibility for the perilous challenge of taking one's life-stuff, whatever its distress, and fashioning it into authentically human being. No, for Merton soul-talk was clear, precise, and deep, unabashedly religious though always expansive and embracive, truly Catholic—and deliberately intelligent, something he prized as a qualifier of right speech. With his diamond-hard and clear vocabulary he cut through the layers of superficiality and made the descent into the soul. Deliberately situated on the margins of things with a view to deepening fundamental human experience, he could excavate and explore the human soul, as he believed was the true profession of the monk (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 305). With his fluency in the many languages of spirituality, Merton formulated a translation of their essential wisdom into a vernacular accessible to moderns and compatible with Christian revelation. What he sought to bring to light was our deep-seated rebellion against God and our resulting tendency toward death (James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, 25). This inherent pathology which disorients the human soul is in itself inexplicably mysterious, an auto-immune disease of the spirit which generates our disfigurement and our inner death; it is a darkness which obscures us to ourselves and each other our whole lives.

Everyone of us is shadowed by a false self. This is the [person] I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown to God is altogether too

much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33)

To locate and boldly identify the illusory or false self is the heart of the matter for Merton. It is the absolute requirement for the work of soul recovery, that task for which we were born.

In returning to God and to ourselves, we have to begin with what we actually are. We have to start from our alienated condition. We are prodigals in a distant country, 'the region of unlikeness,' and we travel far in that region before we seem to reach our own land (and yet secretly we are in our own land all the time!). (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 280-281)

Diagnosing the roots of our soul-sickness, Merton suggests the presence of what appear to be two forces at work in us. There is a centrifugal force in our natural being as it is now constituted that carries us away from our true identity and away from God. There is also a centripetal force which is God's gift to us beyond our natural being that draws us to return to our true self, so that we can become once again in God who we really are (William Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the True Self," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, 195).

The disorienting force is Merton's notion of original sin which propels us to build up a superficial, illusory ego without substance. The reorienting force that draws us to our center and creates a new self by uncovering the essence of the true self Merton identifies with the Holy Spirit. It is in the dialectic of these paradoxical and antithetical energies that we come to be or not to be. That really is the question for Merton: whether we shall give ourselves to that complex of unreality which is incapable of transcendence and therefore must end in death, or gradually come to awaken that true self, the immortal diamond, which sleeps silently in our depths waiting to be roused by the power of the Spirit. But Merton poses a dilemma reminding us that the inner self is as secret as God and, like God, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession.

It is a life that cannot be held and studied as an object, because it is not 'a thing'. It is not reached or coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation. All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of his presence. (Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham, 298)

How then can one come to this true self, this precinct of soul which is the early frontier of God? Merton says it is only by contemplation, in that delicate sinking into the true self, that the false self recedes and the original self awakens. As James Finley, Merton's former novice and one of his most eloquent interpreters, writes:

The core of our being is drawn like a stone to the quiet depths of each moment where God waits for us with eternal longing. But to those depths the false self will not let us travel. Like stones skipped across the surface of the water we are kept skimming along the peripheral, one-dimensional fringes of life. To sink is to vanish. To sink into the unknown depths of God's call to union with himself is to lose all that the false self knows and cherishes. (James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, 26)

Yet we desire to sink, are drawn to our own numinous subjectivity and depth with an inevitable longing, a kind of eternal homesickness, lovesickness—to travel to what Merton calls the *point vierge*, the virginal point, the white-hot point of mystical receptivity. Because if we could get there, which is to say, to get *here*, we would experience ourselves as safe, as held, carried, borne. Reborn.

There is only one problem on which my existence, my peace and happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 35-36)

There is, therefore the necessity and the urgency of the descent. Merton's prescription for healing the soul is to surrender to that delicate sinking into stillness and into wholeness, which is contemplation. Only the therapy of emptying—of *kenosis*—can reverse the damage of our consumptive filling up. We try to satisfy the hunger which is at root a hunger for God with all that is not God; and we try to slake the thirst of our spirit, which if suffered and obeyed could bring us to the rivers of delight. Only this contemplative practice of self-emptying can slowly transform the person, reversing our habits and values at the unconscious and preconscious levels, in an infinitely productive and luminous darkness which begins to light our way anew.

What then is discovered in this dark light of the soul? What is seen or glimpsed as if for the first time? For Merton the radiance toward which we descend in the habit of contemplation is nothing less than the reflection of our true face before we were born. That face is the image of the One whom we resemble as offspring and child. To sense the beauty, wholeness, and mystery of our authentic nature is to see our own true face before we were born, and to find ourselves on the horizon of infinite Being, the very lap of God.

To say I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 60)

If the deepest ground of my being is love, then in that very love itself and nowhere else will I find myself, and the world, and my brother [and sister] in Christ. It is not a question of either/or—but of all in one . . . of wholeness, wholeheartedness and unity . . . which finds the same ground of love in everything. (Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 155-156)

And so the contours of God's image in our own self comes more and more radiantly obvious to us the more we gaze into the shadows where we have been hiding—in all the distractions, in all the compulsions and all the distortions we have imposed on our true and subtle nature. Discovering the real features of our nature, its being and its truth, we realize that we are in a profound state of relation to that source of Being whom we call God. We are God's way of being in time, in history. We are God's way of being finite: here, now, this particular one—this particular *I AM*.

We exist solely for this, to be the place [God] has chosen for [God's] presence, [God's] manifestation in the world, [God's] epiphany. . . . If we once began to recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God in our being, the signature of God upon our being. (Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread*, 147)

Merton goes on to assure and instruct us that love alone gives us the true dimensions of our own reality. For we are created in the image and likeness of God who is Love, and therefore, the union with God that we are searching for must ultimately be a question of love ("Notes on Love," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart, 11). The guru and spiritual master who directs us and instructs us in this way of love, the path that leads us from the realm of unlikeness to likeness again, is none but the beloved, our beloved, in whatever form: Fortunately, "the love of our fellow man [and woman] is given us as the way of realizing this . . . It is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself and herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty" (Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread*, 147).

Can it come down to something so simple as this: to love, to become love? Is it to reiterate this gospel enfleshed in the one living word of Christ that this great soul Thomas Merton plunged

himself into silence in order to spend his life writing us this one extraordinarily long letter—a *love letter*? Is it for this—to recover the power to love—that we must labor in the dark night of contemplation to rehabilitate the soul whose true nature is the doing and being of love? Merton says yes. Yes: this is the insatiable diamond of spiritual awareness, a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in us (Thomas Merton, “Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity,” *Love and Living*, 176).

O my brother[s and sisters], the contemplative is [not] the [person] who has fiery visions of the cherubim carrying God on their imagined chariot, but simply [those] who have risked their mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust, that is to say, in the surrender of our poverty and incompleteness in order no longer to clench our minds in a cramp upon themselves, as if thinking made us exist. The message of hope the contemplative offers you, then, is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God: but that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, [abides with] you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing ever found in books or heard in sermons. The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that, if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union, in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and [God] are in all truth One Spirit. I love you, in Christ. (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 157-158)

The challenge, then is to recover our true selves—which is to say the *lover* in the self—which is to say, our *divine* nature. This is the very task for which we were born. Merton came to know this and the creative preoccupation of his whole life was to imagine a new and deeper metaphysic of the person and of love, and the capacity for communion written into our nature.

Whatever I may have written, I think all can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and one another in Christ . . . It is certainly true that I have written about more than the contemplative life. I have articulately resisted attempts to have myself classified as an inspirational writer. But if I have written about interracial justice, or thermonuclear weapons, it is because these issues are terribly relevant to one great truth: that [the human person] is called to live as a [child] of God. Persons must respond to this call to live in peace with all their brothers [and sisters] in the One Christ. (Thomas Merton, *A Statement Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library*, 14-15, in *The Thomas Merton Studies Center*)

Thomas Merton’s words echo from across the threshold of that newly spent century, from *The Seven Storey Mountain* of his youth to the *Asian Journal* of his maturity. He spoke to the soul of our age in every idiom and dialect his creative genius could manufacture. And his words became revelatory not simply in a prophetic way about our predicament, but in a mystical way about our potential. He addressed our souls and tried to waken them from their chronic narcosis and slumber. We found him disturbing and fascinating—utterly strange and utterly familiar. The great awakening that happened in Merton enlarged the dimensions of his soul and rendered him a mirror for our own soul reflection. His journey east in 1968 to Buddhist Asia—to the land of awakening—anticipated the journey of the soul of our age as well, which has grown beyond the boundaries of creed and cultic definition to new frontiers of spiritual discovery. He challenged us to the edge of enlightenment in Bangkok 36 years ago. Then with a shock, he left us there to stare at him all electrified and luminous, having discovered the secret of life in the creative energy of love—not as a sentimental or sensual indulgence, but as a profound and self-oblivious expression of freedom (Thomas Merton, “The Inner Experience,” in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham, 345).

Thomas Merton got his wish that 10th day of December 1968, the desire that had oriented his whole life and which he spoke into our own yearning as well: “May I not come back without having settled

the great affair. And also found the great compassion. I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body" (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 14-15). That home where he dwells now is indescribable, a hermitage and solitude so wide and deep as to be indwelling in everything, everywhere. In everyone he has inspired during these years of his greater expansion, he lives again and lives anew as *psychopomp*, as soul healer and revealer. Thomas Merton abides with us in the community of the Spirit, the communion of saints, as the great soul of our age. He risked the terrible descent into the depths of his true nature and charted a way for us to do likewise in these critical centuries, in this end-time, real-time, this crucial time of our spiritual evolution. There is a found-poem in Christopher Fry's play *A Sleep of Prisoners* which is reminiscent of Merton, and summarizes the manifesto and gospel of this Buddha man, this Christ again-awakened, risen: this great soul, mahatma.

The human heart can go the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is now winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move.
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul [folk] ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God, . . .
.....
What are you [waiting] for?
.....
It takes so many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity's sake.

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