

to recognize the voice of a particular writer. Part of Merton's voice and tone is his way, Porter points out, of always presenting himself as a beginner, someone "who comes to life as if he were a stranger to it and is beginning to find his way in it for the first time."

Another of Porter's themes, although one not articulated as explicitly as one perhaps might have liked, is Merton's existentialism, which Porter cites in concrete instances rather than in abstract commentary. Merton's way of dealing with questions or problems, Porter maintains, is to "live them." In this way Merton came to an awareness of the value of Latin American writing through his contact with Latin American poets. Similarly, in his quest to understand Buddhism he made contact with those like D.T. Suzuki, who lived Buddhism.

As I have intimated, while this book is about Merton, it is also about Porter, and this is especially evident in the last chapter which is entitled "Hello, Goodbye, Hello Again." Perhaps surprising, given Merton's hold on Porter's imagination, are the trailing thoughts about Merton. Porter confesses to being "dumbfounded" by his loss of interest in the prominent biographical issues about Merton. These include the romance with M., the fathering of an illegitimate child in the U.K. prior to his Columbia and Gethsemani years, and the so-called epiphanies that occurred at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville and at Polonnarawa in what was then Ceylon. I couldn't agree more. Although these matters have preoccupied critics and biographers for some time, somehow they seem secondary at last, rather like those "inessential houses" on Long Island mentioned by the narrator at the ending of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*. What remains behind is the presence of Merton *essentially* to be encountered in the narratives, poems, essays, journals, and letters in which he lives as vividly as ever. Although the experiences that went into the making of Merton shaped the man, they do not equal him.

Ross Labrie

PALMER, Parker J., *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980, 2008), pp. 175. ISBN 9780787996963 (cloth). \$18.95.

Reviewing a book can sometimes lead to reviewing one's own life. This may be most apt to happen, I suppose, when the book under review has been crafted by its author from an intense review of

their own life. A double viewing, in other words, can occur. You see yourself in what the other has seen. Hence, one re-views more than a book. In *The Promise of Paradox*, contemplative educator Parker Palmer celebrates the evolving role of contradictions as they are experienced in the spiritual life, and even re-views his own book in a new Introduction.

The present work is actually the third edition of Palmer's first book, *The Promise of Paradox*. First published in 1980 by Ave Maria Press, but later having fallen oddly out of print, it was picked up in 1993 by the Servant Leadership School affiliated with the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC (Palmer has donated all proceeds of *Paradox* to the School). The reappearance of *Paradox* in 1993 was joined by the second edition of Palmer's splendid contemporary classic on education as a spiritual journey, *To Know As We Are Known*. Palmer's work is of interest to Merton readers for at least three reasons: He quotes Merton extensively in all his works, he writes from and promotes a contemplative perspective of life, love and learning, and he has participated in a conference commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Merton Center at Bellarmine, which led to the publication of his keynote address, "Contemplation Reconsidered: The Human Way In," in Volume 8 of *The Merton Annual* (1996).

The essential change to the 2008 edition of *Paradox* is the addition of a substantial 24 page Introduction by Palmer, which I will focus on for this review. The rest of the book remains virtually untouched. Still intact is the 1980 Introduction by Henri Nouwen. Chapter one frames the entire work in light of Merton's writings and experiences about life "in the belly of a paradox" (*The Sign of Jonas*). Subsequent chapters creatively explore the paradox of outer and inner stations of the cross, the relationship between individual and community, scarcity and abundance in society, and finally the paradoxical way of spirit in the life of the mind (education). Palmer writes simply, clearly and humbly, which is why one will not find common experiences or ideas treated with clichés, automatic dogma or even the hint of omniscience.

In his provocative, new Introduction, he acknowledges two reactions upon rereading his first book: There is much that he would not change, and much that he would not say today. Thus Palmer found himself wrapped in another paradox rooted in his own words and thoughts. He admits, too, to finding it increasingly difficult today "to name my beliefs using the traditional Christian

language because that vocabulary has been taken hostage by theological terrorists and tortured beyond recognition" (xxi). His faith is still strong, but he recognizes, as did Merton, many problems in trying to communicate amidst the constraints of language and the tyranny of (mis)interpretation. Yet he realizes that he still can, nevertheless, certainly speak with uncertainty, for "when you are traveling toward your destiny in the belly of a paradox, as we all are, there are no certainties. But the creative opportunities are boundless. Resist the fact, and life can get brutal. Embrace it, and life becomes one whale of a ride" (xxxvii). Such an understanding clearly informs Palmer's powerful ecumenism that also runs throughout his writing.

Palmer's thesis in *Paradox* is simply and not so simply this: The promise that apparent opposites can cohere in a life lived with a both/and perspective instead of an either/or point of view. Running through the heart of human experience, one might say, is an ever abiding *seemingness*, which means that anything and everything can seem one way or another depending on how you are looking. There always seems to be a relationship between what and how we see, as well as an ever-growing relationship between vision and understanding. One pair of traditional terms for this are *appearance* (or illusion because not total) and *reality*. Contemplation, for Palmer, is defined in general as any way that one can penetrate illusion and touch reality, a perspective that weaves throughout his writings about the unresolved tensions of life—the paradoxes. Thus spirituality, for Palmer, is essentially contemplative rather than moralistic, and is rooted in the paradox of the whole, which naturally assumes there is always more to reality than what we can see, say or do.

Those who may be long on the spiritual journey will already know about living with paradoxes, but Palmer's book does not merely re-explain timeless truths, but rather cultivates deepening insights into one's own paradoxes. As Christians, we are very familiar with such enduring paradoxes such as losing your life to find it, dying to self to live, the first shall be last, in the world but not of it. The value of *The Promise of Paradox*, however, is that it helps the reader come to see one's own contradictions—in terms of the daily tensions, battles and embittered choices that often threaten to tear us apart—and the wondrous possibility of their becoming paradoxes through which we can come to find rest and a little closer to understanding our own quizzical lives.

I did not expect this to happen. Reading Palmer's book for review purposes led me to approach it in a slightly more detached way than I normally would have (as a kind of devotee, like any other contemplative sympathizer). I did not expect, however, to reflect on my own inner turmoil. I came to realize that I have been living lately with three unrecognized paradoxes that until now I had not understood as such, let alone articulated even as problems. The beauty of Palmer's book, is in its capacity to reveal that the problems of the human heart are not private concerns but are paradoxically, hence intimately, connected to the lives of others. Or as Palmer uses Merton's phrasing to make the case: We and the world interpenetrate each other. Thus the same quest for certainty that torments and twists an individual life into a private bureaucracy is also related to the collective illusions involved in the forceful construction of a world steeped in nationalistic interests in opposition to those of other nations, other cultures, other ways of life, other children of God. Palmer does not fall into the trap of relativism, however, because he is keenly aware that paradoxes do not require the neglect of critical faculties but rather their sharpening. Thomas Merton stands as a model for Palmer as someone who lived through paradoxes, who did not try to escape or evade them. By living the contradictions, Palmer advises, we are "swallowed by grace" and allowed to travel with Merton and all the saints in the luminescent belly of a paradox (37).

Gray Matthews

Merton, Thomas, *Gandhi on Non-Violence : Selected Texts from Gandhi's Non-Violence in Peace and War*. Edited with an Introduction by Thomas Merton. Preface by Mark Kurlansky. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2007), pp. xi + 96. ISBN 978-0-8112-1686-9 (paperback). \$13.95.

It has often been noted that the twentieth century, though rife with scientific achievements, also claims the title for the most devastating wars, the most brutal genocides, and the most widespread violations of human rights. In the first few years of the twenty-first century, not much has improved and has perhaps even worsened. Imperialism, oppression, and violence still characterize both the international and domestic policies of the world's most powerful nations and are becoming more and more acceptable by modern standards. This trend of violence and moral degradation became