

## **The Night Spirit, the Dawn Air – where are they now?**

### **Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society, Oakham, April 2010**

*'At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.. I have no programme for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.'* CGB, p.158)

I also have no programme. None of us has a programme, and yet we know that what Merton intuitively here resonates in our own souls. No programme, but a little image that might help us begin our journey. When we peel away the layers, the image of the Russian Dolls brings us to the point of nothingness, of indigence, of poverty, which is the best way I have of trying to connect with 'the core of being. In our own lives, and in our own times, we see these layers being stripped away, and we howl with anguish and some of that stripping, and yet .... can we, dare we believe that this is a way to that 'pure diamond'?

This morning we are in search of a spirituality of transition in troubled times. How can Merton's wisdom help us?

### **Chaos, breakdown and new beginnings**

Merton's '*point vierge*', this point of nothingness, is especially accessible in liminal space, the place on the boundary between darkness and dawn, rain and shine, emptiness and fullness, non-being and being. Liminal space is sacred space – the space where the invisible world interpenetrates the visible world, and something new is conceived:

*'All wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point ... paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it.'* (CGB p. 131-2)

In every crisis, both personal and global, we stand in liminal space. Can we trust that it might also be sacred space, space where something new is being conceived? But the new thing springs not from our ordered plans and ideas, or from the great force of precedent that reinforces the illusion that what has always been so will always continue. Crisis slices through our assumptions and expectations and pitches us into chaos – yet is not chaos the very raw material of every new creation? Whether we trust Genesis or the new sciences, we learn that chaos is the state from which all new things spring, by the action of the 'strange attractor', so why do we do everything in our power to avoid it, to prematurely rearrange our

certainties, to keep control – and thereby risk aborting the new patterns that are longing to emerge from the chaos?

In the Christian tradition, as in the new physics, breakdown leads to breakthrough. You might want to take time to reflect: When have the growth spurts revealed themselves in your spiritual journey? When you had it all together, or when you lost the plot? ‘Let the Spirit hover over the chaos.’ The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air are inseparable partners in the great cosmic dance of life.

*‘Without the night spirit, the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, man’s nature cannot be itself’ (CGB p. 137)*

Metanoia arises with the dawn, but gestates in the darkness. Conversion of heart and mind is not just a modification of habit but a call to become truly a new creation. It is pivotal to the whole evolutionary story as well as to the sacred story, both individual and collective.

This morning we will reflect a little on how the crises we so dread are actually the catalyst of transformation, and on some of the things that militate *against* this process, and others that help us to *welcome* it.

### **Crisis – the catalyst of transformation**

*‘It is precisely anguish and inner crisis that compel us to seek truth, because it is these things that make clear to us that we are sunk in the hell of our own untruth.’ (CGB p. 183)*

If the conception of ‘all things new’ happens at the *point vierge*, the space between non-being and being, the pregnancy leads eventually to the labour pains. We experience these most acutely when we are in CRISIS. The Chinese ideogram reminds us that ‘crisis’ comprises both ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity’, and the Chinese curse asks that we ‘might live in interesting times’. There is no difficulty in seeing where the dangers lie in the crises that currently beset us – the breakdown of the climate – the economic meltdown – the crisis of world poverty, of religious practice and of trust in all institutions. But where are the opportunities? I believe we see the ‘green shoots’ of opportunity all around us, but the dawn light still leaves them difficult to discern. Can we trust them? How can we nourish them? I think, for example, of the opportunities to address climate change, to re-vision our ways of doing world economics, our global response to poverty, our understanding of what faith really means to us, when stripped of its outward manifestations...

The process of birth is a process of parturition, of letting go, of being torn open. Crisis moves us closer to truth, frees us from illusion, takes us to a higher plane. The Flood story reminds us that the inundation actually brings us to a higher place than any we could have arrived at if the crisis had not occurred, but we always have the choice – to embrace the change that crisis brings, or to go into denial, circle the wagons, and stick our heads into the sand (to mix the metaphors thoroughly!). The Mormon version reminds us that even the rocks that seem so burdensome and useless can be the source of enlightenment.

*'A personal crisis is creative and salutary if one can accept the conflict and restore unity on a higher level, incorporating the opposed elements in a higher unity. One thus becomes a more complete, a more developed person, capable of wider understanding, empathy, and love for others, etc.'* (CGB p. 209)

Not just the personal crises but also the collective crises can do this – and never have we stood more deeply in need of this wisdom than we do in today's world. But crisis can either lead us to a higher plane, or give us the option to displace the growing pains by projecting them onto others.

Merton mentions the Berlin crisis – one of many during those years, and a feature of life with which I myself became familiar:

*'Berlin Crisis? It is all in the head. It is a sacred rite, an esoteric and purifying mystery. It is all an elaborate TV production, including the wall: fun for everybody except the wretched people for whom it is not a game, for whom it is life and death, and who get shot trying to get over the wall. But that, too, is good for business.'* (CGB p. 194)

Merton sees the two realities together – the fact of the projection and denial and political manipulation, and the fact of the life and death experience. The story of the Candy Bomber shows what crisis can do, and how it can transform minds and hearts.

He also reminds us that we are on a journey. If we think we have arrived, we have almost certainly gone into a cul-de-sac. Is this a warning we need to hear in the context of institutional religion?

*'We all think that we can understand history by stopping the movie and looking fixedly, for a moment, at one of the frames.'* (CGB, p. 193)

Has organised religion tended to do this? What might this mean for our religious observance?

How do you feel about the breakdowns evident in our world/your life today? Could they help to lead the human family to breakthrough? Are we willing to embrace the crisis/chaos, on the way to transcendence? Or are we stuck with an OT view of 'passover' – that if we have the right mark on our doorpost the angel of death will pass over us and we will be 'saved'?

### **What militates against this process of transformation?**

Merton's reflections seem to indicate a few tendencies that militate against the possibility of allowing crisis to become a gateway to transcendence. These include:

- 1) Setting Jesus on a pedestal, and worshipping him, rather than following him. The two are not mutually exclusive, but if we are not very careful, the 'worship' can be the best excuse we will ever find *not* to follow. Merton warns us that *'It is Satan's theology to make Christ the most perfect of all the Pharisees, so that the publicans will all despair while the Pharisees will come to Him and be confirmed in their self-righteousness.'* (CGB, p. 142). If we glorify Jesus to such an extent that we raise him to an unreachable height above humanity, are we perhaps helping Satan in his theologising?

- 2) The ‘dumbing down’ of the Christian vision by complacency. This can happen when people want religion/church practice simply to reinforce their comfort zones, and would resist any kind of spiritual challenge. (A common complaint from clergy!). The Christian vision is stunningly simple, yet impossibly hard to live. Often church practice and doctrine suggests the opposite – something that is very hard to understand, intellectually, in its creeds and catechisms, yet (if you keep the right rules), relatively easy to live. Such a suggestion, however implicit and unintended, is a serious distortion of the faith that Jesus lived, and taught to the least of the ‘anawim.’

*‘This is no more than the religion of those who wish themselves to be in a certain state in which they can live with themselves, approve of themselves: for they feel that, when they can approve of themselves, God is at peace with them. How many Christians seriously believe that Christianity itself consists of nothing more than this? Yet it is anathema to true Christianity.’ (CGB, p. 154)*

- 3) Individualism and the illusion of separateness. 21<sup>st</sup> century science is telling us what the mystics always knew – that we are completely inter-connected and inter-dependent. Merton notes that this temptation can come along with a vocation to the separated ‘holiness’ of vowed life: it is no less a temptation to all of us, especially in the over-individualised western world.

*‘The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream’.* (CGB, p. 156)

- 4) The potential of the negative movements within and around us to pull us down from dream to nightmare. Merton caricatures these movements and makes them all too uncomfortably recognisable, in our generation as in his:

*‘There seems to be excitement – but there is only the superficial agitation of a nervous daydream. So much for our lusty apes with cowboy hats – they are not even comic any more! But collect them together, put uniforms on them, give them a leader that fits into the pattern of their fantasies and knots their dream images all together into a psychosis – then the whole thing comes alive in destruction.’* (CGB, p. 203)

And so the dream of all that humanity could become descends into nightmare. Passion and vision are distorted into superficial agitation and a nervous daydream. The power of the collective can utterly destroy, but we should not forget what potential for good lies in the ‘power of one’. We have certainly seen a few ‘lusty apes with cowboy hats’ at work in our contemporary world; that is no excuse for allowing them to define our foreign policy!

These are some examples of our resistance to grace and transformation. There will be no transformation without a readiness to let go (as the story of the two caterpillars illustrates). If we refuse to engage in the labour pains and the birth process, we are choosing to stay forever in the dark night, and this will break the whole life cycle. What each of us chooses affects all of us.

**What helps us to welcome the new creation and embrace it?**

But Merton balances these warnings with indicators of the positive in his own times, and in ours. Some examples of how we might be encouraged to embrace the call to transcendence include:

- 1) Recognising that we have won a 'cosmic lottery', just to be here, on this planet, in our own unique identity.

*'It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race... A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realisation should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.'* (CGB, p. 157)

If we could remember this on our down days, what a different view we might take of life from the conventional 'vale of tears'!

- 2) Seeing the 'pure diamond' in ourselves and in each other (see opening quotation, p. 158). Once we have glimpsed, just for a moment, a fragment of the beauty within ourselves, we can never again be unaware that this same 'diamond' is present in every one of us. The image of the agate stone might help us get in touch with this.

- 3) Overcoming our innate fear of the huge potential that lies within us. To embrace our full potential would be a challenge beyond what most of us can cope with. Better, we think, to shrink into less than ourselves, and avoid the exposure that the fullness of our being would bring.

*'Perhaps I am stronger than I think.*

*Perhaps I am even afraid of my strength, and turn it against myself, thus making myself weak.*

*Making myself secure. Making myself guilty.*

*Perhaps I am most afraid of the strength of God in me.*

*Perhaps I would rather be guilty and weak in myself, than strong in Him whom I cannot understand.'* (CGB, p. 146)

- 4) The power of the small, and of 'slight gestures of dissent'. How urgently we need to hear Merton's warnings today against the manipulative power of mass protest. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe should convince us that effective protest against injustice works best when it rises up from the grass roots and not when it is imposed from above or fomented by the rhetoric of power.

*'The more massive a movement is, the more it is doctored and manipulated. The more it tends to be a mass lie, a front... Genuine dissent must always keep a human measure. It must be free and spontaneous. The slighter gestures are often the more significant, because they are unpremeditated and they cannot be doctored beforehand by the propagandist.. And so perhaps it is saner and nobler to expect effective protest from the individual, from the small unsponsored group, than from the well-organised mass movement... It is better not to line up with the big, manipulated group.'* (CGB, p. 163)

- 5) Not going back; always going forward. In these times of false nostalgia, and even fundamentalist regression to the past, we need to hear this admonition. Just as Jesus warns Mary of Magdala not to cling to what has been, but to move forward in trust to all that shall become, so we too are urged to walk on with empty hands, receptive to

all that shall come, and knowing that everything that matters from past experience has already been internalised in our hearts.

*'To 'return to the Father' is not to 'go back' in time, to roll up the scroll of history, or to reverse anything. It is a going forward, a going beyond... Our destiny is to go beyond everything, to leave everything, to press forward to the end and find in the End our Beginning, the ever-new Beginning that has no end.'* (CGB, p. 171-2)

### **In conclusion...**

Merton reflects on the mood of his times, the radical spirit of the Sixties, and wonders whether it will lead to the longed-for transformation or go the other way, into something wholly destructive. He hopes for the former, but fears the latter.

*'I think this new radicalism may be the decisive force and hope of the sixties – or it may simply be the catalyst that will bring on our transformation into something very disagreeable and stupid, a permanently organised warfare state, blind and dedicated to the forceful resolution of imaginary problems.'* (CGB, p. 172)

So, with the hindsight of a further fifty years, what can we say now? Which was it? The catalyst of transformation or the trigger of a destructive downslide? It may be an open question, but the future is still an unopened chapter. We get to write it. What will we choose it to be, and how can Thomas Merton guide us in that choice, and its implementation?

Margaret Silf, April 2010

Quotations are from Thomas Merton *'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander'*, Doubleday, New York, ISBN: 0-385-01018-4