

Contemplation Reconsidered: The Human Way In

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As I was preparing this essay, I remembered a correspondence Thomas Merton once had with a scholar named Louis Massignon, who had been instrumental in lifting up the life and work of a ninth-century Muslim mystic named al-Hallaj. When Massignon was asked about his scholarship on this mystic, he said that his relation to al-Hallaj was not so much that of scholar to subject as it was "a friendship, a love, a rescue." Massignon did not mean that he had rescued al-Hallaj from historical obscurity but that al-Hallaj had somehow reached out across time to rescue him.

That is how I feel about my own relation to Thomas Merton. I never met Merton and I am not a Merton scholar. I discovered his books only after he had died—I was raised as a mainline Protestant, and we are a little slow in these matters. I simply want to share with you something of what Thomas Merton has given me—this Merton who, at a time when I needed it, reached out to me from beyond the great divide and offered friendship and love and rescue.

My remarks will take us through three "movements." Each of them builds on a quotation from Merton's brilliant essay, "The Inner Experience."¹ The first movement is titled "Self-Impersonation as a Way of Being in the World," the second is "Get a Life," and the third is "God is Shy—and So Am I." The images and insights belong to

1. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. with introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1992) 294–356.

Merton; I simply attempt to articulate some of the ways they have illuminated my own life-journey to this day.

I. Self-Impersonation as a Way of Being in the World

Reflect, sometimes, on the disquieting fact that most of your statements of opinions, tastes, deeds, desires, hopes and fears are statements about someone who is not really present. When you say "I think," it is often not you who think, but "they"—it is the anonymous authority of the collectivity speaking through your mask. When you say "I want," you are sometimes simply making an automatic gesture of accepting . . . what has been forced upon you. That is to say, you reach out for what you have been made to want.

Who is this "I" that you imagine yourself to be? An easy and pragmatic branch of psychological thought will tell you that if you can [say] your proper name, and declare that you are the bearer of that name, you know who you are. . . . But this is only a beginning. . . . For when a person appears to know his own name, it is still no guarantee that he is aware of the name as representing a real person. On the contrary, it may be the name of a fictitious character occupied in very active self-impersonation in the world of business, of politics, of scholarship or of religion.

This however is not the "I" who can stand in the presence of God and be aware of Him as a "Thou." For this "I" there is perhaps no clear "Thou" at all. Perhaps even other people are merely extensions of the "I," reflections of it . . . aspects of it. Perhaps for this "I" there is no clear distinction between itself and other objects: it may find itself immersed in the world of objects, and to have lost its own subjectivity, even though it may be very conscious and even aggressively definite in saying "I."²

I have been meditating for some days on this remarkable diagnosis of the malaise of modern men and women: we are immersed in the world of objects and we have lost our subjectivity. Merton's words lead to some troubling reflections about a sector of our society in which I do a lot of work, education, a sector that has a tremendous impact on the formation and deformation of our souls. Higher education especially does not worry about our immersion in the world of

2. *Ibid.*, 295–296.

objects—indeed, it is obsessed with the opposite phenomenon. Higher education believes that people are lost in subjectivity and must be brought, kicking and screaming, into the world of objects where, it presumes, personal and social health is to be found.

In our educational establishment we are deeply devoted to the notion that knowledge that is not “objective,” that does not make the known into an object, is not knowledge worth having—indeed, is not knowledge at all. We believe that until you know a subject at arm’s length, as an objectified “thing,” you do not have any real knowledge about it at all. We believe that if young people are not taught to objectify the world they will be lost in narcissism and emotion and irrelevance. In fact, we are profoundly afraid of the very subjectivity to which Merton is calling us. We do not value it the way Merton suggests we should—we flee from it as if from a plague.

I have spent this year teaching undergraduates at a small liberal arts college, teaching a course for seniors on vocational discernment and decision-making. On the first day of class I told my students that they would be writing a series of brief papers in which they recalled their own life experience and reflected upon it. At the end of that first session, a young man came up to me and asked, “In those papers you are asking us to write, is it OK to use the word ‘I’?”

I said that I could not imagine how to write an autobiographical paper without using the word “I,” and then asked him why he asked. “Because,” he said, “in my major department I am downgraded a full grade if the word ‘I’ appears in a paper.” We sell students the myth that a paper that says “I believe” is subjective and suspect, while a paper that says “It is believed” is objective knowledge. We do so, I suspect, because faculty themselves have been trained in graduate programs bent on draining us of our personhood and subjectivity and sense of self so that we will become safe bearers of “objective” knowledge, knowledge that gets transmitted to students untouched by human hands. This is why we have such poor writing coming out of the academy—and why we have so little academic knowledge that is of deep human significance, of real human scale.

I have puzzled a great deal about why our education so frequently turns Merton’s insight on its head. Why is it that instead of rescuing people from the world of objects and helping them to recover the authentic self, we ask them to sweep self under the rug and lose themselves in a world of objects? To put it more succinctly, why are

we so afraid of subjectivity? The answer that comes to me, slowly but persistently, is that we fear the subjective because subjectivity will draw us into relationships with what we know—and in those relationships we will find *ourselves* challenged and changed rather than being forever able to fancy ourselves as those who will change the world.

The poet Rilke once wrote the stunning line, “There is no place at all that is not looking at you—you must change your life.”³ But in academic life we turn that around and teach students how to objectify the world in a way that prevents it from looking back at us.

We teach biology in a way that lets us look at nature and dissect it and experiment upon it without ever letting nature call us to accountability for our consumptive way of living. We teach political science in a way that lets us look at Third World countries and critique the “mess” they are in without letting those cultures look back at us and critique our distorted First World values. We teach literature with the tools of literary criticism without letting the reader encounter the poem or the novel in a personal way that might make a claim on how he or she is living life. Education of this sort turns out people who are very adept at manipulating the external world of objects but who know nothing about what is going on within their own communities or within themselves.

I travel around the country visiting campuses and talking to students, and I often ask them, “When was the last time you were invited to intersect your own story, your ‘little’ story, with the ‘big’ story of the disciplines you are studying?” The most common answer I get is, “Never.” The entire agenda of our educational institutions is to sweep the student’s “little” story under the rug because it is full of bias and prejudice and error, so that the “big” story of objective truth can replace it—and when this is accomplished we believe we have an educated person. But Merton is telling us that what we really end up with is the pathological personality of our time, someone so lost in the world of objects that he or she has no subjective self and thus ends up as “a fictitious character occupied in very active self-impersonation in the world of business, of politics, of scholarship or of religion.” If ever a phrase hit uncomfortably close to home, this is it!

3. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” in Robert Bly, trans., *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Harper, 1981).

I think often of a particular deformation in my own education that may make my point clearer and weightier. I was educated at some of the best schools in this country about the horrors that go under the name of the Third Reich. I was taught about the murder of six million Jews—and of countless gay and lesbian people and gypsies and people with retardation and protesting Christians and others who did not fit the Nazi mold—but I was taught about all of this in a way that left me with the impression that it had all happened on another planet, to another species. My teachers never said, “Other planet, other species,” but they taught me about these things at such objective distance, at such arm’s length, that I was left with the sense that none of them had anything to do with my own life, my own experience.

We studied the Holocaust almost exclusively through words and numbers about it. We never looked at the heart-wrenching art created in those camps; we never read the poetry written by the survivors and those who died, and I was well out of school before I saw the photographs of the bodies piled like cordwood at Auschwitz. Why? Because by the canons of objectivism, those data would have been suspiciously subjective. They would have evoked passion and feeling—and to evoke passion and feeling is to destroy the possibility of objective knowledge.

So we stayed with the words and numbers, and my life, as a result, was ethically deformed. Nobody ever asked me to intersect the subjective with the objective, my little story with the big story. Nobody ever helped me to understand that the town I grew up in had its own fascist tendencies, to reflect on the fact that the Jews all lived in their own gilded ghetto, two suburbs away. Worse still, nobody ever helped me understand that I have a little Hitler in my own heart—that is, a shadow force that, when the difference between you and me gets too threatening, will attempt to kill you off. I will not do it with a gun or a gas chamber, but with a word, a concept, a dismissive image—“Oh you’re just a this or a that. . . .” I will engage in the ultimate objectification, the transformation of a human being into a disposable “thing.”

Elie Wiesel has made this point with the power that only a survivor of the death camps can summon:

How do you describe the sorting out on arriving at Auschwitz, the separation of children who see a father or mother going away, never to be seen again? How do you express the dumb grief of

a little girl and the endless lines of women, children and rabbis being driven across the Polish or Ukrainian landscapes to their deaths? No, I can’t do it. And because I’m a writer and teacher, I don’t understand how Europe’s most cultured nation could have done that. For these men who killed with submachine-guns in the Ukraine were university graduates. Afterwards they would go home and read a poem by Heine. So what happened?⁴

Too many educated people are, as Merton suggests, immersed in a world of objects, lacking authentic subjectivity and engaged in active self-impersonation, living on the outside of their lives and not from the inside out—and our “scientific” mode of education contributes heavily to the pathology. But what amazes me about all this is not only how ethically deforming objectivism is, but how utterly unfaithful it is to the nature of true science as well. The myth of objectivism has nothing to do with real science at all—it has everything to do with the arrogance that leads us to want to believe that we are in charge of the world of objects.

Here is my favorite story from the heart of real science. A year or two ago, the *New York Times* carried a front-page obituary for a woman named Barbara McClintock. McClintock, who died in her early nineties, was arguably the greatest American scientist of the twentieth century and almost certainly the greatest American biologist. As a young woman, McClintock became fascinated with the dynamics of genetic transmission, and she began pursuing hypotheses so outrageous that her science was widely regarded as out of vogue—until she won a Nobel Prize.

When a biographer asked her, late in her life, to describe how she did her great science, McClintock’s answer was, “You have to have a feeling for the organism.” When the question was pressed further, McClintock, thinking of the ears of corn she had studied for so many years, said, “You must learn to lean into the kernel.”⁵

Is this Nobel Laureate saying that objective data and analysis have nothing to do with science? Of course not. But she is telling us that science is a profoundly relational activity in which authentic subjectivity is interlaced with rigorous objectivity, a dance of intimacy and

4. From *The Columbia University Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

5. Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism* (New York: Freeman, 1983).

distance which we must learn to do in every dimension of our lives. She is saying that the relation between a geneticist and an ear of corn is not unlike a relationship between two persons—intersubjective, in the deepest sense of that term.

Evelyn Fox Keller, McClintock's biographer, writes a sentence about all of this that I hope I never forget. She says that McClintock, in her relation to ears of corn, achieved the highest form of love—"love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference."⁶ What an extraordinary way to assert the same thing that Merton is asserting: if we are to live well, if we are to do science or any other human activity well, we must be liberated from the world of objects and become reconnected with that authentic subjectivity in which both we and the world become real again.

II. Get a Life

The worst thing that can happen to a person who is already divided up into a dozen different compartments is to seal off yet another compartment and tell him that this one is more important than all the others, and that he must henceforth exercise a special care in keeping it separate from them. That is what tends to happen when contemplation is unwisely thrust without warning upon the bewilderment and distraction of Western man.

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 and simple whole, and learn to live as a unified human person. This means that you have to bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence so that when you say "I" there is really someone present to support the pronoun you have uttered.⁷

When I first read this selection from "The Inner Experience," I found the opening paragraph deeply insightful—it named everything I have always felt was wrong when "contemplation" is presented as a "fix" or a technique. So when I began reading the second paragraph

I thought, "This is great! Now Merton is going to tell me what I have to do in order to have a spiritual life, to recover my authentic self."

Then I read his next words: "The first thing you have to do . . . is to . . . learn to live as a unified human person." I thought, "Right. You bet. Thanks a lot, Tom!" I thought this recovery of self was the pearl of great price that came at the end of long contemplative experience, but here Merton is telling me that it is the first thing I must do before I even think about contemplation!

Then I recalled a remarkable moment in a Merton tape I heard years ago, a tape in which Merton is speaking as novice master to the young monks of Gethsemani. As the tape begins, you can hear the rustling of papers and the sounds of people settling into their chairs. There is a brief silence, and then Merton suddenly blurts out, "Men, before you can have a spiritual life, you've gotta have a life!"

I turned off the tape player at that point while a wave of horror washed over me: "My God, I've got to go out and get a life before I can be spiritual." As I sat there, indicted by that thought, another wave washed over me with the suddenness of insight that comes with a Zen koan: "My God, I've already got a life—and it's a complete mess! It's full of loves and hates, joys and anguish, happiness and defeats! Merton isn't telling me I need to get a different life. He's telling me something much harder—that I must embrace the life I have, the only life I will ever have, as the only true source of my own spirituality."

That, I think, is what Merton is saying in the quote at the beginning of this second movement. Before I can even *think* about contemplation, let alone do it, I must accept the life I have, stop fighting it, embrace the whole of it as the source of my own wholeness. Similar words, words that Merton would have loved, I think, were penned by Florida Scott-Maxwell in *The Measure of My Days*: "You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done . . . you are fierce with reality."⁸

I have a theory that God creates nouns but we create adjectives—which we then use to mess up the lovely nouns God has given us, qualifying them and distorting them beyond recognition. For example, God creates people; then we start piling the adjectives on: male and female people, black and white people, gay and lesbian and straight people, conservative and liberal people, good and bad people. With

6. Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 164.

7. Merton, op. cit., 295.

8. Florida Scott-Maxwell, *The Measure of My Days* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

the adjectives we make distinctions, usually invidious—and with those distinctions we destroy the essence of created goodness that the original noun embodies.

So God creates the noun “life” and then we louse it up by saying, at some point, “I’ve got to have a love life,” or “I’ve got to have a professional life,” or “I’ve got to have a successful life,” or “I’ve got to have a spiritual life.” I think Merton is calling us back to the nouns that God created in us, back to the givenness and giftedness of our own experience, back to the simplicity and everydayness of our loves and hates, our joys and anguishes, our happinesses and defeats as the source of our deepest treasure—because the adjectives diminish our lives. I am clear that he is telling me, at least, that by seeking a “spiritual” life I may lose the life I have—but by claiming my life as it is I may find what I am seeking, right here, right now.

In earlier years, as I ran headlong after a “spiritual” life, I experimented with different forms of contemplation. I tried techniques beyond number, and none of them worked for me. I finally figured out that I am not a contemplative by intention; I am a contemplative by catastrophe. One of the great gifts of my life has been enough catastrophes that I could have become a world-class contemplative—if I had been paying attention.

Today my definition of contemplation is quite simple: contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality. If I understand the great mystics correctly, that is what their contemplation was all about: it was not about technique, but about a journey from illusion to reality, a journey that we are given a thousand opportunities to take every day—if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. It is precisely in the ordinary catastrophes of life that we have a chance to distinguish what is real and abiding from what is not.

I think often of a woman I know who is the single mother of a child with severe retardation. This woman does not have an extra five minutes a day to sit cross-legged and chant a mantra, for she must live two lives. If her child is going to move, she must move for him; if her child is going to eat, she must help him eat; if he is going to play, she must be there to play with him.

But despite her lack of “retreat” time, as classically understood, this woman has become a contemplative on the order of Teresa of Avila. In the very raising of her child, she has had to penetrate all the cruel illusions that this society harbors about what makes a human being

valuable—things like success and physical beauty and wit—and she has grounded herself in the truth, the reality, that there is an essence of personhood that makes all of us precious just as we are.

If I ask myself when it is in my own life that I penetrate illusion and touch reality, the first answer is “Not often enough.” But the second answer is, “When times are tough.” Gain and success do not put me into an especially contemplative mood—indeed, they seem to generate more illusions than they penetrate. But failure and loss force me to reflect long and hard on who I am and how I am and where I am, and the result is sometimes a breakthrough into reality.

My father died earlier this year. He was an extraordinary man who surrounded me all my life with love and affirmation and trust—and I am still in the process of penetrating certain illusions about life that I was able to harbor because his presence kept me from having to face the realities behind them. In particular, I am having to deal more directly with the reality called my own mortality which I could somehow evade a bit when my father was still alive.

We moan, sometimes, about the “disillusionments” that come with the hard experiences of life—and if someone comes to us complaining of having been “disillusioned,” we tend to put an arm around their shoulders and say, “I’m so very sorry. How can I help?” But if we understood contemplation properly, we would respond quite differently. We would shake their hand, saying, “Congratulations! To be ‘dis-illusioned’ means that you’ve just lost another illusion! Tell me, how can I help disillusion you some more?”

In my own life two profound passages of clinical depression have turned out to be times of profound contemplation. There are many different kinds of depression, I think, some of them almost totally biochemical, so I do not mean to generalize about the experience. But my depression was very situational, very much related to choices I had made in my life. I was living the compartmentalized life that Merton describes in the quote at the beginning of this movement—a divided life in which no division ever communicated with any other division.

My life at that time was not like the famous “seven-storey mountain” of Merton’s life, but more like a seven-storey apartment building with no stairs and no elevator and no hallways and no telephone system. No communication was going on between the various parts of me, between the good stuff and the bad stuff and all the in-between stuff. I would live out of one or another of those parts at any given

time, while hiding the others away, ignoring and denying their existence.

I got great help from a person who said to me, "You seem to keep imaging your depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Why don't you image it, instead, as the hand of a friend trying to press you down to safe ground on which to stand?" Eventually, I came to understand my depression as a life-giving force bent on demolishing that seven-storey apartment building so that those isolated compartments would have to connect and communicate with one another—so that I would have to move toward wholeness, or die. Wholeness—the movement from self-impersonation to authentic selfhood—is the great gift contemplation can bring, a gift often hard-won through the catastrophes of our lives.

As I bring this movement to a close, I want to note that the gifts contemplation has to offer are not only for individuals but for societies as well. For several years I have been trying to understand the great social movements of our time—the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the liberation of Eastern Europe, the movement for gay and lesbian rights. At the outset of all of these movements, as I understand them, there are people—some now famous, some still obscure—who make a deep inner decision to live "divided no more," people who decide one day that it is no longer tolerable to live one way on the outside while feeling and knowing something completely different on the inside.

I call this "the Rosa Parks decision" because she is so emblematic in our century of the social power of living the undivided life. On December 1, 1955, this forty-two-year-old black seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, decided that she would no longer sit at the back of the bus, but would sit up front in witness to the fact that she knew herself as a full human being. Years later, someone asked if she had taken that act in order to start the Civil Rights Movement. She said, "I sat down because my feet were tired." Of course, she meant that her heart was tired, her soul was tired, her whole being was tired of living a divided life, of acting as if she were less than fully human.

I have often wondered where people like Rosa Parks get the courage to decide to live divided no more, knowing full well that they will be punished for their acts. From studying her life, and others, I now think I know the answer: that courage comes from realizing that no punishment anyone might ever lay on you could possibly be worse

than the punishment that comes from conspiring in one's own diminishment.

The story of Vaclav Havel, the person most responsible for triggering the movement that liberated Czechoslovakia, is parallel to that of Rosa Parks. Years before the so-called "Velvet Revolution" occurred, Havel wrote an open letter of dissent to Gustav Husak, President of Czechoslovakia and head of the Communist Party. Later, when someone asked him if he had written that letter to spark the revolution, Havel answered, "No, I wrote it to keep from committing suicide." It was an act of expressing personal integrity which was taken to change Havel's own life—and ended up changing the world as well.

The words I quoted from Thomas Merton at the beginning of this movement seem daunting, but his advice is actually quite simple and realistic and to the point: "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 and simple whole, and learn to live as a unified human person." Before we take on anything as complex and challenging as a contemplative life, we need to take on life itself with the simple act of writing that letter of dissent or of sitting at the front of the bus. Once we do, our contemplation will have commenced and nothing will ever be the same.

III. God Is Shy—And So Am I

From what has been said, it is clear that there is and can be no special planned technique for discovering and awakening one's inner self, because the inner self is first of all a spontaneity that is nothing if not free. . . . The inner self is not a part of our being, like a motor in a car. . . . It is like life, and it is life: it is our spiritual life when it is most alive. It is the life by which everything else in us lives and moves. . . .

The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as an object, because it is not "a thing." It is not reached and coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation. All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner

self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of his Presence.⁹

The reason we are so obsessed with technique in our society—in every arena from sex to spirituality—is that we grant all reality and power to the things of the outer world, the world of objects, and “things” always yield to technique. But there is no technique for the inner life because the inner life is not a “thing.” It is a world of nearly-invisible truths, of silence and modesty and reticence, whose inhabitants can be encountered only as one is willing to sit quietly and wait for them to come forth. And it is a world of great power, even though our culture ignores and even denies that fact.

Let me illustrate by reflecting for a while on the sources of power in professional life—especially in teaching, the profession I know best—and on how those sources are, or are not, addressed in the way we train professionals. To put it in a nutshell, I am intrigued by the fact that good work in any profession can never be reduced to technique, and yet we prepare people for all the professions with little more than training in technique.

For twenty-five years I have visited schools and colleges around the country, often asking young people, “Who are your great teachers?” The answers I get range all over the map in terms of technique—some great teachers lecture almost non-stop, some do little else but assign a lot of reading and ask a lot of questions, and others fall somewhere in between. The stories I have heard about great teaching have no discernible continuities in terms of technique—but what they do have in common is an emphasis on the qualities of selfhood that great teachers possess and reveal and offer to their students. Students continually say things like, “Professor X is really present when he teaches,” or “Professor Y really cares about her subject,” or “Professor Z is such a real person—and I would like to be like him some day.”

I remember one young woman who said that she could not possibly generalize about her good teachers because they were so different from one another—but she could describe her bad teachers because they were all the same: “Their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like the balloon speech in cartoons.” Here is a remarkable, intuitive image of bad teaching—or bad practice in any profession: it hap-

pens not simply because of a failure of technique, but because there is a gap between the stuff being taught and the self that is teaching it. Such a teacher is engaged in “active self-impersonation,” to use Merton’s phrase.

When I hear these stories about the selfhood of good teachers, I marvel again at the fact that our teacher education programs are devoted almost exclusively to technique, and spend little, if any, time helping would-be teachers clarify and confront the self that is the ultimate source of all good work. But rather than merely bemoan that fact, I want to say a few words about a new program for teachers that is attempting to do things differently.

The program is sponsored by a foundation called the Fetzer Institute, which sponsored and helped design the recent Bill Moyers series on public television called “Healing and the Mind.” Fetzer is interested in the spiritual dimensions not only of medicine, but of teaching and other professions as well. I am helping them develop the program for teachers, which we have come to call the “Teacher Formation Program.”¹⁰

Just a month and a half before our first, experimental event, a weekend retreat called “The Courage to Teach” aimed at K-12 teachers in central Michigan, we sent out about a couple hundred brochures to as many school principals; we did not have a mailing list of teachers, and we were fearful that the brochures might get buried on the desks of those busy administrators. The brochure said that this retreat would not be about technique or about curriculum reform or about budgetary issues—it would be about the inner life of the teacher, and especially about recovering the heart to teach in these discouraging times for public education.

Within a week or two, we found ourselves overwhelmed with inquiries and applications, including those from principals who wanted to know why this was for teachers only! We selected twenty-two teachers from the one hundred who sent in applications, and we walked together through a three-day retreat of real depth and power. These teachers—many of whom had been at their craft for one or two decades—told us that never before in their careers had they been invited to share and explore and develop their inner lives. Instead, they

9. Merton, op. cit., 297-298.

10. Information about the Teacher Formation Program can be obtained from The Fetzer Institute, 9292 W. KL Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49009.

had usually been subjected to a promotion for the "method-of-the-month" that promised to make everything better, or had been berated for being such poor stewards of public funds and public trust.

What we did at the retreat, of course, was to try to create the conditions that would invite, from the group and from each individual, "something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of God's Presence." That is, we approached each other, and our professional lives, with the respect that is due to the dignity and the mystery of the human soul—a respect that seems sorely lacking in the way we train professionals and, not surprisingly, in the way professionals then treat the people whom they are supposed to serve.

In the development of the Teacher Formation Program (which draws heavily on Merton's insights into the nature of spiritual formation), we have been trying consciously to avoid the "manufacturing metaphor" of doing education (or spiritual formation) and turning, instead, to an "agricultural metaphor." The manufacturing model is the dominant one in our society, a model that assumes that the "stuff" we are working with—i.e., the human being—is raw material with little value until we add our technique and our labor to shape it into something worthwhile. This is, of course, a violent way to do anything, and it results in the spread of violence throughout our society.

But the agricultural model is one that respects the *a priori* reality and fecundity and integrity of the seed—the seed of true self. In this model we know that our task is not to "make" something happen, but to provide the conditions under which the seed can grow. We know that sometimes the weather works for us, and sometimes against us, and we must develop the patience to co-create with whatever weather we get. We know that we cannot force the crop, but must learn how to await the shy, unpredictable springing of the green, and then learn how to nurture it into fuller growth and hearty maturity.

I think again of Rilke, who was in so many ways a soul-mate to Thomas Merton. Rilke wrote, "Love is this—that two solitudes border, protect, and salute one another."¹¹ He was warning us against the invasive and violent notion we have of how to "love" each other

into shape (even if it kills us), spreading the good news that we can best help bring each other into fullness of life by creating quiet and attentive spaces where the God-image that is in us can finally emerge. I give thanks for the life of Thomas Merton, which was lived so deeply in such a space, and for the message of healing and hope that his voice still speaks to us out of the eternal silence.

11. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1984) 78.