

And There Was Endlessness

Review of

The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind

By Fiona Gardner

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015

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Reviewed by **Gray Matthews**

This is a book about the mind's journey into the mystery of growing up and becoming a child, finally and literally, of God. Merton said it is the only mind worth having, and Fiona Gardner explains in this disarming book of playful depth why it is the only mind worth having and why this should matter to us.

Merton scholars are familiar with Gardner – current board member of the ITMS, recent recipient of a Louie Award (2015), and regular presenter at ITMS conferences; she was the former chair of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland as well as co-editor of *The Merton Journal*, while practicing as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, spiritual director and writer (*Journeying Home* [2004], *The Four Steps of Love* [2007], and *Precious Thoughts* [2011]). She has worked and reworked her ideas on child mind over the last several years, culminating in this far-reaching and multifaceted book.

Gardner is working with quite a lot here, so I will touch on the basic ideas slowly. First of all, the title phrase “the only mind worth having” is from a letter of Merton to John Wu in April, 1961, while Merton was beginning to work on *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Merton is closing his letter by encouraging Wu to “keep ever fresh and young your ‘child’s mind’ which is the only one worth having” (62). Secondly, Gardner wisely sees a serious depth of meaning in Merton’s blessing that links it to the wisdom of Christ’s commandment to become like children if wishing to enter heaven. These two “teachings” dovetail in a profound simplicity that sparkle more and more prismatically as you read through Gardner’s book. “Child mind” is not about going back to your former childhood, but rather advancing beyond adulthood into a transformation of the mind. The child mind is the spiritually mature mind and it requires, says Gardner, a great leap of the imagination. Rowan Williams, who supplies the Foreword, underscores the richness of this experience in noting that “Talking about this is full of paradoxes” (ix).

Gardner divides the book into three parts to help us navigate what becomes a path of spiritual guidance. The first part of the book (13-82) focuses on “understanding” the child mind from both a spiritual and a psychological perspective, chiefly contemplative and Jungian. The second part of the book (83-138) then explores how to “re-find” one’s child mind, to reawaken and cultivate one’s mind. The third part (139-208) moves to consider the experiential process of “becoming” a child in a real world where paradise is no longer a trope for make-believe.

The concepts of enchantment and disenchantment are woven deeply throughout her discussion to help describe how the world appears and disappears according to the changing seasons of our

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intellectual life. Individually and collectively, mystically and historically, we enter an enchanted world as children and later become adults who haphazardly find themselves living in a disenchanted world. What happened? What do we do now? Such questions may lead to wondering and seeking, along with Gardner, the only mind worth having at this point.

The child mind of Thomas Merton is opened with creative finesse as Gardner probes the life of Merton to illuminate his continual and tremendous spiritual energy and growth ever more deeply into his original child mind, the mind of his true self, the mind in communion with a world that unfortunately does not yet think with the only mind worth having. Gardner shows how Merton's contemplative mind develops as she reveals the wide range of influences upon his unfolding mind as well as helping us re-appreciate the influences Merton has had on so many other fresh, living lives. Thus her book may serve many readers as a marvelous introduction to Merton and to the contemplative life. The child mind must grow, not ossify and snap – think of Merton's frustration with structures and closed, narrow minds! The child mind must grow because it is the mind of the mystic, the beginner's mind, the renewed mind, the unknowing mind, the undying mind. Amazingly, the child mind seems as if it is *the seed* of contemplation itself.

The well-chosen cover image for the book is the Frontispiece from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789). We know what comes after innocence – experience – but then a second innocence is possible, a renewed innocence, sharpened, purified, priceless, a pearl, a treasure hidden in a field, the one thing necessary – the only mind worth having. This wonderful book is full of references to a host of individuals who sought this child mind at all costs. If you read this book, you will renew your search and the cultivation of your own child mind, and then you will hunger for the enchanted kingdom of reality, the whole real world, with greater and greater attention.

In the end, my favorite part of the book was the Afterword (209-11) in which I sensed the ongoing delight of the author who was still thinking of more examples leaping out at her of people who had experienced the child mind. But then you realize the inspiration, as Fiona Gardner certainly does in this book, is our very model: the Christ Child. Suddenly your pretenses of maturity melt away and you are happy to see that your entire life has been nothing but your becoming an endless child of God. Growing up, we are ascending children.

Among the very last poems penned by Denise Levertov, in her posthumous collection *The Great Unknowing* (New Directions, 1999), is a poem about her "First Love" (a flower) upon which she reflects using her still young and fresh child mind:

It looked at me. I looked
back, delight
filled me as if
I, not the flower,
were a flower and were brimful of rain.
And there was endlessness.
Perhaps through a lifetime what I've desired
has always been to return
to that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness
of that attention,
that once-in-a-lifetime
secret communion.

To me, this is what Fiona Gardner's book encourages readers to find through their own lifetime – this *endlessness* – with the always-fresh, loving attention of their child mind.