

"It is there all the time..."

MERTON AS A GUIDE TO AWARENESS

Esther de Waal's latest book, *Lost in Wonder* owes a debt to Thomas Merton's way of seeing. Here she explains why, and includes an extract from the book on the practice of Walking in Awareness

A LETTER APPEARED ON MY DESK asking if *The Merton Journal* could use extracts from my recent book in their next issue? I was delighted, and realised how appropriate that would be as an act of homage to the man who more perhaps than any other, has helped me in the art of seeing which is the theme of this book.¹

That we should have to learn, or rather re-learn, the art of seeing is of course sad but true. It was brought home to me vividly during my brief career as a school-master in one of England's more prestigious public schools. That sentence perhaps needs a little explanation. Arriving to live in Canterbury in September at the start of the school year, a persuasive head master told me that he needed a replacement for a history master taken ill and that I should take his place. I was given the youngest classes, the boys who had just arrived from their preparatory schools and were mercifully not yet bound by any tiresome syllabus. Having never before taught in a school and given a free hand, I chose to study the archaeology and architecture of the city. One afternoon having taken them through the roof spaces of the cathedral (it was useful being able to combine the roles of Dean's wife and history teacher) I set them their homework: to write about the experience and tell me what they had seen. The reaction was one of anxiety and dismay—they were used to copying out from their textbooks or to write notes on some set topic, but to tell

me what they had seen in the amazing space that they had just been exploring, to express the relationship of vaults, ribs and bosses, the range of arch and pillar, the play of light and shadow, left them totally non-plussed.

This is a sad comment on what happens to too many of us. Small children see naturally, they see with delight and with wonder. Then at some point that vision is lost, overtaken by the pressures of an outside world, whether of books or television or computer games, and that natural gift seems to disappear. The book that I have just written is essentially an exploration into the way in which my own ability to see, to see attentively, to see beyond, has been nurtured in recent years. I owe a debt to many people, writers, artists, poets (and I acknowledge that in the pieces for reflection which end every chapter), but it is undoubtedly above all Thomas Merton who has shaped my vision.

Any monastic vocation, whether Christian or non-Christian, is ultimately about attentiveness. It is a call to pay attention, to be vigilant, watching and waiting—after all the day begins for Benedictines and Cistercians with the office of Vigils. The prologue to the Rule of St Benedict speaks of *apertis oculis*, and I love the way in which the Latin sounds enhance the sense that we should see with sharply attuned eyes. Merton lived this out. He wrote so simply and pithily that sentences run through my mind like catch phrases:

"It might be a good thing to open our eyes and see."

"We don't have to run after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us."

"Every day is different and every day is the same."
"It was so bright and new I wanted to cry out, and I got tears in my eyes from it."

"To go out to walk slowly in this wood—this is more important and significant at the moment than a lot of analysis and reporting on things of the spirit".

But he not only wrote about it; he shows us how he saw in the way in which he used his camera.² I realised this myself by looking at his photographs, spending time with them.³ There is a passage in Ron Seitz's memoir *A Song for Nobody* which tells us a great deal about what underlay his use of the camera, and it has meant much to me, for it shows me the distinction between looking and seeing. He and this young and enthusiastic man are walking together through the woods, each with their cameras, and Merton stops him from taking so many quick pictures.

Looking means that you already have something in mind for your eye to find; you've set out in search of your desired object and have closed off everything else presenting itself along the way. But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and not targeted. The same holds for listening as opposed to *hearing*! You can't appreciate sound or music already knowing or expecting what's to come, excluding all else surrounding it. That way you're making it do, not allowing it to be...⁴

What he says about being focused but not targeted I have found carries profound implications for the way in which I approach the whole of life. I take it both literally and metaphorically. I remember once hearing a Benedictine monk in America saying that the intention of our lives should be continually to focus and re-focus on the person of Christ.

Walking, whether round my garden

or walking through life with eyes open and hands open to whatever comes and bringing to it my full attention sounds so simple. Yet I have found that it needs practice. As a result I tried in the appendix to the chapter on 'Attention' to give my readers some practical help, and this is taken from the two opening pages:

WALKING IN AWARENESS

I begin in silence and as I start to enter that silence I try to become aware of my breathing. I spend a moment or two to alert myself to God's presence, and to take a deep breath of air. With gratitude I thank God for this air which I can so easily take for granted, and yet it is the substance of my life, of all life, it comes from that unceasing generosity of God which holds me and the whole universe in existence.

I start to walk very slowly and deliberately. As I place my feet (and if it is possible and sensible I am barefoot) on the ground I try to be aware that I am blessed by it and in turn I bless it. This is a reciprocal act of giving and receiving. O God to bless the earth beneath my feet; O God let the earth bless me.

I want to use all my senses, the fullness of my physical self, and at the point I list those five God-given gifts: of sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell.

I try to stop thinking and instead simply to be. I try to let go, to let everything drop away so that I can be totally present to whatever may reach me through my senses.

My first act is to listen, and if I stand still, with closed eyes, it helps to sharpen my perception of the variety of sounds around me—sounds close to me, nearer sounds and distant sounds, the sounds that come from the earth and those that come from the sky.

If I am somewhere in a city there will probably be only the sounds made by human activity. Yet even here we

should listen with openness, for as a New York apartment dweller, bound by his agoraphobic condition to remain indoors, can say, 'sounds move you emotionally', as he learnt to listen to the sounds from the streets below.

Even if I manage to find what seems like silence then even that apparent silence is in fact teeming with sound—as we are reminded in the story of Elijah when he finds himself surrounded by what a modern translation renders as a 'sound of sheersilence' (1 Kings. 19.12).

When I open my eyes and I begin to walk, I do so slowly and deliberately. I want to look with both the outer and the inner eye, taking in a wide arc from the height of the heavens to the ground below me. I begin to notice the diversity of structures, shapes outlined against the sky, patterns in all their diversity, light and shadow, in their contrasts, and the relationships between them. As my vision sharpens I begin to see the range of the colour green in the country. It may be that I find something that is only a part, a fragment of the whole, yet it is still to be treasured, for each unique element has a worth of its own.

In the town I may have to make more of an effort if I am walking the streets I know well with a new eye. I begin with my feet, looking at the cracks in the pavements,

the variety of pattern of the drain-covers, or the gas mains, and then I look upwards to the roof level, to the clusters of chimney pots in all their variety of design set against the sky, or the starkness of the silhouettes of the television masts and aerials with their dramatic geometric shapes.

Notes and References

1. *Lost in Wonder, Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentioness*, Canterbury Press, Norwich; Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota, 2003.
2. Paul Pearson wrote about the recent exhibition of photographs at the Thomas Merton Center in Kentucky in the *Advent* number of *The Merton Journal*, 2003, Vi 10, no 2, pp.30-32.
3. The abbey of Gethsemani and the Merton Trust were generous enough to let me have about thirty of them while I was writing my book, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, and they then allowed me to keep them, saying that they believed I would put them to good use. I have indeed tried to make them available, not only when I have given retreats but also in exhibitions in Oxford, Rochester Cathedral and most recently in Bath. That book is no longer in print in this country, but in America it is published by St Anthony's Messenger Press, Cincinnati Ohio.
4. Subtitled *A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*, it is, as Br Patrick Hart says in his introduction the account of a very intimate friendship, expressed in prose, poetry and photography. Triumph Books, Ligouri, Missouri, 1993, pp 133-4.

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OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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