

Moved by Grace: The Joy of the Gospel and the Misery of Creativity

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Echoes of joy

You sang your presence in poetry. Breathed beauty into
our lives.

You gathered us all in, put a pulse to our innocence,
locked love in our hearts.

Then left. Fled smiling, still singing. Parting the trees and
waters with laughter.

A joyous time of it, you had.

And we are deeper, more true, for your going.

We have been called to task.

Yours, the note let loose. Ours, the word unsaid.

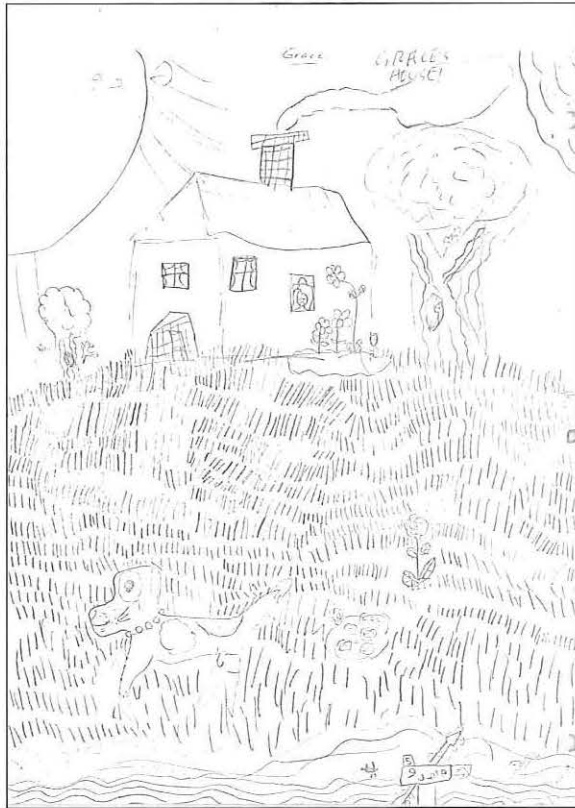
Do we hear? And will we answer?

That is our calling.

A thousand years, a thousand poems, will not undo you,
Thomas Merton.¹

I see this picture of Grace's House, and I remember one playful evening with a student of psychology. 'Draw a house,' he said. So I drew a house, and he began to read it: Is there smoke from the chimney? What kind? Are there curtains? What are the door and windows like? Is the house set apart? Where is it...?

As though the picture of the house echoed some primal emotions about mother, early childhood, comfort or discomfort, longings... perhaps even pre-natal, mystical floating in dependence, union, innocence. The house signals both longing and archaic memory.



Grace's House

All speculation, you might say. A playful game, a reading of signs. It came back to me as I re-read the poem inspired by drawings by Grace and Clare Sisson enclosed with a letter sent to Merton in 1962 by his friend, their father, Elbert Sisson of Maryland.² 'I was so moved by Grace,' writes Merton in reply, 'and by her house and by her lovely little self that I wrote a poem which I enclose.' He is careful not to forget Clare, who 'even more than Grace,' he writes, 'has just stolen my heart completely and I don't know what to do or say.'

It is the picture of Grace's house which captures his poetic imagination: landscape, home, childhood – poignant and recurrent themes for Merton. His responsive poem³ is on one level simply a detailed description of elements of the picture (solid smoke, knotholes, a smiling dog, a river, a rabbit ...). On another level it is celebration and thanksgiving, yearning and revelation and lament. He reads the picture, and finds reflected there archaic, biblical and mystical impulses:

'Grace's house is secure ...' In a world of threat, violence and uncertain futures.
 'No blade of grass forgotten ...' like remembered hairs, or a falling sparrow.⁴
 'All the curtains are arranged ... for seeing', from a place of innocence and clarity.

And love reaches across the gulf between a cloistered monk and a young girl toward whom there is no path: 'Mailbox number 5 is full of Valentines for Grace'.

Merton then writes of what is *not* there in the picture: 'There is no path to the summit ...' and naïve notions of progress need be left behind. For now, at least. There is no path drawn to Grace's house. Instead there is, between our world and hers, a sweet river. This is no fordable stream, but:

'the uncrossed crystal water
 Between our ignorance and her truth.'

We may hear echoes of longing, of yearning, perhaps of regret. Does the picture evoke a paradise, a child's world around this archetypal hill, this womb of mysteries? Merton's words are laden, and they resonate with the ways in which a student of psychology had been reading another picture of another house all those years ago. What if we had begun from elsewhere, with pencils, crayons, paper, and our own creativity? What might have been revealed? Would the game have

worked? Would it have worked if we knew we were going to be read? Would we have chosen rather to hide behind those curtains? Self-consciousness, self-editing, self-presentation and all that transactional anticipation just get in the way. The complexity of adulthood, knowledge of good and evil, opens up a gulf (or is it an impassable river?) between what is and what could be. Circles within circles.

The emperor's new clothes?

Merton sent the poem to his friend and teacher, Mark Van Doren, commenting that 'we do not know where we are ... There are circles within circles, and ... if we choose we can let loose in the circle of paradise the very wrath of God ... But children can, if they still will, give us the lie and show us our folly.'⁵ Indeed they can. A 'naked king paraded out into the street where all the people were gathered to admire his suit of clothes, and all did admire it until a child dared to point out that the king was naked.'⁶ And we may smile in recognition as we hear the tale, whilst missing the more everyday revelations available to us, the ways in which children at their best can alert us to what matters – and what doesn't. For, Merton continues in his letter to Van Doren, 'we are more and more persistent in refusing to see any such thing. All we see is the image, the absurd image, the mask over our own emptiness.'⁷

Perhaps Merton is right and we are simply *refusing* to see. Or is it that we simply *cannot* see, as the womb of mysteries becomes for us a womb of collective illusion?. 'Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' asks Nicodemus.⁸

Of course not. There is no returning to first innocence, to a supposed pre-linguistic paradise, even if mystical experience *can* seem to be a kind of ambiotic immersion. The rumour we have heard, however, is of re-birthing by water and spirit, a different kind of awakening, from the womb of collusion and collective illusion, into a paradise which just may be all around us. We may, after all, be in the

midst of it and it in the midst of us. The wind blows where it chooses, Jesus tells Nicodemus. We hear the sound of its passing, but know not whence it comes or where it goes. A child's picture of a house, 'on a fair summit prepared by [those primordial] winds,' for just a moment awakened someone's awareness and longing.

The emerging road cannot take us back, only forwards

Because young Grace Sisson knew that Merton was reading her picture (how and when she knew, we cannot say), she offered him another picture some five years later, this time with a path – a road to joy. She wanted to give Merton what he was longing for. 'I am glad to see you still draw things with love,' Merton replied,

and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realizing. When I say that, I don't want you to start thinking about it. You already know it without thinking about it.⁹

And here we are, thinking about it. But we are not that child, Grace Sisson. In fact we are not children at all, in any ordinary sense. There may nevertheless linger within us an echo of that voice which says 'don't complicate my simple faith.' We may hear such things in our churches. We occasionally hear versions of it at the seminary, where studies in theology (or just the *idea* of studying theology) are experienced by some students as unsettling, even threatening. As though something may be lost in the process. As though, perhaps, a secure place may be either dismantled or overwhelmed. The sources of unsettledness are not always clear. Does the appeal (not to complicate or threaten a simple faith) arise from fear of losing a lingering, rose-tinted memory, mistaken for a road to joy?

Merton idealised children, perhaps because he was never responsible for children, nor lived with any. The appeal, "don't complicate my

simple faith” (faith in Jesus, in people, in the world as I know it), may be associated with an idealised version of childhood or a fantasy innocence. It doesn’t sound like a child’s voice. Children I’ve known tend to be more exploratory, fired by curiosity and wonder. They want to be sophisticated, to shun childish ways, to kick away any notion that their perspective is either innocent or simple. It is adults who voice such things, when we fear appearing stupid, or when critical thinking feels like too much effort or responsibility. The self-professed simple faith of an adult is altogether different from the feisty (or sullen) energies of contemporary childhood, or the directness and freshness of a child who can still ‘draw things with love.’

The supposed simple faith which adults want to wear is more like a shell, even body armour, defending fiercely against the complexity of experience. Merton in the poem highlights ‘a spangled arrow’ pointing ‘from our Coney Island,’ from that archetypal amusement park, that place of fabricated play and mechanized fun, the kind of place which can evoke mixed feelings in an adult: on a good day, playful and entertaining, a re-enactment of childhood; on other days, a place where masks fall off to reveal machinery of distraction, triviality and consumerism. Disappointing, to say the least. Coney Island had its day. Meanwhile Disneyland flourishes, delighting adults with its surprisingly powerful nostalgic resonances, and that safe-house kind of comfort we prefer not to dismantle or critique. ‘That’s our childhood you’re toying with!’

Where is joy?

These places work so much better in the company of young children whose wide-eyed delight we might briefly and vicariously share. And it is the young child’s delight that we need, to help us avert our gaze from the machine-slick industry intent on pulling us apart from our money at every turn. Whatever transient pleasures or distractions these magic-factories offer; they can never be places of real joy –

despite their blatant promises. For they are no more than a parody of our longings and our liberty.

The ethos of our society certainly places an enormous emphasis on ‘having fun,’ but our whole concept of joy is mendacious because it is servile. Even the fun that we have is for a purpose. It is justified not by its gratuity, its simple celebration of the gift of life, but by its utility. It makes us feel better, therefore helps us to function better, work better, get ahead in life. Since our fun usually costs something – one cannot have fun without buying all kinds of toys, commodities, and refreshments – it helps the economy....¹⁰

These words are from the last section of Merton’s 1966 classic, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. A few pages on, he addresses this parody of joy. I wonder whether he was also recalling memories of school days in Oakham when he wrote these words for which I hope Anglican friends will forgive me (and him, for what he says is surely not just about Anglicans):

I can remember that one of the things I found most exasperating in Anglicanism – or in the peculiar sort to which I was subjected – was the facility with which preachers could enthuse over airplanes, radios, and other wonders of that time. It was this fatuous ‘joy-of-living’ view of Anglican religion that made me want to become a Roman Catholic.¹¹

Adult talk of joy can be fatuous, glib, unhelpful: just as our sombre, cheerless despondency or grumbling can be draining. Cadbury and Disney may evoke longings or rose-tinted nostalgia, but we know well enough that the way to joy through adulthood tends to be more complex than a simple decision to re-enact childhood, where fantasy

and playfulness should have no real consequence. What do we do with real and persistent dissatisfactions with how things are, which gather as we grow? Do we carry with us memories of fear or despair, or disappointment or failure? What to do with inadequacies, with our sense of being complicit in harm, our lack of power to change much for the better, even ourselves? How does joy rise up again, this far down the road?

There is no road to Grace's house, wrote Merton. There is no simple pathway to a place of child-like security and contentment. Whether or not such a place ever exists for actual children, Grace's picture reminds us that it certainly exists in the imaginative world of *some* children, however closely that world relates to their physical, geographical, relational world. Does her picture represent the world as she knows it or the world as she longs for it to be? We can assume little from this simple gift sent to a friend of her father's.

On the origins of art and the pursuit of happiness

Between the world as we know it and the world we long for, religion and creativity set to work. Semir Zeki's essay on the splendours and miseries of the brain¹² guides us through that place between what is and what could be, between the dream and the disappointment, and suggests a way of thinking about the connections between Merton's apocalyptic paradise consciousness, his contemplative intensity, and his prodigious artistic output. As Zeki's work is concerned with the quest for human happiness, we do well to remember what Merton thought of the whole 'pursuit of happiness' project:

Why then aren't we happy? Because of our servility. The whole celebration is empty because it is 'useful.' We have not yet rediscovered the primary usefulness of the useless. From this loss of all sense of being, all capacity to live for the sake of living and praising God, all thankfulness, all 'Eucharistic' spirit, comes the awful

frustrated restlessness of our world obsessed with 'doing' so that even 'having fun' becomes a job of work, an operation, a veritable production, even a systematic campaign. The phony spontaneity which has to be 'produced' in our fun-loving world naturally arouses disgust and guilt, and destroys faith in all real joy. Yes, we still try with all our might to believe in joy, since Madison Avenue tells us to. But we know that Madison Avenue itself is not convinced. The fruit of our servility is the despair that no one can admit – unless of course he is a monk or a beatnik.¹³

How hard it is for us to know how our own happiness relates to the good of society. How hard to know what will make most difference for the common good, and how those things relate to – or conflict with – our own personal satisfactions. We may never know; we can hardly anticipate the long-term effects of any of our actions.¹⁴ If we cannot be sure quite how our personal quest for happiness relates to the happiness of other people, neither can we *gain* that happiness simply by pursuing it. With some conviction Merton teaches us that:

Another law of the contemplative life is that if you enter it with the set purpose of seeking contemplation, or worse still, happiness, you will find neither. For neither can be found unless it is first in some sense renounced. And again, this means renouncing the illusory self that seeks to be 'happy' and to find 'fulfilment' (whatever that might mean) in contemplation. For the contemplative and spiritual self, the dormant, mysterious and hidden self that is always effaced by the activity of our exterior self does not seek fulfilment. It is content to *be*, and in its being it is fulfilled, because its being is rooted in God.¹⁵

This kind of contentment with *what is* seems at one and the same time both mature and childlike, a contentment which seeks neither its own fulfilment nor happiness.¹⁶

Semir Zeki writes less about contentment than about *discontent*, and about the connections between discontent, vision and art. What might he teach us about the fusion between Merton's dissatisfaction with the world, his dreaming of a renewed creation, of life in God, and the literary work which poured out between the two? Was Merton's own particular road to joy necessarily paved with blank pages waiting to be filled with poetry, prose and memoir; words for angels to read, words reaching out for human response and communion, words sent out to seed a little corner of the paradise they struggled repeatedly to communicate? Each of us may go about our world-making creativity quite differently. But we are surely going about it one way or another.

A necessary sorrow?

Following Freud, Zeki agrees with the rather gloomy conclusion that humans are generally wired to be discontented, and that there is no easy solution to our discontent.¹⁷ Then Zeki veers away from Freud, interpreting the workings of the brain quite differently. How do people deal with the tension between internal and external realities,¹⁸ between the world as we perceive it, and the world as we conceptualize it? How do people deal with experiences of repeated frustration, when the world seems to refuse to sustain our values or our longings? How not to suffer repeatedly in that way? In other words, how to be happy? Or, from another perspective, how not to indulge that sorrowful mood which brings its own strange consolations?

A root cause of discontent, says Zeki, is "a failure to satisfy the... concepts that the brain develops in its quest for knowledge."¹⁹ So don't quest for knowledge, you might reply. "Mine is a simple faith." After all, "Don't go thinking about it," was Merton's advice to Grace Sisson. If only it were that easy. Alas, we are hard-wired for learning too.

The tree of knowledge will always seem appealing. And in reaching for its fruits, the brain formulates ideals which can leave the actual world seeming disappointing by comparison. The tension between how we imagine life and how we perceive the world can generate misery.

Sorrow is perhaps more familiar Catholic vocabulary than misery. They are not the same thing. But the contradiction which Zeki describes as miserable, between the world of our minds' conceiving and the world as we experience it, was described by Merton as sorrowful in a class of 1964. St Arsenius had not crossed my horizons before I heard Merton ask, 'And what has the martyrology picked to say about St. Arsenius?' He answers his own question, telling us that 'he always had to have a handkerchief ... because he was always bursting into tears.' Does this continue to have any meaning for monks, asks Merton, or is it just silly? Again he answers his own question: Of course it continues to be important. But why?

Because 'it is essential to a monk that, that there is in the life of a monk an essential element of sorrow ... It is essential for us to have sorrow in our life,' he says. Turning to Our Lady of Sorrows at the foot of the cross for insight into the real theological dimension of sorrow, Merton asks, 'where does this sorrow come from?' He goes on,

It comes from a contradiction. It comes from a contradiction between the way things should be and the way they are. And yet it implies an acceptance of the way they are. See, both these things have to be remembered. Because actually it is sorrow over the way things are, tears over the way things are, that enable you to accept the way things are with joy. See, this is one of the big paradoxes of the monastic life, see.²⁰

Merton moves on to a long discussion of idolatry, the fundamental problem of the age, as he saw it. He even says that 'the deepest root of the monastic life is the realisation of idolatry' (though we need be

a little cautious with Merton's superlatives – the deepest, the most urgent, the most vital, and so forth: there are many of them). But it is this insight about sorrow and joy, the paradox of joy and sorrow, over which I wanted to linger. It may be a key for our living with contradiction – ‘a contradiction between the way things should be and the way they are’. Our experience of this contradiction generates sorrow. And yet that sorrow (when we allow it, when we feel it) ‘implies an acceptance of the way they are.’ And ‘both these things [the sorrow and the acceptance] have to be remembered ... Because actually it is sorrow over the way things are, tears over the way things are, that enable you to accept the way things are with joy.’

Can we sit with that paradox a while, allow it to settle within us? We are alert to the devastations of this world, and their apparent causes (idolatry, essentially, as Merton tells it in this lecture – allowing our own ambitions and cravings and greed and lust to take the place of our longings for God). We do not hide from the sorrow, but learn to accept that this is a part of how the world is, of how we are. And the sorrow allows us to accept what is, with joy. I guess we need to live it to understand it.

The road to joy may lead through some strange territory, and does not allow us to rest in a place of supposed innocence, a place of non-participation, a place which has to be shored up by continuous distraction or self-assertion or self-deception. In the broad sweep of Merton's story, those recollections we call the epiphany at Fourth and Walnut make exactly this point: Where is joy? It is in a sense of connectedness and of participation, a deep awareness of and acceptance of *being in the same world as everybody else*. Accepting the inevitable sorrow of that can allow for the arrival of joy. Not to turn face. Not to filter out or explain away; neither to seek final meaning nor to reject the gift of joy because of guilt or grief about others' pain and our own failings.

The neurobiologist Semir Zeki, from a different perspective altogether, describes how the tension between how we imagine life

and how we perceive in the world brings unhappiness or suffering, but can in turn be the source of remarkable creativity, for:

... just as we pay a substantial price in misery for the splendours of our brain, so the misery itself generates splendours in its turn ... In human discontent ... we find a powerful paradox in that the brain also has the capacity to turn that discontent into creative achievements, in works of art, literature or music, either by realizing the concept itself in a work of art or by *drawing attention to its inevitability*.²¹

Zeki isn't just describing the kind of sublimation of our animal instincts (into artistic, scientific or literary productivity) in the way Freud suggested, which perhaps only applied to a select few with the talents to transform those instincts creatively. He is describing something fundamental to the human brain, something essentially and ordinarily human:

Creativity applies as well to a child who builds a sandcastle, to those who perfect the art of conversation, to management skills and to many other human activities and actions. Indeed, the difficulty lies in identifying actions and activities from which the creative element is exempt. Thus creativity and imagination are attributes with which all brains are blessed to varying degrees and that all brains impart to what they are doing to varying degrees. Creativity therefore is, in a way, the brain's way of making up for its shortcomings.²²

Perhaps Grace Sisson built sandcastles, like the children Zeki imagines. I don't know. We do know that she made drawings which inspired Thomas Merton. The inspiration is not just in the object itself, but *in its being a gift*, a gift from a child. In the actual world (Merton is

reminded) there is simplicity and happiness and trust; there is love; there are relationships which matter, friendships which endure: connectedness, even communion.

Joy, creativity, communion, a vision of how the world might be in a moment when that kin-dom breaks through. Whilst working on this text and thinking about the *Road to Joy* I found myself humming Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. (The splendours of a brain making its own connections I guess.) Searching the internet for a little background information about Beethoven's creation of that piece, I found something quite unexpected, which seemed to say it all. Go take a look at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbJcQYVtZMo>, or put 'Flash Mob Ode to Joy' in a search engine.²³ A beautiful scene seemed to say it all – about the glorious creativity of human connectedness and all that we can be together. Then we pan out and recognize it as an advertisement for a bank, and all at once it's less than beautiful. Disappointing at least. When I gave this paper at the 2014 Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland conference I edited out the final logo, just as Merton's parting advert for Coca-Cola was edited out of the transcription of his final address in Bangkok. But the reality is that idolatries cling: wheat and tares; joy and sorrow flowing mingled down, always, for now. Arsenius weeps, and invites us to begin (if only to begin) by accepting the way things are, to live without resolution, rooted in God.

Notes

1. Ron Seitz, *A Song for Nobody* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1993), p.19.
2. Therese Lentfoehr notes that 'the German edition of Merton's *Selected Poems* is titled *Grace's Haus* ... On sending a copy of this edition to a friend he remarked, "I think they did a very nice job. Glad my little Grace made the title!"' Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p.87. See also Robert E. Daggy, 'The Road to Joy: Thomas Merton's Letters to and About Young People' in M. Basil Pennington (ed.), *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey* (Oxford: Mowbray/Cistercian Publications, 1987), pp.52–73.

3. 'Grace's House', *New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), pp.92–4.
4. Matthew 10:29–31.
5. Letter to Mark Van Doren, 9 August 1962, in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), p.45.
6. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.62.
7. *Road to Joy*, p.45.
8. John 3:4.
9. Letter 13 May 1967, in *Road to Joy*, p.353.
10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p.301.
11. *Conjectures*, p.313.
12. Semir Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness* (Oxford: Blackwell/John Wiley and Sons, 2009). Semir Zeki is a British neurobiologist who, since 2008, has been Professor of Neuroesthetics at University College, London.
13. *Conjectures*, p.302.
14. On this, see Merton's letter to James Forest, 21 February 1966, in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), pp.294–295.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), pp.2–3.
16. Contrast this with the teaching of St Arsenius (mentioned below) on the sorrow of 'what is.'
17. He agrees with Freud's conclusion that a solution is a 'near-impossibility.'
18. *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*, p.209.
19. *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*, p.212.
20. Transcript of 'The paradox of joy and sorrow', recording 120.3 (18/07/1964) indexed at <http://merton.org/Research/AV/novitiate.aspx>.
21. *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain*, p.212 (my italics).
22. *ibid.* Further work needs to be developed, based on Merton's 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal' (24 October 1958). See also Lucy Winkett, *Our Sound is Our Wound* (London: Continuum, 2009) and Barbara Glasson, *A Spirituality of Survival: Enabling a Response to Trauma and Abuse* (London: Continuum, 2009).
23. Available at 30 July 2014.

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