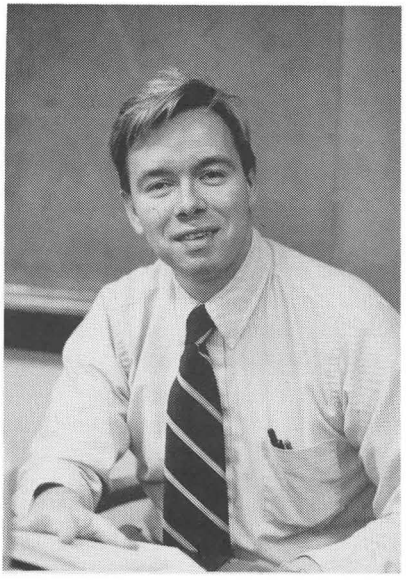
MERTON'S BELLS:
A Clarion Call to Wholeness

by **Robert G. Waldron**

The following is a commentary on Merton's poem *All* the Way Down written in 1966. It appears in the "uncollected poems" section of *The Collected Poems* of Thomas Merton. *All the Way Down*, composed when Merton was fifty-one years old, can be interpreted as a retrospective view of his individuation.

I went down
Into the cavern
All the way down
To the bottom of the sea.
I went down lower
Than Jonas and the whale.
No one ever got so far down
As me.

Merton, the solitary explorer, admits his willingness to plumb the mystery of his psyche, to go "To the bottom of the sea." He proudly announces that he has penetrated the sea, symbol of the unconscious, more deeply than Jonas, the biblical figure Merton identified with as early as December 10, 1946, twenty years before this poem was written.[1]—"No one ever got *so* far down/ *As* me." Merton, being a contemplative monk, is able to explore more deeply his psyche because the very nature of his vocation encourages him to do so. This exploration Merton considers an honor, one he wishes to share with others. He writes: "My brother, perhaps, in my solitude I have become as it were an explorer for you, a searcher in realms which you are not able to visit—except perhaps in the company of your psychiatrist."[2] The poem itself is realms which you are not able to visit—except perhaps in the company of your psychiatrist."[2] The poem itself is symbolic of Merton's willingness



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1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace , & Company, 1953), p 17.

2 . Thomas Merton, "A Letter on the Contemplative Life," in *The Monastic Journey* edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977), pp. 220-221.

to reveal what he has discovered about himself to others because he knows that what is true for him is also true for all men and women, echoing Emerson's insight: "To believe your own thoughts, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius."[3]

I went down lower
Than any diamond mine
Deeper than the lowest hole
In Kimberly
All the way down
I thought I was the devil
He was no deeper
Than me.

The first archetype to be encountered in the process of individuation is the shadow ("the *devil"),* an encounter which Jung says is the "apprentice-piece" of a person's development; coming to terms with one's contra-sexual archetype (animus/ anima) is considered the "masterpiece" of individuation.[4] Often a person fails to integrate his shadow into consciousness because he is unwilling to face the negative aspects of his personality which he finds too disturbing; the truth about oneself is often painful. In order to preserve the idea he has of himself (his persona), he frequently projects his shadow onto other individuals, or onto a collective group or onto the world in general. Sometimes a person identifies with his shadow, believing he is completely evil. In this stanza Merton considers himself to be one of the world's great sinners,"*I thought I was the devil."* In his life Merton faced substantial obstacles with integrating his shadow into consciousness. As a Cistercian monk, however, he accomplished much shadow recognition/ integration, eventually allowing him to take back his shadow projections which freed him to understand compassionately other people within his Trappist community and people in the outside world, resulting in a highly sensitive social consciousness that embraced all people.

The reference to diamond mines *("Kimberly")* suggests that jewels are symbolic of the hidden treasures of self-knowledge that reside in "*the lowest hole"* of the psyche, gems of self-knowledge available to anyone willing to go *"All the way down."*

And when they thought
That I was gone forever
That I was all the way
In hell
I got right back into my body
And came back out
And rang my bell.

The archetypal journey to wholeness requires the hero to pass through hell. The classic example of this is Dante's journey through Inferno and Purgatorio. Merton feared he had gone down too far, but he returns to consciousness, represented by his body, and "rang [his] bell," a gesture suggesting a positive, if not joyful, encounter with the unconscious.

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3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, " Self-Reliance," in *Basic Selections from Emerson*; edited by Eduard C. Lindeman (NewYork: Mentor Books, 1954), p 53

4. Daryl Sharp, *C. G. Jung Lexicon: A Primer of terms and Concepts* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1991), p 22.

Bells are an important part of Merton's life. Gethsemani's tower bell announces all the liturgical hours of the day. The bells call all to prayer and holiness. They call all to God: "Bells are meant to remind us that God alone is good, that we belong to Him, that we are not living for this world. They tell us that we are His true temple. They call us to peace with Him within ourselves.''S There is also the Sanctus bell announcing every day of a monk's life the presence of Christ at Mass. Merton's first Mass at Gethsemani reverberated with the sound of bells: "Almost simultaneously all around the church, at all the various altars, the bells began to ring. These monks, they rang no bells at the *Sanctus* or the *Hanc igitur*, only at the consecration: and now, suddenly, solemnly, all around the church, Christ was on the Cross, lifted up, drawing all things to Himself, that tremendous sacrifice tearing hearts from bodies, and them out to Him."[6]

Merton obeyed the clarion call that tears "hearts from bodies." He in effect obeyed the call to individuation. When Merton says he "rang my *bell,"* he is truly summoning all people to embark on the inner journey, to find the Self, the Christ within, even though it requires their passing through hell (*"I was all the way in hell").* Self-knowledge is costly, demanding suffering and purgation. In his autobiography, Merton recounts the first Mass he ever attended, at Corpus Christi Church in New York City. He had not yet converted to Catholicism, but he obeyed his inner voice with its command to "Go to Mass! Go to Mass!" (SSM, p.206). Merton as a young man had visited the greatest churches and cathedrals of Europe, but he had never attended a Mass. And when he finally did, he was overjoyed. But at the sound of the bells at consecration, he fled into the street because he felt he did not belong there for the "celebration of the Mysteries." He writes: "It was liturgically fitting that I should kick myself out at the end of the Mass of the Catechumens, when the ordained *ostiari* should have been there to do it" (SSM, p. 210).

No matter how
They try to harm me now
No matter where
They lay me in the grave
No matter what injustices they do
I've seen the root
Of all that believe.

What a person accomplishes in individuation cannot ever be taken away from him or her. No one can harm them because they are integrated persons. They are beyond harm because they are not ego-inflated. They know who they are and where they came from. *"I've seen the root/ Of all that believe."* They are whole. They have found the pearl of great price, or, if you will, the diamond "in the lowest *hole."* They, therefore, accept the mote in another person's eye because they have seen and dealt with the beam in their own. They have befriended and accepted their shadows. Not even death, *"No matter where/ They lay me in the grave,"* can deprive them of the fruits of individuation, for they have been in touch with the *"root of all that believe."* They have experienced the collective unconscious from which springs all myth, all religion.

I've seen the room
Where life and death are made
And I have known
The secret forge of war

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5. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/ Noonday Press, 1976), p 67. Hereafter *TS.*
6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), pp. 323-324. Hereafter SSM.

I even saw the womb
That all things come from
For I got down so far!

As all life originates in water, so all self-knowledge emerges from the waters of the psyche. Water is symbolic of the Great Mother, "*the womb/ That all things come from*," the feminine principle, the *prima materia*. Merton compares the unconscious to a room under the sea, a secret room where life and death abide, where consciousness is born, where the old self dies so that the archetypal Self can be experienced, causing the ego to suffer a "sea change." Again, self knowledge demands arduous effort. It emerges from the struggle between ego and the Self. Forging, then, is an apt metaphor for individuation. *"And I have known/ The secret forge of War*," suggesting the fires of a furnace with its power of transmutation. Water and Fire: the marriage of opposites, leading to psychological wholeness.

But when they thought
I was gone forever
That I was all the way
In hell
I got right back into my body
And came back out
And rang my bell.

A deep sea diver knows he or she can descend so far into the ocean before they must return to the surface or risk drowning. When they return to land, they then appreciate the wonders seen at the bottom of the sea, wonders they feel compelled to share with others. So, too, an individuated person must protect him-or-herself from being inundated by the waters of the unconscious. They must maintain a healthy ego-Self relationship. Jungian Edward Edinger writes: "Individuation is a process, not a realized goal. Each new level of integration must submit to further transformation if development is to proceed. However, we do have some indications concerning what to expect as a result of the ego's conscious encounter with the Self. Speaking generally, the individuation urge promotes a state in which the ego is related to the Self without being identified with it .... The dichotomy between outer and inner reality is replaced by a sense of unitary reality." Because Merton has taken his individuation seriously, because he has made himself conscious of it, he has the privilege to ring his bell. The bell, containing qualities of the feminine and the masculine, is a symbol of completeness, of wholeness. Merton emerges from his encounter with the unconscious as a more complete/ whole person. He is also energized with the libido (psychic energy) to ring his bell, to share with others the wonders of his individuation. Again we are reminded of the bells that called Merton from New York to his life as a Trappist at Gethsemani:" I started to hear the great bell of Gethsemani ringing in the night—the bell in the big grey tower, ringing and ringing, as if it were just behind the first hill. The impression made me breathless, and I had to think twice to realize that it was only in my imagination that I was hearing the bell of the Trappist Abbey ringing in the dark .... The bell seemed to be telling me where I belonged—as if it were calling me home" (SSM, pp. 364-365). Merton listened to the bell. He writes: "My life is a listening. His is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond. For this, my life must be silent. Hence, my silence is my salvation" *(TS, p.* 72). Merton, however, is not totally silent. His poetry and prose serve as a bell summoning all people to enter the waters of the psyche and embark on their own inner journey, one that calls every person "home" to the Christ within. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Merton was born on the last day of January 1915, "under the sign of the Water Bearer."