

The Contemplative as Teacher: Learning from Thomas Merton

by
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In this paper, I am concerned mainly with the question of what distinguishes and characterizes Merton's teaching as a contemplative. In other words, in terms of content, purpose, and approach, how does Merton's teaching reflect his contemplative view of life? It seems to me that this is a critically important question to ask if we have any hope of linking the contemplative values Merton brought so compellingly to light with the work of education. As an introductory answer, I will highlight Merton's concern for the development of deep personal identity, for the recovery, as he once put it, of the integrity of our inner depths. I will refer also to several supporting and mutually reinforcing themes which largely define his teaching as a contemplative, namely: an intuitive way of knowing leading to awareness of the hidden presence and love of God, social and cultural understanding, transcultural consciousness, and wisdom or sapiential understanding.

Merton was a teacher for most of his adult life, starting when he was a masters student at Columbia University in the fall of 1938 and including all but his first formative years as a monk of Gethsemani. At Columbia he taught composition in the extension division, and continued as an assistant professor of English literature at what was then St. Bonaventure College up until his admission into Gethsemani Abbey on December 10th in 1941. He began teaching an introductory class in theology at Gethsemani in 1949, as well as a series of orientation classes for novices. Appointed Master of Scholastics in 1951, he became responsible for those monks studying for the priesthood, to be followed by ten years of service as Novice Master beginning in 1955. He gave weekly conferences in the monastery thereafter until he left on his fateful trip to the Far East.

Merton's monastic teaching was more person- and wisdom-oriented than knowledge-oriented, his concern more for who we are in a Christian existential sense than for what we know. "The whole idea of monastic formation is to form people," he said in discussing Confucian education with Gethsemani novices. In another context, he asserted that education should give "not only knowledge but also wisdom," and open and develop our basic human capacities. What did this focus on the person, and relatedly wisdom, mean for Merton, and what role does knowledge play in relation to it? Merton advised that we not confuse the ends and means of education, and recognize that the goal is to help ourselves develop a free and mature personal identity – not a pseudo-identity formed in response to some model in popular culture or an image of the ideal monk – but one based on a realisation of our

true or authentic selves, our interior selves beyond ego and pretense, our whole selves animated – given life – by the love of God.

In placing the person in this profound sense at the heart of educational purpose, Merton was by no means advocating individualism or selfcenteredness. Quite the contrary, to become a person in Merton's Christian and contemplative view involves very much becoming aware of one's fundamental relatedness to others, involves more deeply recognizing that God's love which is at the heart of our own being and identity unites us to the heart of all being, is the hidden ground of all life. It means learning to act in response to this love, indeed, learning to orient one's whole life as a response to this love, in this way making of one's whole life a kind of prayer.

Merton's person-oriented approach evolved continuously throughout his teaching life, with roots in his pre-monastic experiences as both a learner and teacher. For instance, though his subject was ostensibly composition, he confronted his first students at Columbia with questions that had a philosophical if not existential import. He reminds himself in his journal to tell his students how important "a writer's attitude towards life is," noting that "if [someone] writes remembering we must all, at some time or other, die, it is very important." Writing to confidant Bob Lax, he described the class in this way: "Teaching is candy. Wotta happy clars! They write essays about the funny sheet and the movies and now precisely I got them writing a big dirty argument whether money stinks and defiles the hands like pitch or not, and whether everybody ought to love everybody."

In the monastic context, Merton is quite focused and explicit in his effort to help his students discover their true identity. He has initially high and perhaps unrealistic expectations of what he and they can achieve in this respect, perhaps not unrelated to his own high spiritual aspirations at the time, as the following self-appraisal in his journal suggests:

It is now six months since I have been Master of the Scholastics and have looked into their hearts and taken up their burdens upon me. I have not always seen clearly and I have not carried their burdens too well and I have stumbled around a lot, and on many days we have gone around in circles and fallen into ditches because the blind was leading the blind.

I do not know if they have discovered anything new, or if they are able to love God more, or if I have helped them in any way to find themselves, which is to say: to lose themselves.

Over time, and in ways consistent with his growing contemplative identification with the world in hiddenness and compassion, Merton broadened his understanding of how to support the formation of his students as whole persons, with marked effect on his teaching.

According to Fr. John Eudes Bamberger, currently abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee, Merton's focus as the scholastics' teacher "was decidedly and explicitly spiritual, but based on exegesis and theological reasoning. He saw our greatest needs

as getting to understand the Christian mystery in a wholesome and integral way, free from moralism and rigidity and a too negative approach. He also understood that we needed to get to know ourselves at a deeper level, get in touch with our feelings and intuition." Merton characteristically worked up a succinct and comprehensive set of mimeographed notes for his students for each class; these notes reflect the exegetical and theological approach pointed out by Fr. Eudes. But, more significant in terms of his evolution as a contemplative and monastic teacher, Merton sought to awaken the innate intuitive capacity of his students, to develop an awareness of their intrinsic ability to apprehend the mystery and reality of their own being. As important as a conceptual and intellectual appreciation of spiritual theology was to the development of his students' understanding of their faith and their identity as persons, it was their direct intuition of the ground of their own being in God which could lead to a deeper awareness of themselves, what Merton refers to as "awareness of being" or "ontological awareness".

The theme of intuition appears in Merton's spiritual writing and quite explicitly in his teaching. His talk on the natural experience of God in the novitiate in 1963 is exemplary in this respect, as the following excerpt illustrates:

The natural knowledge of God is not purely that which you arrive to by reasoning ... we in the West tend to think that reasoning is the whole shooting match ... There is such a thing as intuitive natural knowledge of God

And there is this intuition of being, and not only a sense of one's own existence but a sense that everything exists; ... the whole thing is... this very strong experience of isness ... If you deepen that ... all that *is*, so to speak, becomes completely transparent ... and you see ... somehow or other beyond all this being is Infinite Being. And very simply one sees that this Infinite Being is our Father, a person; so this kind of realization ... should be part of everybody's normal equipment.

For Merton getting in touch with intuition paves the way for a deeper or interior approach to knowing; such knowing is a matter of experience and consciousness rather than speculation or deduction, and leads to what Merton called a "qualitative perception of reality," a recognition of reality "as a thing full of value ... shining with the light of God." As he puts it to the novices, "There's a difference between being able to check off on a questionnaire [in response to] 'Do you exist?' 'Yes' ... and having a real experience of one's own being, realizing one *is*." This epistemological concern helps to define Merton's approach to both learning and teaching as a contemplative.

Merton's interest in an intuitive or interior manner of knowing originated at least in part during the period of his own early monastic formation, with traceable roots in his premonastic studies in literature and spirituality. It is certainly informed by the monastic tradition of *lectio divina*, or meditative reading, on which Merton himself wrote, "All our reading should tend, in one way or another, to increase in us the knowledge and the love of God." It is reflected similarly in one of his first

writings on St. Bernard, in which he comments, "When we come to ask what is the wisdom of this world, we find that it consists not in a certain *type of subject matter* so much as a certain manner of knowing. The knowledge of created things is not reprehensible: far from it; we know that God made them precisely to arrive at the knowledge and love of him."

Taken together, these statements raise the question of Merton's understanding of the role of knowledge and the mind in the spiritual life and in the formation of personal identity. They reflect in part the value Merton placed on insight that intimates an authentic and lived experience of God, experience that in some sense transcends time and space. Merton became particularly adept as a teacher in making this kind of spiritual knowledge accessible to his students. A conference to the novices on St. Bernard is representative. Merton begins by assuring the novices that he does not intend to give a review of Bernard's work – that, he says, would be "like school" – and suggests that it might be possible "to find something in [his work] that made him a saint." He attunes the novices to the "resonances" and "echoes" of genuine inner experience reflected by Bernard's words, suggesting that they consider not the words themselves so much as their "implications"; ultimately these "implications" point to the reality of God's presence in the heart of our own being. Merton in this instance of his teaching fosters a manner of knowing which can discern in a work distant historically an expression of a lived and powerful experience of reality that transcends time, noting only that we have to transpose it "into our time and our way of looking at things".

As important as it was to Merton's teaching to focus on content linked to deep interior experience and spiritual insight, he hardly disdained other sources of knowledge. He himself was an ardent student of psychology and anthropology, and occasionally ventured into other knowledge domains as well. Once, after a try at understanding quantum physics, he enthused in his journal, "Neils Bohr and Co. are definitely among my number one culture heroes. This magnificent instrument of thought they developed to understand what is happening in matter, what energy is really about – with their confrontation of the kind of thing that Herakleitos was reaching for by intuition. It is terribly exciting, though I can't grasp any of it due to the fact that I have never had even high school physics and the equations are just hieroglyphics that represent to me no known animal." Interestingly enough, Merton's enthusiasm was not based on real comprehension. The key to understanding it is found in his manner of knowing, in particular, in his capacity for apprehension; what quantum physics disclosed about the created world resonated with his intuitive and contemplative apprehension of reality.

What Merton does, in terms of knowing and knowledge, is to capture anew a quality of knowing alien to our modern and western consciousness, one that reflects an integral relationship between mind and heart, between lived inner experience and insight, between intellect and intuition, and between understanding and being. This way of knowing seems an important, if not necessary basis for growth in wisdom and contemplative awareness. In fostering it, Merton provides a striking and instructive

contrast to the all-too-familiar approach in which learning is construed as a matter of acquisition, of absorption, control, and manipulation of information by a detached and unreflective individual, or as a purely cerebral act. Merton's understanding of the purpose and manner of knowing implies a profound interior or ontological openness and attentiveness, and the possibility of a new, renewed, or deeper re-orientation of self in love. As he put it simply, "We study in order to love."

In his teaching, Merton manifests his concern for an interior way of knowing oriented to an awareness of being and the presence of God in a number of different ways. He addresses it directly and conceptually, using the work of spiritual writers such as St. Bernard as a springboard. Reflecting deeply his own contemplative or spiritual understanding, he also uncovers the quality of inner experience filtering through time and the words of persons who, as he says, "had more than their own share of humanity," and links it directly – often with sharp psychological and cultural insight – to his and his students ideas about the spiritual life and needs as monks and persons in the moment. Dramatically during the final period of his teaching in the novitiate and beyond, he appropriates a wide range of cultural and intellectual resources – most notably from the humanities, religion, and anthropology – to illustrate what we might call the experience of being, in part as a necessary contrast to cultural ways of seeing and knowing shaping the vision and understanding of his students, and in part to prepare them to move beyond these constraints to a more transcultural consciousness, which he himself strove for as an outgrowth of his own contemplative identification with others in hiddenness and compassion. Finally, and perhaps representing his greatest distinguishing characteristic as a contemplative and teacher, Merton at his best brings his students into contact with a kind of sapiential experience, providing them literally with a taste of wisdom, by bringing the spiritual dimension of a work clearly to light. I will conclude with several examples to illustrate some of these features of Merton's teaching.

In 1964, near the end of his ten years as Novice Master, Merton began a series of conferences on art and poetry. This marks the beginning of a tremendous expansion of the traditional monastic curriculum by Merton, and corresponds directly to what he was advising for monastic education at the time, namely, that it "must seek to develop the special human capacities which will enable [the monk] to experience the deepest values of the contemplative life. These values ... imply a certain aesthetic and intuitive awareness, a 'taste' and connaturality or a capacity to savour (in an experience that cannot easily be formulated) the deepest truths of the Christian life." To the monks during a session on poetry he explains, "Let's get back to this question now of poetry ... the idea of poetry as an expression of spiritual experience, the idea of getting close to the way in which poetry expresses spiritual and interior experience ..." He discusses the nature of lyric poetry as song, asking "What is a song, and what does a song say that cannot be said in any other way?", and explains that a song "reaches.. into the heart of your being A song is much more appropriate to a

deeper activity than just thought, and the deeper activity is love." (Poetry: Tape 199; notes, p.63)

Within a year of introducing art and poetry to the novices, Merton offered a conference on Bantu philosophy. Indicative of his effort to expand his fellow monks' consciousness of life beyond the bounds of their own culture, time, and place, he begins, "I am very interested in this whole question of primitive kinds of philosophy, and primitive outlook on life and being ... it's closer to the Bible, for example, than some of the stuff that we have with our post-Cartesian viewpoint." He says that in contrast to our culturally reinforced mental habit of standing back, of analysing, judging, and categorising from a distance, the Bantu apprehension of reality is more direct, immediate, and concrete. According to Merton, we may have lost "this kind of direct intuition" or "intuitive knowledge," so important to the contemplative life, which he describes in this conference as a "life of intuitive contact with reality." This is but one instance of Merton's effort to open up culturally unfamiliar ways of understanding, as part of the process of developing a more contemplative and transcultural orientation to reality.

His conference on William Faulkner's "The Bear" is perhaps the best demonstration of Merton's ability as a teacher to awaken spiritual insight through the power of story and the faculties of intuition and imagination. Merton wrote in discussing Faulkner's work of the potential of creative writing as a "privileged area for wisdom in the modern world." In its greatest expression, through a kind of existential or spiritual symbolism, literature can create an experience in which our whole selves are implicated and affected. As Merton puts it, we are brought "into living participation with an experience of basic and universal human values which words can point to but cannot fully attain." Faulkner's story "The Bear" is one such sapiential work. In it, young Ike McCaslin is drawn increasingly into the woods by the near-mythical presence of a bear which tantalizes hunters in a yearly ritual of respectful aspiration and frustration. Merton traces McCaslin's journey in spiritual terms, describing it "as a pattern of spiritual formation." There is a significant juncture in the journey when young Ike becomes aware that the bear sees him, although he cannot see the bear. To know that the bear recognises him is a whole new experience, creates a whole new sense of himself in relation to the bear. Merton parallels this awakening moment with what happens in the spiritual life, noting "that it's very important in the life of prayer to realize that one is apprehended, one is heard, that there is a relationship." Merton amplifies the theme of awareness in relation to the bear as he describes how Ike slowly and symbolically strips himself of the trappings and mind set of the hunter and opens himself up, as it were, to the bear's presence. He stresses, "It is very important indeed to cultivate this kind of awareness in all levels of our life." Ike sees the bear, the moment of theophany, only when he leaves behind his gun, his watch, his compass and his stick, and, to use Faulkner's word, "relinquishes" himself "to" the wilderness. Merton concludes, "The whole business of growth is knowing when to let go.. then all of a sudden, you'll find that it'll just work by itself — you'll see the bear, see".

At least in part, to teach in light of Merton's contemplative view of the world means opening others to a way of knowing which, although it may mean relinquishing familiar personal and cultural markers of identity, may lead to the deeper level of awareness and identity Faulkner's Ike McCaslin experiences in relation to the bear.

