

# Digital Natives and the Digital Self: The Wisdom of Thomas Merton for Millennial Spirituality and Self-Understanding

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## I. Introduction

In the two years since I first suggested that the neologism the “Digital Self”<sup>1</sup> might serve us well as a modern synonym for Thomas Merton’s often-discussed “False Self,” the technological, and subsequently spiritual, context of our society has changed. A direct result of our fast-paced world, shaped as it is by our collective and increasing dependence on the Internet, new social media and digital communication technology, contemporary commentary on the state of our experience observes the rapidity with which the “latest” becomes “outdated,” and the “tried and true” becomes “obsolete.” In a sense, novelty is prized over pragmatism or even necessity, and a culture has been cultivated within which people are urged to update, upgrade and upload, not only their technology, but themselves as well. While this high-speed current of cultural and social transformation in our day might ostensibly suggest that a term such as the “False Self,” or the “Digital Self” (think “False Self 2.0”), is no longer compatible with our contemporary operating systems and means of cultural navigation, I believe that the technological developments as well as the potentially concurrent declivities of these last two years only increase the relevance of reflecting on Merton’s insight as it relates to the intersection of technology, contemplation and the discovery of the “True Self.” For this reason, I maintain that among the varied synonyms Merton himself used to describe the false self – among which are counted the exterior self, empirical self, outward self, shadow self, imaginary self, illusory self, masks, and so on – we should also count the “Digital Self.” Its aptness stems in part from the term’s ability to capture the timely challenges of a generation that has only known a technologically hegemonic world, a cohort of young people that faces – in addition

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1. See Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “Striving toward Authenticity: Merton’s ‘True Self’ and the Millennial Generation’s Search for Identity,” *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010) 80-89.

to the myriad challenges to the spiritual life that all people of all ages face – new and unanticipated realities that have significantly affected the way in which people go about the world, relate to one another and develop their relationships with God.

Merton's writing on technology as an explicit theme has often been presented as a cautionary tale that verges on singular critique of technological reliance and appropriation. From farm equipment to the television, we read Merton's incredulous take on the purported "advancement" new and emerging technologies offer society. I am not entirely convinced that such a reading takes into account the true complexity of modern living, something in which Merton himself participated and something from which none of us – at least without extraordinary effort and intention – can escape. We, like Merton before us, are faced with the realization that we cannot critique technology or society's collective use of its varied forms from the outside, for we are dependent on, complicit in and inexorably shaped by (in countless known and unknown ways) the very thing we seek to critique. This is perfectly fine. But, as with any honest engagement with a subject, we are called to acknowledge our hermeneutical biases. That so much of our experience is informed by the latest technology – which, unlike the domestication of horses, the creation of writing or the invention of the automobile, occurs in previously unknown rates and has incredibly long-ranging impact – needs to be considered as we begin our reflection.

Due to the necessary limitations of time and scope, I wish only to return to the theme I first engaged two years ago: the insight of Merton's notion of the "True Self" and its fecundity for aiding today's young adults (as well as other members of future generations) in living authentically in relationship with themselves, with others and with God. To do this we will first take a look at just a few of the studies and noted challenges that face today's young adults in order to gain an appreciation for the context within which today's seekers live out their desire to better understand themselves and their God. Next, we will take a look at Merton's formulation of the True Self and consider how the identity formation in a digital age might at times be considered a form of the False Self. Finally, we will examine some ways in which Merton's writing, now more than a half-century old, continues to be informative and offer wisdom to people today.

## II. Today's Spiritual Seekers

In his provocatively titled book, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*, Jesse Rice keenly notes that “at the root of human existence is our great need for connection: connection with one another, with our own hearts and minds, and with a loving God who intended intimate connection with us from the beginning. Connection is the very core of what makes us human and the very means by which we express our humanity.”<sup>2</sup> What Rice is getting at here, in other words, is that at the core of our very humanity is the capacity and desire for relationship. How we understand ourselves, our world, other people and God are all directly shaped by this need we share to be connected to others and to participate in a relational experience of a uniquely human order. From a theological perspective, this is identified as an intrinsic or existential attribute of humanity. We are created as *capax Dei*, with the capacity for relationship with the Divine, which serves as the ground upon which our human relationships stand. The Franciscan theological tradition emphasizes this aspect of theological anthropology further, serving as a spiritual exponent of the truth that our very createdness is itself a sign of our *a priori* or inherent relational quality. That we exist bespeaks an intentional and loving divine act of creation that is entirely contingent; therefore we are already always in relationship from the first moment of our existence.<sup>3</sup> One recalls the Hebrew prophetic tradition, such as is found in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, when seeking to illustrate this theological truth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5).

That our desire to enter into relationship is a fundamental quality of our existence is therefore nothing new. However, the *way* in which we enter into relationship today does present something new, and for those who were born after 1982, the cohort popularly called the Millennial Generation (or simply “Millennials”), this feature largely defines the only world they have ever known. Adam Thomas, an Episcopal priest and member of the Millennial generation, says as much in his recent book *Digital Disciple: Real*

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2. Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009) 28; subsequent references will be cited as “Rice” parenthetically in the text.

3. For more, see Daniel Horan, “Light and Love: Robert Grosseteste and John Duns Scotus on the How and Why of Creation,” *The Cord* 57 (2007) 243-57.

*Christianity in a Virtual World*, when he writes: “The new dimension of virtuality that [technology] has added to our lives has brought new locations, new situations, and yes, new opportunities and dangers. . . . [T]he lay of the land has changed, so to speak, and our new virtual environments are affecting us on multiple levels.”<sup>4</sup> How these changes are made manifest in the spiritual, emotional and relational lives of today’s young adults is what concerns us here, but before we look at some specific ways the “new virtual environments” have impacted Millennials, we need to briefly examine this generation.

In what follows I will offer an overview of what I and other scholars mean by use of the term “Digital Natives” and how this moniker relates to our discussion of the place, value and challenge of technology in the lives of Millennials. Next I will very briefly introduce some of the recent scholarly discussion of Millennial identity formation. To conclude this section, I will propose five challenges to Millennial identity formation in a digital age.

#### *A. Digital Natives*<sup>5</sup>

There are two types of people in this world: Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. At least this is the view forwarded by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser in their book *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*.<sup>6</sup> Palfrey and Gasser suggest that in today’s society one can better understand the differences between the Millennial generation – those women and men born in or after 1982 – and all those who were born before them by characterizing them in terms of their respective relationship to technology. These authors explore the manifold ways technology has influenced, impeded and reshaped adolescent identity formation in recent years. Their research, one of the more recent studies on the role technology plays in the lives of Millennials, provides a helpful glimpse into the world of young adults who have only ever known a technologically advanced and digital world.

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4. Adam Thomas, *Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011) 7.

5. Some of the material in this section first appeared in Horan, “Striving toward Authenticity” 81-84, and Daniel Horan, “Digital Natives and Franciscan Spirituality,” *Spiritual Life* 56 (2010) 73-84.

6. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008; rev. ed., 2011); subsequent references will be cited as “Palfrey & Gasser” parenthetically in the text.

The Millennial generation, unlike Generation X, the Baby Boomers or any other cohort before, has grown up in a technologically hegemonic era. For example, most members of this generation have had access to computers, the Internet, cable television and cellular phones long before entering high school; or, as one author says, "For many kids using the new technology is as natural as breathing."<sup>7</sup> Palfrey and Gasser summarize this world in which Digital Natives live and interact as a new dimension of reality. This dimension is not something completely distinct from the world as we have known it, but it is unlike that which has come before.

Unlike most Digital Immigrants, Digital Natives live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and the offline. Instead of thinking of their digital identity and their real-space identity as separate things, they just have an identity (with representations in two, or three, or more different spaces). They are joined by a set of common practices, including the amount of time they spend using digital technologies, their tendency to multitask, their tendency to express themselves and relate to one another in ways mediated by digital technologies, and their pattern of using the technologies to access and use information and create new knowledge and art forms. For these young people, new digital technologies – computers, cell phones, Sidekicks – are primary mediators of human-to-human connections. (Palfrey & Gasser 4)

Furthermore, with electronic books, virtual worlds, GPS navigation systems and so forth, there is hardly anything exempt from its duplicate electronic or virtual counterpart. To say that Millennials take technology for granted is an understatement. Millennials live in and have, for the most part, only ever known a technologically advanced and digital world.

Palfrey and Gasser suggest that Millennials face two challenges in identity formation that are heightened by this digital world. The first is the instability of identity that results from frequent changes and, increasingly, from non-volitional acts of the person whose

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7. Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998). See also Tapscott's subsequent study, published more than a decade after the first; here he revisits the Millennial generation's relationship to technology as a larger portion of the cohort has come of age: Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

identity is at stake (Palfrey & Gasser 31). Concerning the frequent changes, the authors point out that “a Digital Native’s identity is context-specific; its expression depends on who’s asking, what environment they’re in, and what day it is. [Therefore there are multiple identities.] These multiple identities complicate matters in terms of how Digital Natives think of themselves and present themselves to the world” (Palfrey & Gasser 27). This superfluidity is complicated further when one considers that a Millennial faces a decrease in his or her ability to control identity as others perceive it (Palfrey & Gasser 31). Whereas a teenager in the agrarian or industrial age might be able to form her identity in a manner that allows her to present her “self” in a social setting with some sense of how she is perceived through personal interaction, a digital native almost constantly defines and redefines her personal and social self-image while being simultaneously removed from the interpreters who perceive those images. Such a disconnection often leaves Millennials vulnerable to identity manipulation and falsification (Palfrey & Gasser 32).

Following the challenge of instability is that of the insecurity of Millennial identities. As Palfrey and Gasser keenly note, “It is hard for a sixteen-year-old girl in a wired society to control who can access or make changes to her identity. It would be impossible for her to secure her digital identity at any given moment, even if she wanted to” (Palfrey & Gasser 33). So, while experimenting with one’s identity and self-image is a normal process of adolescent and young adult development, the digital age complicates the process through the media used, the public forum it is presented in, the frequent changes, and the lack of control the young person has over his or her perceived identity.

David Buckingham presents another way to look at these two challenges raised by Palfrey and Gasser. He suggests that instead of viewing these as two separate problems, we should consider it one context that has both positive and negative dimensions. Buckingham writes:

On the one hand, it could be argued that the internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been denied or stigmatized. . . . [S]uch arguments presume that media can be used as a means of expressing or even discovering aspects of one’s “true self,” for example, in relation to sexuality. Yet on the other hand, these

media can also be seen to provide powerful opportunities for identity play, for parody and subversion . . . . [H]ere, the emphasis would lie not on honesty and truth, but on the potential for performance and even for deception.<sup>8</sup>

No matter how one characterizes the new landscape of identity formation, it remains clear that the context has changed and the process has become more complicated, if not dangerous.

The complexity of identity formation for Millennials reaches its climax with the paradox that as digital natives are able to more easily create multiple identities online and experiment with how they present themselves, they are also more bound to a single identity – a sprawling, morphing, shifting and public identity – than ever before (Palfrey & Gasser 34-35). Whereas a young adult in the pre-digital age could simply pack up and move to another location, meet a new group of people and essentially recreate her identity, today's young adults are more tightly linked to the digital representations of their identities that can be accessed at nearly any time and from nearly any location.

#### *B. Identity Formation in a Digital Age*

One of the hallmarks of identity formation for Millennials growing up in a digital age, as we have already seen, is its fluidity. Scholars like Zygmunt Bauman and David Buckingham have suggested that, unlike the way in which identity was understood or formed in the pre-digital age, Digital Natives engage a personal (and perhaps even a collective) identity that is “almost infinitely negotiable.”<sup>9</sup> As Buckingham has noted elsewhere, this fluidity or negotiability is ostensibly positive and negative, carrying with it both advantageous and problematic implications. On the positive side, such fluidity offers a seeming freedom that young people may have never known in a previous era. This freedom to “explore one’s self” is heightened by the speed of communication and the sharing of ideas, cultures and experiences across the normative borders of society and language. On the negative side, such fluidity presents an omnipresent challenge of instability, uncertainty

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8. David Buckingham, “Introducing Identity,” in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008) 8-9; subsequent references will be cited as “Buckingham” parenthetically in the text.

9. See Buckingham 2; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

and confusion in terms of one's ability to relate to one's self, others and, ultimately, God.

Sharon Daloz Parks has described the process of young-adult identity formation as like one's journey toward becoming "at home" in the universe. She writes:

It has become increasingly clear that there is value and healing in incorporating into our understanding of human development an imagination of becoming at home. A part of becoming at home in the universe is discovering our place within it, in the new global commons in which we now find ourselves. We are beginning to recognize that this becoming is not so much a matter of leaving home as it is undergoing a series of transformations in the meaning of home. We grow and become both by letting go and holding on, leaving and staying, journeying and abiding – whether we are speaking geographically, socially, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually. A good life and the cultivation of wisdom require a balance of home and pilgrimage.<sup>10</sup>

The metaphor of becoming "at home" in one's life does not lend much credence to the notion that young adults can fabricate or develop a personal identity through social media, technology or self-machination. On the contrary, the dual poles of home and pilgrimage point toward a dialectic tension that suggests a journey of discovery and recognition. One "finds," as it were, one's "place," rather than constructing something alternative. This imagery draws on language much more in line with Christian notions of vocation and philosophical concepts of inherent individuation than it does with the malleable content of the Digital Self.<sup>11</sup> What role new and emerging technologies play in the self-understanding or identity formation of Millennials is a pressing question. From the perspective of Millennial identity and spirituality, is technology intrinsically good or bad?

The sociological, psychological and demographic reports vary by scholar and study as to the pull of the positive and negative

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10. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 51.

11. For more on this notion of inherent individuation, see Daniel Horan, "Praying with the Subtle Doctor: Toward a Contemporary Scotistic Spirituality," *The Cord* 58 (2008) 225-42.



aspects of digital-age identity formation for the Millennial generation. On the one hand is someone like Mack Hicks whose agenda-transparent book title reveals his position, *The Digital Pandemic: Reestablishing Face-To-Face Contact in the Electronic Age*.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand there is the much more optimistic reading of contemporary young-adult identity formation in the works of authors such as Neil Howe, William Strauss, John Palfrey, Urs Gasser and others.<sup>13</sup> Others, like Jesse Rice, David Buckingham and Sherry Turkle, the founder and director of MIT's Initiative on Technology and Self, offer something of a middle-of-the-road approach that acknowledges both the positive effects of newfound freedom and the challenges inherent in the hyperactivity and disconnection consistently present to the young people of this age.

Turkle has used the term the "tethered self" to illustrate how she sees the Millennial generation's constant engagement with communication technology influencing how young women and men understand themselves. We have become, and therefore expect always to be, "on and available" to those with whom we regularly communicate. Therefore there is no end to the work day, no escape from friends and no time for solitude as one's identity becomes more and more reflective of a so-called tethered self. As nice as it is to be able to be reached and to reach others quickly, it is also a burden that has previously been unseen. Such behavior moves from innovative novelty to smart-phone addiction as one can no longer imagine one's self without this ever-present technology.

The cultivation of a healthy self-concept is being subtly undermined by the tendency toward always-on behavior. By way of example, Turkle mentions the fact that many kids are getting cell phones at a younger age, a reality that is having an impact on their development. The new phone is enabling parents and children to be in touch with one another, but it can prevent the child from having to face certain difficult tasks on their own. "With the on-tap parent," Turkle observes, "tethered children think differently about their own responsibilities and capacities. These remain potential, not proven." Likewise, when a young person jumps on Facebook [or other social networking sites] as

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12. Mack Hicks, *The Digital Pandemic: Reestablishing Face-to-Face Contact in the Electronic Age* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 2010).

13. See Palfrey & Gasser, and Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Great Falls, VA: Life Course Associates, 2007).

soon as they cross the minimum age of twelve, they are newly connected to a vast and growing network of “others” from whom they can receive guidance, comfort, and camaraderie. While this is often a positive experience – teens need access to a widening circle of voices in order to make sense of themselves and their world – it can also be potentially harmful. Young people can come to so fully depend on the advice and opinions of others – including parents – that they become stunted in their ability to navigate life on their own. (Rice 143-44)

It is fair to say, at least from several informed perspectives, that there are indeed positive aspects that bolster creativity, access and connectivity among the Digital Natives that engage new technologies. What is helpful does not need to be examined any further here; instead we can take for granted the complexity of the influence of technology on identity formation. In our attempt to explore the way in which Thomas Merton’s work might best aid Digital Natives in moving from a focus or preoccupation with the Digital Self to the True Self we should allocate our energy toward elucidating the challenges that face Millennials in this regard.

### *C. Five Challenges to Millennial Identity Formation*

Drawing on what we have already examined in the work of Palfrey, Gasser, Buckingham and Parks while developing their insight further, we can identify several thematic elements that highlight challenges to Millennial identity formation in a digital age.

1. *Affective Instability.* Palfrey and Gasser suggest that the public identity – or *identities* – of Digital Natives are highly fluid, reflecting the shifting adaptations, experimentations and expressions of Millennials. With “real-time” updates to public profiles, news streams and other forms of digital affectivity, Millennials are constantly adjusting and readjusting the way their identities are presented to others. The theologian Ilia Delio has described this fluidity as a sort of mask that covers up the fear of authentic human interaction, of actually getting to know another, thereby encouraging a world of superficial interactions and anonymity. She writes: “The prevalence of anonymity marks our culture today; hence the desire for some people to be identified either by dress, tattoos, or sculptured hair. We are wired together on the Internet, on our Droids, iPhones, and video screens, but face to face we are like marble

statues."<sup>14</sup> Fred Herron picks up on this same phenomenon and writes that it is like young people today are paralyzed by the confusion of their own being.<sup>15</sup>

2. *Lack of Interpretative Control.* It is true that all identities are subject to interpretation and evaluation by others. The way in which others perceive you is not something you can ever fully control, but given the increasingly public nature of identity formation matched with the ease in accessibility made possible with smart-phone technology and other tools, scholars warn that manipulation and misrepresentation of one's identity in electronic formats is a more acute risk for Millennials than for any other cohort.<sup>16</sup> Such identity abuse was witnessed in the recent tragic events involving gay teenagers who were "outed" by others who manipulated their public identities through social media. This sort of behavior is not always as extreme as those instances leading to the suicides of these young men, but daily public negotiations to maintain control of one's Digital Self draw energy away from other pursuits in life, which raises concerns about long- and short-term impacts on Millennial identity formation and socialization.

3. *The Prioritization of Instant Gratification.* Another concern that arises from the challenges present to Millennials in a digital age is the prioritization of instant gratification as the *modus operandi* of all things from information acquisition to communication. As Rebekah Willett has observed, today's young adults increasingly are viewed and view themselves as consumers who demand immediate response and return, in both the public square of the marketplace and in the private realm of personal relationship.<sup>17</sup> Those things that require time, patience and long-term commitment may become more challenging for Millennials as they have become accustomed to the immediacy of return afforded by communications tech-

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14. Ilia Delio, *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011) xiii.

15. Fred Herron, *No Abiding Place: Thomas Merton and the Search for God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005); subsequent references will be cited as "Herron" parenthetically in the text.

16. For more see Palfrey & Gasser 31-37 and *passim*.

17. Rebekah Willett, "Consumer Citizens Online: Structure, Agency, and Gender in Online Participation," in *Youth, Identity and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008) 49-70.

nology, social networking, electronic books, Internet search engines and the like.

4. *A Loss of Recognized Embodiment.* Although a human being can never “lose” one’s experience of embodiment (at least not yet), this reality that stands at the heart of theological anthropology becomes less recognized with those who spend more time in front of a computer monitor or smart-phone screen. Digital Natives, some scholars have claimed, have a very different self-perception than their generational predecessors. Much more of their day-to-day experience takes place “in the head” and by way of digital media than it does in the typified human experience of embodied relational engagement or physical and tactile activity. This technologically ubiquitous context has led to a loss in the realization or recognition of Digital Natives’ embodiment, thereby impacting the ways in which they understand themselves as fully human.

5. *Diminished Emphasis on Vocation.* There is little scholarship currently available that explores the relationship between Millennial engagement with technology and their understanding of personal (or collective) vocation as an identity created by God. The ease with which today’s young people are able to create, manipulate and recreate a digital identity appears to diminish any attempt of the Christian community to emphasize a person’s unique and individual vocation created by God. Instead of striving to enter into a relationship with one’s Creator in order to better understand one’s self, Millennials might come to devote their energy instead toward becoming whoever they desire or wish to be instead of who God has created them to be.

The challenges outlined here, as well as the numerous areas of concern that remain unnamed, suggest there is an emergent metatheme that is found throughout the process of identity formation for Millennials. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, I believe that what is lost in a technologically hegemonic rearing such as that experienced by Digital Natives is the communal or relational sense of identity formation. What is found in its place is a potential individualism that replaces personal discovery with consumer consciousness and social formation with private development.

Jesse Rice creatively describes this transformative and problematic shift that leads to distraction and confusion rather than

elucidation and self-understanding for so many. “Our lives unfold, moment by moment, and the only way we can truly experience them is in the moment. Being always-on can thwart awareness of the present moment, keeping our attention ever focused on the new rather than the now. Endless Facebook-checking, email-checking, texting, updating, posting – it all serves in keeping us ‘disembodied,’ unable to get a tangible grip on ourselves in relation to those around us” (Rice 149).

There has been a long tradition, particularly within a Christian context, of recognizing that who we are is discovered in large part through the living out of relationships. The relational dimension of human existence is particularly emphasized in Thomas Merton’s understanding and presentation of the True Self. It is only in relationship with God – and not through our personal constructs of “self” – that we can first discover and subsequently embrace who we are in an existential, total way.

### III. Merton, Technology and “The True Self”

In this section of the paper, I wish to address the way in which Merton broadly critiques technology as it concerns the contemplative life and offer some reasons why our wholesale appropriation of his admonishments might be in need of reconsideration. Additionally, I wish to reiterate the value of Merton’s technological critique as a foundation for engaging the concerns of the Digital Self for Millennials seeking a more substantive spiritual life and authentic self-understanding. Secondly, I will offer a brief review of what Merton means by the True Self.

#### *A. Merton’s Critique of Technology vis-à-vis Contemplation*

The way that Thomas Merton writes of technology, particularly later in his life, bears a style and orientation that would have made Jean-Jacques Rousseau proud.<sup>18</sup> In Merton’s now-famous posthumously published work, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* – which began as a pamphlet manuscript originally

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18. Here, of course, I am alluding to Rousseau’s famous treatise *Discourse on Inequality* (1754), in which the early modern philosopher posits the state of “natural man,” from which we have inherited contemporary iterations such as the “noble savage,” or, as in the case of Merton’s *The Inner Experience*, “preindustrial man” (Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003] 128 and *passim*; subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text).

titled *What Is Contemplation?*<sup>19</sup> – we read of the twentieth-century monk’s lamentation arising from his conjecture that modern life in general, and technologically advanced societies in particular, have lost something of an original disposition to the contemplative life. While Merton’s concern for the decreasing time and space permitted or appropriated for prayer and contemplation in his contemporary culture is legitimate in its own right, he moves beyond critique to overly romanticize an age and people that no longer exist. Merton writes, “In the preindustrial ages and in primitive societies that still exist, man [*sic*] is naturally prepared and disposed for contemplation. In such a world we find men who, though perhaps not all literate, possess traditional artistic and technical skills and are in a broad sense ‘artists’ and ‘spiritual men’” (*IE* 127).

Merton continues this praise of the so-called “preindustrial men” for some time, striving as he does to illustrate an image he will later use in contrast to those citizens of the contemporary age:

They are formed by their tradition and their culture. Even though such men [*sic*] may not be able to read and write, they are not necessarily “ignorant.” On the contrary, they possess a certain very important and vital kind of knowledge, and *all of it* is integrated into their lives. They have a wholeness and a humanity, and therefore a poise, a simplicity, and a confidence, which have vanished from a world in which men are alienated, enslaved to processes and to machines. Preindustrial man is therefore all ready to become a contemplative. . . . [T]here was no special difficulty for individuals to find their way into a monastery or to a hermitage and there devote themselves spontaneously to a life centered on the Presence and Infinite Reality of God. (*IE* 128)

How Merton could claim to authentically know any of what he claims as matter of fact here, writing as he did from within the confines of a Trappist monastery in the mid-twentieth century, is never explained. But it is clear that Merton has convinced himself that there was a problem in his own day with the way people “in the world” (the way Merton later refers to, well, people who are presumably not monks, complete with quotation marks) live and

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19. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, IN: Saint Mary’s College, 1948); rev. ed. (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1981).

with their ostensibly decreasing ability to contemplate (IE 142).

There are several reasons that Merton finds technology in general to be problematic. One is the universal obsession with improvement and the rapidity with which things must change in a technological society.<sup>20</sup> Another concern is the lack of ethical content in matters of technology. In a talk given at Gethsemani on June 5, 1966, Merton said, “Another thing technology doesn’t ask is, ‘Is this right?’ The individual engaged in dealing with technology may ask this question too, but technology as such doesn’t” (Merton, “Technological World” 212). During the same presentation, Merton raises a concern that is partnered with his ethical question, namely the philosophical value of technology and its apparent disinterest in things of permanence, identity and meaning. Merton contrasts technology’s focus on questions like “What does this do?” with a philosophically significant question such as “What is this?” or “What does this mean for the salvation of my soul?” – to which he adds: “You can save your soul in a technological environment, but there is no machine for saving your soul” (Merton, “Technological World” 211).

There is much reason to be sympathetic to Merton’s critique of technology and the way it impedes or distracts from an active spiritual life; surely we have seen that in the recent literature as it concerns today’s young adults and identity formation. However, it seems more than appropriate to approach Merton’s critique of technology in modern society with the proverbial grain or two of salt. This qualification is necessary for two reasons. The first is that Merton’s romantic notion of “preindustrial” or “natural” humanity, men and women who once existed as utopian contemplators or might currently exist as endangered aboriginals in some remote community, bears the marks of an outdated and controversial Rousseauian concept of human nature. The second need for qualification is the near value-judgment or assignment of moral culpability for those women and men who find themselves in situations, whether of their own choosing or otherwise, that create contexts hostile to contemplation. Merton’s critique reads at

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20. See Thomas Merton, “The Christian in a Technological World,” as transcribed in Paul Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 210; subsequent references to the book will be cited as “Dekar” parenthetically in the text; subsequent references to the conference will be cited as “Merton, ‘Technological World’” parenthetically in the text.

times, not of technology, but of the technophiles that emerge in a digital age. "The tragedy of modern man [*sic*] is that his creativity, his spirituality, and his contemplative independence are inexorably throttled by a superego that has sold itself without question or compromise to the devil of technology" (IE 129). As we see, there is little sensitivity or pastoral concern expressed in Merton's admonishment of modern people enveloped in a continuum of technological paralysis or pseudo-life.

Yet, in other instances, Merton makes explicit attempts to acknowledge that he does not wish to extend a generic value judgment on technology. Such is the case in his letter to the renowned moral theologian Bernard Haring on December 26, 1964, in response to the preparatory schema that would eventually become Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Merton writes:

I am not of course saying that technology is "bad," and that progress is something to be feared. But I am saying that behind the cloak of specious myths about technology and progress, there seems to be at work a vast uncontrolled power which is leading man [*sic*] where he does not want to go in spite of himself and in which the Church, it seems to me, ought to be somewhat aware of the intervention of the "principalities and powers" of which St. Paul speaks.<sup>21</sup>

While Merton vacillates on the subject of the inherent goodness or evil of technology, such that one is unable to accurately pinpoint his position due to his at times whimsical pronouncement of technology as "good" and "bad" at different points, we should realize that this is merely symptomatic of the great complexity technology plays in the quotidian lives of modern people. It is important to remember that Merton's own life was filled with the comforts and advantages of a technological society, even if he did lament his unavoidable complicity as he does in the talk he gave on June 5, 1966: "technology is revolutionizing the monastic life. And when I say that, I'm not screaming, or yelling, or anything. I'm just stating a fact. It is revolutionizing the monastic life. And you have to take into account the fact that the monastic life is now deeply influenced by technology" (Merton, "Technological World" 207).

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21. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 383-84.



Nevertheless, while it is important to state plainly that a reading of Merton's critique of technology as unmitigated by several significant factors is untenable, his critique presaged the second half of the twentieth and first decades of the twenty-first centuries. As we have already seen, there are indeed far-reaching concerns about the role technology plays in the lives of Millennials. Even in his own day, Merton saw the specter of something problematic emerging in the collective experience of young people. In what would become a chapter entitled "The Identity Crisis" in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton writes:

The crisis of identity which is everywhere normal in adolescence has become a grave problem in America extending far beyond adolescence and through young adulthood. Possibly there are many who never really resolve this problem in our society. One of the characteristics of "mass society" is precisely that it tends to keep man [*sic*] from fully achieving his identity, from operating fully as an autonomous person, from growing up and becoming spiritually and emotionally adult.<sup>22</sup>

His concern about the identity of young adults, those we could categorize as Digital Natives today, reverberates with those who remain concerned about the identity and spiritual lives of the Millennials. To consider the ways in which Merton offers contemporary spiritual seekers, whether young adults themselves or those tasked with their spiritual or social mentoring, a heuristic model by which to discover one's True Self, we must first review what the Trappist means by that term. For those already well acquainted with Merton's writings on contemplation and identity, what follows in this section will be familiar.

### *B. The True Self: An Overview*

"The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God," Thomas Merton famously wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>23</sup> Immediately following his equally famous exposition on the existential presence of the False Self (or, perhaps more accurately, the False *Selves*) of each person, Merton locates the reality of our true identity in God. This is done within the context of reflections on

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22. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 59.

23. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 35; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.

contemplation, a factor that sometimes becomes removed from Merton's treatment of identity. That it is through prayer and not through our own fabrication that our identity is *discovered* (and I use that term deliberately in an effort to diminish any constructive notion of the True Self that might be read into Merton's exposition) is a detail about which one is well served to reflect.<sup>24</sup>

In his introduction to Merton's notion of the True Self, William Shannon explains that one of the most consistent aspects of Merton's varied reflections on the subject has to do with his insistence that whatever the True Self may be, it is not found on the surface and does not appear within the realm of the exterior. "There is a huge difference between what we appear to be and what we are, between our exterior self and our inner self."<sup>25</sup> Shannon offers this description of what he understands Merton

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24. There have been some recent discussions about a passage in *New Seeds* in which Merton writes: "Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity" (32). Some have suggested, in what I assess to be a combination of eisegetical projection and isolated reading, that *New Seeds* offers evidence that Merton's notion of the True Self is, at least in part, a human construct that we help shape. This is clearly not the case. Merton, even within the passage cited above, is introducing and addressing the variance in vocational responsibility that exists among creation. Unlike trees or birds, human beings have been granted free will and have, by virtue of their Divine image and likeness, a responsibility or share in whether or not to discover and embrace one's truest identity. There is work involved in this, something about which Merton alludes in this chapter of *New Seeds*, noting the difficulty of the task at hand. The work is a matter first of (a) "choosing truth," which is the recognition that who we are is found in God alone, and then of (b) living out our True Self in contradistinction to the False Self or Selves of our own personal or social construction. In this respect we "co-create" with God through our exercise of free will and our conscious and active response to reject the False Self. This and similar isolated passages, when read outside the context of Merton's continuous reflection on the True Self elsewhere in *New Seeds* and in other texts, can be misrepresented. It is important, if tangential to the rest of my paper, to highlight this interpretive error – an infrequent, but existent school of thought – lest a misunderstanding of the distinction Merton draws between the False and True Selves persist.

25. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) 87; subsequent references will be cited as "Shannon" parenthetically in the text.

to mean in describing the True Self:

The true self . . . is the self that sleeps silently in my depths, waiting to be awakened by the power of the Spirit. It is the openness in us to the call of God to become one with God (or rather to discover that we are and always have been one with God). It is what Daniel Walsh, Merton's onetime teacher and friend, called "man's capacity for divinity," and what the distinguished German Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, called human "openness to the Transcendent." Merton describes it as "the white-hot point of mystical receptivity" which is present in all of us, but dormant in most of us. (Shannon 89-90)<sup>26</sup>

I am particularly fond of Shannon's way of describing the True Self in these terms. He continues his elucidation with an un referenced description of John Duns Scotus's notion of the formal distinction as it relates to the Medieval Franciscan theologian's principle of individuation, perhaps the most important influence in Merton's development of the True Self.<sup>27</sup> While the details of this presentation are not germane to this overview, suffice it to say that the emphasis in Shannon's description and in Merton's writing centers on the reality that one's truest identity, his or her True Self, is intrinsic, inherent and really identical (in the Scotist sense) with that person's very existence.

Because the True Self is only known perfectly to God, Merton often discusses his understanding of this identity in contrast to the so-called False Self. The False Self, what we have come to identify within the generational and cultural milieu of the Millennials as the Digital Self, is oftentimes likened to a mask or a shell. Take, for example, Merton's description of this contrast in his essay, "Rain and the Rhinoceros":

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26. For an interesting study on the influence of Daniel Walsh on Merton's understanding of the True Self, see Robert Imperato, *Merton and Walsh on the Person* (Brookfield, WI: Liturgical Publications, 1987).

27. Imperato notes pertinently that Walsh's unpublished doctoral dissertation was on John Duns Scotus, entitled "The Metaphysics of Ideas According to Duns Scotus" (Toronto: Medieval Institute, 1933). For more on this, see Daniel Horan, "Sparks of *Haecceitas*: A Scotist Reading of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Journal* 17 (2010) 15-21, and Daniel Horan, "Thomas Merton the 'Dunce': Identity, Incarnation and the Not So Subtle Influence of John Duns Scotus," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47 (2012) [forthcoming].

Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth. This seems to be the collective endeavor of society: the more busily men dedicate themselves to it, the more certainly it becomes a collective illusion, until in the end we have the enormous, obsessive, uncontrollable dynamic of fabrications designed to protect mere fictitious identities – “selves,” that is to say, regarded as objects. Selves that can stand back and see themselves having fun (an illusion which reassures them that they are real).<sup>28</sup>

There is something of a gravitational attraction emitted by the False Self that draws a person deeper and deeper into what might be considered a narcissistic spiral of obsession and focus. In a technologically hegemonic age, and for Digital Natives especially, the attraction to work and rework one’s Digital Self becomes nearly hypnotic. Most Millennials can attest to the “black hole” of time that social networking sites like Facebook present to the already overscheduled days of today’s youth. Yet, this is often the locus of the contemporary person’s energy and self-understanding. How one is presented in the digital realm becomes a priority for the manifestation of one’s distorted, albeit natural (what Merton will elsewhere associate with original sin) attraction to the False Self as it becomes manifest online.

One’s True Self is only found in God, and one finds God in prayer. In his reflections on the meditative and contemplative practice of prayer that leads to finding one’s true self, Merton recalls that the Christian mystical tradition teaches that one cannot find one’s innermost self – and therefore find God – as long as he or she remains preoccupied by the activities and desires of the outward and false self (see *IE 15*). The true self only *appears* elusive because we are too concerned with our false self (or selves) to turn toward God. We are held back from our own authentic self-discovery by our dependence on self-gratification, “pleasure seeking, love of comfort, or proneness to anger, pride, vanity, greed” and so on (*IE 15*). While Merton confirms the challenge of discovering one’s true self, at times speaking metaphorically of it as a “shy wild animal” (*IE 5*), it still remains an ever-present

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28. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 15.

reality possible of being “discovered” and “awakened” through contemplation.<sup>29</sup> This is summed up by Merton when he writes, “Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him” (NSC 36).

#### IV. The Wisdom of Merton for Millennials

In an effort to address, in a concrete manner, the particular ways in which Merton’s work and insight might serve as a heuristic or at least inspirational model for Millennials, I will now offer a brief reflection on each of the five thematic elements presented above that highlight the challenges to Millennial identity formation in a digital age. While this presentation of five areas is not exhaustive, it is my hope that it helps us to situate the contemporary relevance and application of Merton’s work for another generation and cultural context.

##### *A. Affective Instability*

We begin with a look at the fluidity of identity in a digital age. In some sense, this is a problem that is the most clearly correlative with the work of Thomas Merton. At the heart of any iteration of the False Self stands a core of instability. Because the False Self, whether we call it the Digital Self or something else, is of human construction, it is necessarily fleeting and finite. Such constructions of identity are merely masks or shells that cover over our insecurities and present to the world an affect created in the image and likeness of our own desire. This type of self-understanding is therefore predictably malleable and subject to the passing foci and immediate distractions of a given moment.

Merton’s approach to discovering one’s most authentic identity, one’s True Self, can aid Digital Natives in the search for grounding and authenticity that they seek or will come to seek when the affective instability of the Digital Self comes to be understood for what it is: a symptom of the fluidity of the False Self. While those attuned to the spiritual life and the transcendent quality of existence might already be sensitive to the difference between the true and false selves, young adults are often much more confused about the distinction. Fred Herron has written about this in the

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29. Mark O’Keefe, “Merton’s ‘True Self’ and the Fundamental Option,” *The Merton Annual* 10 (1997) 242.

life of his own high school and college students:

Wrenched or released from the secure moorings of childhood, adolescents are cast adrift and must begin to search for their pearls of great price, for a treasure which merits all their hopes and dreams. Those who minister to adolescents may choose to use these opportunities to challenge them to reflect more deeply upon the meaning of their existence and the goal of the journey. Those who accept this challenge will find themselves grappling, in a variety of ways, with the meaning of the false and true selves and with the challenge of on-going integration. (Herron 75)

The challenge posed by the lure of the Digital Self in the form of its rapid adaptability, potential for shifting and general fluidity calls us to pause and reevaluate the ways in which we are engaging in identity formation. Toward what end do we direct our energies and efforts in life-long self-understanding? For the Digital Natives, mentorship and guidance is especially needed in this regard.

This instability can oftentimes take the form of identity fragmentation. Merton writes in *The Inner Experience*,

The first thing that you have to do, before you even 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. (IE 3-4)

The way to respond to the instability of the Digital Self and the lure of false-self distraction is to refocus on the unification of our very human existence. While the exterior world appears disconnected, fragmented, disordered and confused, the True Self remains protected from the fleeting quality of individuals constructing their identities. Although such an understanding of identity might bear too many Neoplatonic undertones for the contemporary hearer, instead of associating one's True Self with the static or immutable quality of personal identity, one should instead locate the consistency of the True Self within God as Merton does. For Merton, the stability of the True Self is found, not within its own Platonic idealism, but within the love of God. Just as God remains

already always in relationship with creation, so too one's True Self remains already always present at the core of each person's unique existence.

*B. Lack of Interpretative Control*

The challenge faced by Digital Natives with regard to the potential for identity manipulation and abuse vis-à-vis new social media and electronic communication is a serious and omnipresent threat. Just the other day I heard a sponsorship advertisement on NPR for an Internet company whose sole purpose is to safeguard and defend its clients' online reputations. The need for serious professionals and Digital Native youth alike to be aware of the ways in which their now-public identities are presented and received introduces a new layer to the discussion of the False Self in Merton's writing. For Merton the condition of the False Self is an existential reality resulting from our human limitedness, finitude and sin. Everybody is, as Merton famously wrote in *New Seeds*, "shadowed by an illusory person: a false self" (NSC 34). While we have, it would seem, always been plagued by the temptation to focus our energies and efforts on the construction and representation of our False Selves, it is not entirely clear that the third-party manipulation of those identities was as present a threat as it is today.

In contrast to the False Self, Merton writes, "The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone" (IE 5). Because the True Self is really identical with our very existence and not our own construction, and because the True Self is found in God alone, it is, practically speaking, sheltered from redaction and distortion both by us and by others. Merton explains further:

The inner self is not a *part* of our being, like a motor in a car. It is *our entire substantial reality itself*, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. . . . 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 object, because it is not "a thing." It is not reached and coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation. (IE 6-7; emphasis added)

Unlike the identities of our own construction, the True Self is not fabricated and is no object to be observed, examined, reshaped or represented. One cannot, therefore, find the True Self anywhere

but in relationship with God. One important lesson that subtly comes through Merton's writing on this quality of the True Self is that we should focus our efforts not in the false establishment of ourselves "out there," as if we had to colonize society, culture and technology to assert our own existence, but work to shirk the strictures of the limitedness of our False Selves in order to be free of the burdens of distraction and self-centeredness in order to enter more deeply into relationship with God and therefore come to know ourselves.

### *C. The Prioritization of Instant Gratification*

Things happen today in rapid succession. Just as Digital Natives have come to expect everything from news delivered immediately by electronic media to meals prepared in a matter of minutes at fast-food restaurants, there is a sense in which coming to know one's self and then a desire to relate that identity to others emerges with force for Millennials today. Speed is the name of the game and immediacy is what is expected. Yet, as Merton explains time and again throughout his writings on the spiritual life, contemplation and the journey to know God and live the life of one's True Self do not happen overnight (let alone in the time it takes to download an iPhone App!). This prioritization of instant gratification among the characteristics expected of and by young people today poses a real challenge to Millennials seeking authentic and substantive engagement within themselves, with God and with others. Merton warns us of the temptation to acquiesce in matters of self-indulgence while journeying on the pilgrimage of life and prayer. He writes, "Freedom to enter the inner sanctuary of our being is denied to those who are held back by dependence on self-gratification and sense satisfaction, whether it be a matter of pleasure seeking, love of comfort, or proneness to anger, self-assertion, pride, vanity, greed, and all the rest" (*IE* 15). One of the most pressing issues Merton sees in what he calls the "technological revolution" is the effect of the speed with which everything evolves and moves ahead, oftentimes without proper reflection. "I am not interested in what [technology] does," Merton said in a monastic lecture, "but in the effects on people, on life, and on outlook. This profoundly changes one's whole outlook on life. And for us, the huge problem is this: What do you mean by 'a contemplative view of life' in this intensely active concern with moving ahead as fast as possible?" (Merton, "Technological World" 211).



There is an entire lifestyle shift that is demanded by those who wish to move away from the False Self and seek God through contemplation. "In seeking to awaken the inner self we must try to learn how this relationship is entirely new and how it gives us a completely different view of things" (IE 19). Precisely because this focus on the need for instant gratification is so deeply ingrained in the collective and individual identities of the False Self, Merton explains that real and substantial changes in the way one relates to others and sees the world must take place.

This takes time. Contemplation, which is the relationship with God in prayer that Merton identifies for us as the path toward "awakening" or "discovering" one's True Self, is not susceptible to the demands and urgency of an instant-gratification culture. Space and time are needed within which one is able to direct his or her attention to the relationship already always present with God. Merton's insight for Millennials in this regard is one of admonition, exhorting today's young people not to become swept away by the ostensible luxury of rapidly having so much at hand. What is lasting, valuable and true does not come delivered to us in a text message nor does it appear in a Happy Meal box. The True Self is simply not subject to the whims, demanding and collective though they may be, of Digital Natives' cultural expectations. To put it another, more colloquial way, when it comes to the True Self, it's all in God's time.

#### *D. A Loss of Recognized Embodiment*

As admitted earlier, one is never able to "lose" his or her "embodiment" as such, but one can certainly lack real recognition of what it means to be embodied. In a way that almost resembles what might be called a "digital Manichaeism," Millennials are less concerned and aware of their own creatureliness or embodiment because of the disassociated effects of increased technological engagement. The more young people spend time playing video games, surfing the Internet, communicating electronically and constructing their Digital Selves, the less connected to creation and the empirical reality of life they are likely to become.

There is something resembling another Platonic temptation to subordinate the physicality of human existence to the intellectual aspects of existence that emerges with the declivity of embodiment in the self-understanding of Digital Natives. As it concerns technology, Merton said in another Gethsemani lecture, "Now if

technology is for man [*sic*], there are perhaps problems arising from a certain dehumanization in life, as a result of a too Faustian concept of man. I'm not just talking about machines, but this completely technological view of life where the important thing is efficiency."<sup>30</sup> This seems to follow from the concern about self-gratification and the speed of technology. What emerges from an increased focus on technology, a reality that is only increased in the experience of Digital Natives, is a concurrent dehumanization in life. What does this look like? Merton offers something of a response.

What is depersonalization? . . . The way I conceive it, it's the idea of a person being cut off from his [*sic*] internal resources, his creative self, spontaneity, direct contact with life. In my language, a depersonalized [person] is [a] person when he has no direct contact with anything. . . . He has reactions that are dictated for him by everyone else. (Merton, "Marxism" 218)

As Paul Dekar summarizes well, "Merton doubted that technology could deliver what people expected, a new world of progress, prosperity, and peace. Rather, technology would usher in a new kind of jungle" (Dekar 104). It is precisely within this jungle – not a physical jungle the likes of Vietnam but an intellectual, psychological, emotional and spiritual jungle – that Digital Natives often lose an integrated sense of embodiment.

In an essay that first appeared in 1958 in *Commonweal* entitled "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," Merton again highlights the conflict in which contemporary people find themselves as the lure of technology depersonalizes and encourages the conditions of a decreased sense of embodiment:

In an age of science and technology, in which man [*sic*] finds himself bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of the machines he has created, we live precipitated outside ourselves at every moment, interiorly empty, spiritually lost, seeking at all costs to forget our own emptiness and ready to alienate ourselves completely in the name of any "cause" that comes along.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Thomas Merton, "Marxism and Technology," as transcribed in Dekar (217); subsequent references will be cited as "Merton, 'Marxism'" parenthetically in the text.

31. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 339.

Merton goes on to explain that, at first glance, it seems absurd to talk about contemplation in such a world. Yet, this is precisely the remedy for the depersonalization and disembodiment that is symptomatic of an emphasis on the Digital Self and the move away from the prayerful journey to God in the discovery of one's *real* identity.

Who we are in our truest sense is not a disembodied mind or collection of ideas, thoughts and questions. Nor is our body a simple machine for which we could substitute another machine or nothing at all. Instead, we are created out of divine love, with intentionality and a unique, incommunicable and unrepeatable identity. As Karl Rahner says, our bodies are the sacrament or symbol of who we are; they actualize and make present that which they represent. To live in a way that diminishes this reality or seeks another experience of identity is to be complicit in our own alienation from others, from God and from ourselves. Authentic contemplation, the quest to awaken or discover the True Self, does not separate us further from empirical selves, but helps us to recognize the inherent glory and holiness granted to all of creation – including our bodies – through God's loving decision that we should exist.

#### *E. Diminished Emphasis on Vocation*

Stemming from the popular notion that we are the fabricators of our own identity is also the notion that what we become – individually, collectively and professionally – is simply a matter of our own choosing or, worse still, the result of cosmic chance. The Christian tradition has maintained for centuries that human beings each receive from God a “call,” a vocation (from the Latin verb *vocare*, “to call”), that reflects some aspect of who a person is at his or her deepest level. A vocation, popularly understood as something reserved for those such as myself or Thomas Merton who are members of religious communities, is actually meant to be understood in a much broader sense. Merton explains what a vocation means in his book *No Man Is an Island*:

Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom. If we find that place we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us, there is only one thing

necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, what Merton is saying to us is that we are not created to simply fabricate a future of our fantasies or go forward in life unaided by the Creator – quite the opposite. Through prayer, often called discernment (in contrast to simple decision-making), one is invited to recognize that God has given each person certain gifts, as well as challenges, among which are skills, talents, dispositions, interpersonal abilities, intellect, personality, emotional and other forms of intelligence and the like. How we best use those aspects of our individual self in connection with the state of life where we are found reflects this quest for happiness that Merton describes in his claim that we cannot be happy unless we are, at our most fundamental level, living as our True Self, or who we are as individually called by God.

This is certainly a challenge for Digital Natives who have been reared in a world in which identity is so unstable, who we are presented to be is so vulnerable to manipulation and misunderstanding, instant gratification has been prioritized, and our complete humanity as embodied creatures is diminished. Today's young adults look around and see a context that encourages ways of going about the world that are far from the image of self-understanding and spirituality present in Merton's explanation of what it means for everyone to have a vocation from God. Merton's wisdom is certainly needed today and into the future.

### Conclusion

In some sense each of these five challenges represents a particular aspect or symptom of the complex environment that Digital Natives face today. On one hand the inertia of contemporary culture and the hyperactivity of technology contribute to an ostensible quandary from which one finds it difficult to escape. Yet, on the other hand, we are only identifying or naming the reality of living in the twenty-first century, calling to mind the truths about who we are (our self-understanding) and who God is (spirituality) that are in need of renewed emphasis.

Indeed it is not easy to live in today's world. God only knows how dramatically the cultural, social and technological environ-

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32. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) 131.

ments of our contemporary existence has changed from the time I typed this words until the time you encounter them now. God only knows how things will change in decades and centuries to come.

What Thomas Merton offers Millennials today, those we have come to acknowledge as the Digital Natives of a technological world, is a steady reminder of how one comes to understand his or her True Self. While technology is not in and of itself bad, it is simply not the way to discover one's inner self, because it – as good as it can be – is not the way to discover God. Who we are is in God and it is through contemplation that one must journey on such a pilgrimage of self-understanding and spirituality.