The Hospitable Hermitage: Where the Hearts of God, Self, Other and World meet.

by
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Before a phrase like "your heart is my hermitage" could take on any genuinely healthy meaning in Merton's life, he had to learn to be at home in the hermitage of his own heart. A hermitage is a place you can live in – a sacred space. It is a space that invites you to a deepened life and to spaciousness – a spaciousness that is inclusive of God, world, and others. Before it makes any sense to say "your heart is my hermitage", before you can be comfortable, spacious, and non-defensive in the heart of another, you must be able to be comfortable and "at home" in your own heart. Too often people seek to enter the hearts of others or of God as an escape from the confinements and shadows of their own hearts.

The heart is the primary metaphor for the deep center of our true selves. In our hearts reside not only our capacity for love and relatedness, but also our experiences and memories of love that has fallen short; of love, loss and relationships that hurt, deform and diminish our humanity. In our hearts also reside the "hidden ground of love" from which the still small voice of God whispers our true names. Being centered in one's heart is the key to living a life of connection and integrity with self, God, others and the world. The monastic journey of Thomas Merton is a journey of the heart.This journey has many stages. In Merton's case the stages could be named – "the overwhelmed heart"; "escape from the wounded heart"; "bypassing one's own heart to seek the heart of God"; "embracing the heart"; and "the hospitable heart". In this paper I intend to broadly trace Merton's journey from the homelessness of his young, overwhelmed heart to the hospitable hermitage of Merton's mature heart, a place where the hearts of God, self, other and world meet and form a compassionate community.

The Overwhelmed Heart

Merton's early life left his heart with an overwhelming legacy of grief. The loss of his mother, the rootlessness and unpredictability of his father, and then his father's death, combined with other losses and much moving around flooded Merton's young heart with an amount of traumatic experience that just could not be processed. Childhood trauma can profoundly disconnect us from God, our true selves, and from authentic relationships to others. In Merton's case the overwhelming

amount of loss and rejection led to a feeling of being hollow, empty, and inauthentic. Judy Herman, an expert on the effect of traumatic experience, has written:

> Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. [1]

Escape From the Wounded Heart

His "overwhelmed heart" basically shut down for self preservation. Like Mary, he "kept all these things in his heart", only he did so unconsciously, and developed a provisional or false self to make his way in the world. He began to live life from the outside-in, trying to fill the emptiness and incompleteness he felt through grasping after the things and experiences of the world. This stage I have called "escape from the wounded heart". For the next several years, Merton tried to fill up the emptiness within by embracing the world without, and all that it had to offer, as if that alone could give his life meaning and a sense of purpose. Personally, I feel too much has been made of Merton's wild lifestyle by others and also by Merton himself. The disgust that he felt with the world and himself was not so much because of the moral failure it implied, but rather at its core, it represented a flight from his heart - the heart that was holding all the "unexperienced experience" of his childhood woundedness.

He was aware that something in his inner world was amiss. During 1941, which was a year of great turmoil and ferment in Merton's life, he writes:

> I am not physically tired, just filled with a deep, vague undefined sense of spiritual distress, as if I had a deep wound running inside me and it had to be stanched. As if I ought to go back to the chapel, or try to say something in a poem. The wound is only another aspect of the fact that we are exiles on this earth. [2]

Bypassing One's Own Heart To Seek the Heart of God

When it became clear to him, at least on some level that the world would never be able to fill him or give him a sense of peace, he moved into the next stage, which I have called "bypassing one's own heart to seek the heart of God". This is a common stage that I have witnessed in many people who carry around unconsciously a deep layer of unhealed hurt and pain. Merton's entrance into Gethsemani was a flight from the world, from the pain of the world, and from the pain of the self that the world had formed. He was sick and disgusted with the world and with himself and wanted to seek and live for God alone. This spiritual escapism or "spiritual bypassing" is often an attempt to flee one's self and one's pain by focusing on

spiritual matters. If one gets "holy" then one can avoid the muck of one's own heart and life. Although the impulse to seek God can be authentic, many people, and particularly survivors of childhood trauma, want to skip the journey and get right to the destination.

Merton's monastic experience began with a "contemptus mundi". Gethsemani became a sanctuary, a safe place, an escape. Though it began as spiritual by-passing, it evolved, over time, into an authentic recovery of his true self and a "right" and compassionate relation with others. The beauty of the spiritual journey is that when it's done with integrity and sincerity, even if it began with the wrong motivation, it will lead truly into the presence of God who will lead us through whatever we need to go through that we may find the wholeness that we seek.

Solitude and contemplation conspired with stability and structure to grow Merton whole from the inside out. This journey toward wholeness, toward recovery of his full humanity from childhood woundedness, would continue for the rest of his life. His journey, like everyone's, had its ups and downs, its deserts and oases, its graceful moments and moments of distortion. But it was a process to which Merton staved faithful through the early lean years of rigidity to the breath-takingly open years of 1958 on. "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts". [3] In the rest of the paper I intend to explore certain aspects of that interior journey.

Embracing the Heart

Merton was slowly beginning to learn to live with the ambiguities and complexities of his own heart. In a talk to novices Merton says:

> "If I love God, I've got to love him with my heart. If I love him with my heart I've got to have a heart, and I've got to have it in my possession to give . One of the most difficult things in life today is to gain possession of one's heart in order to be able to give it. We don't have a heart to give. We have been deprived of these things, and the first step in the spiritual life is to get back what we have to give.." [4]

In order to get back his heart, Merton needed to embrace it, to accept it with all of its pain and imperfection. The monastic life turned out to be not an escape from self, but a journey toward the true self, the heart. Armand Veilleux writes:

> The goal of monastic life is to get to know oneself - to know one's heart - which means to "return to the Center", to go back to the roots, to the core of one's being, where one can ultimately encounter God... [T]he common denominator of the persons that we could call 'monastics' would be the fact that they are all people who, in their search for God, go through the path of their own heart. This is, in fact, our only possible way to God. [5]

In *Sign of Jonas*, around the time of his thirty-fifth birthday, there is an immense struggle and eruption from within. This is the classic time for the return of the repressed. Jung marked the turning point into middle age at thirty five. During this time the energy that usually goes out into the world, or in Merton's case into the world, then into the externals of the Trappists, begins to get withdrawn and turns within, activating the unconscious. This is when the journey toward wholeness begins in earnest. But the first leg is usually the task of facing one's own inner demons, or shadow as Jung called it. It means facing those parts of ourselves and their concomitant feelings, that we have pushed aside or repressed. Or in the case of trauma, and I think this is the case with Merton, the return of those feelings that were just too painful and overwhelming for a small child to feel.

In an entry in the *Sign of Jonas* Merton writes:

> Tuesday at the Night Office - Psalm 54 [55] had tremendous meaning for me. I felt as if I were chanting something I myself have written. It is more my own than many of my poems:
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> *My heart is troubled within me: and the fear of death is fallen upon me. Fear and trembling are come upon me: and darkness hath covered me. And I say who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest? Lo, I have gone far off, flying away; and I abode in the wilderness. I waited for him that hath saved me from pusillanimity of spirit and a storm.* [6]

During these early stages of his path through the heart Merton identified with the prophet Jonas, in the belly of a whale, riding in the depths of the seas. He was uncanny in his ability to capture the paradoxical truth of his experiences in certain symbols or images. Clearly, Jonas was an apt symbol for the journey to his depths where he had to confront the early feelings of loss, grief, pain and abandonment, that surely must have felt like overwhelming "monsters" to a young child's psyche.

Annie Dillard writes:

> In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned. [7]

Merton through his writing, his vow of stability and his practice of prayer and contemplation was able to "ride the monsters deeper down" to the matrix of the heart where God, self, other and world interpenetrate.

At the core of Merton's heart and ours lies our oneness in Christ, our true identity which paradoxically makes us unique and is the common connection among us. This 'New Man' or 'True Self' resides under the false accretions of individual personality that have been built up through acculturation and experience. Stripping these away, and the illusions that go with them is one of the major tasks of the contemplative life and the recovery of one's heart.

Recovery of one's heart involves the opening up of one's inner world, accessing those parts that have been repressed or dissociated, and maintaining a healthy connection with the Center. Merton reflects in "The Inner Experience": "The first thing you have to do, before you start thinking about such a thing as contemplation, is to try to recover your basic natural unity, to reintegrate your compartmentalized being into a coordinated simple whole, and learn to live as a unified human person. This means you have to bring back together fragments of your distracted existence..." [8]

As Merton moved toward recovering those parts of himself that were split off in childhood, he had a growing reconnection with the world around him. The more the reconnection occurred within himself, the more he had the capacity and desire to reconnect with the world. In this final section of the paper, I intend to explore this interplay between inner and outer unity and reconnection in Merton's life.

The Hospitable Heart

To enter into a place where the words "Your heart is my hermitage" is a reality that speaks of the "hidden wholeness" of deep interconnectedness and not just words, is to be able to enter the depths of one's own heart. Merton, through his contemplation and solitude was able to enter his own heart and find there the experience of being at one with others, through Christ, in the desert of compassion.

Merton realized that "[w]e do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them: we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good." [9]

As Merton's healing journey continued there was a softening of his rejection of the world. As he became more accepting of the different parts of himself, he became more accepting of the world and people around him. On a rare trip to Louisville in 1948 Merton ponders: "I wondered how I would react meeting once again, face to face, the wicked world and found it after all not so wicked. Perhaps the things I resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it. Now, on the contrary, I found that everything stirred me with a deep and mute sense of compassion".[10] This newfound deep sense of compassion for the world did not stay "mute" forever. Merton was feeling more connection with the monks inside the monastery and more desire for connection with people outside. His famous experience at Fourth and Walnut, where he felt love, compassion and

connection with all the people around him on the street, was an outward expression of his growing inner unity.

The true life he had discovered and recovered was now something he wanted to share with others. He stressed in his writings that a monk did not just live for himself. "It is the peculiar office of the monk in the modern world to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open for modern technological man to recover the integrity of his own inner depths." [11]

Other signs that his heart was growing into a spacious, hospitable hermitage of wholeness and connectedness are: his diverse and voluminous correspondence; his deep and intimate relationship with nature; his openness and delight in exploring other spiritual traditions; his writings on social issues such as peace and civil rights; his exploration of his artistic side, other than writing, with photography and art; his deep humanity as expressed in his wonder and delight in life and laughter; his more honest and risky relationship with women. Many people who visited Merton at his hermitage were struck by his simplicity, humanity and ability just to be who he was without artifice.

Merton has come full circle. From his wounded early life of outer mobility and inner constriction, he has evolved to outer stability and inner openness. He has moved from fleeing the world in disgust to embracing the world in compassion. His spirituality evolved from a desire to deny himself and seek God alone to a recognition that searching for his true self, reconnecting with God, other people and the world are all somehow interrelated. Finding any one of the four in depth and truth, leads one into true connection with the others. "To be holy is a question of appreciating where one is in life and learning to foster the vital connections that are already operative."[12]

At an informal talk given in India just weeks before his tragic death, Merton observed: "The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers we are already one. But we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are." [13]

Notes and References

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