

Humanizing the University: Adding the Contemplative Dimension

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“The purpose of education,” Thomas Merton wrote, “is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself.”¹ Later in the same essay he reflected on the purpose of higher education “in more outrageous terms,” as he put it. “The function of the university is to help men and women save their souls and, in so doing, to save their society . . . from the hell of meaninglessness, of obsession, of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, of self-destructive futilities.”²

Higher education has come under intense scrutiny recently for a number of interrelated reasons. Both public and private institutions are perceived as failing to prepare students for their roles in a changing society. People are calling for more accountability. In effect, they want a guarantee on their investment. So there is a flurry of activity in developing adequate assessment tools. Still an essential ingredient is missing. I propose that before we can adequately prepare students to assume their role in society, we need to restore to all of our educational institutions the contemplative dimension.

One of the most impressionable pieces of information I recall learning in high school world history class concerned the four cradles

1. Thomas Merton, “Learning to Live,” in *Love and Living*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1985) 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

of civilization: the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus, and the Yellow Rivers. The change to the so-called "civilized" ways of living took place in these great river valleys first, where the land was fertile and the inhabitants, freed from the intense struggle for survival and always on the move looking for new gaming and fishing sites, learned to meet their basic needs through agriculture. The time and stability this brought, we were taught, became catalysts for the growth of civilization. People sought ways to improve and decorate their essentials: tools, clothing, and shelter, for example. Thus humankind was set on the trajectory called civilization, leading eventually to exploration, invention, industrialization, automation, and technologization. Neil Postman, in his most recent book, has gone so far as to say that we have now actually become a "technopoly" in which technology has become our God.³

Thomas Merton wrote one essay, "Learning to Live," concerned specifically with higher education. The first draft of this essay, originally entitled "Learning to Learn," was written in July 1967 for a volume of essays by distinguished alumni of Columbia University, published under the title *University on the Heights*.⁴ The essay also appears in the collection *Love and Living*.⁵ Perhaps because Merton was writing this essay in the same season I was graduating from a college not too far from Gethsemani, I have found myself mulling over Merton's ideas in relation to my own life within and outside the university, and as they apply to society at large.

In his essay "Learning to Live" Merton states that the goal of life is "learning who one is . . . what one has to offer to the contemporary world, and then learning how to make that offering valid."⁶ As was stated earlier, in Merton's point of view the purpose of education is "to show students how to define themselves authentically and spontaneously in relation to their world." Notice that his focus is on the student; not a collection of courses or accumulation of credits. A principal function of colleges and universities, he concludes, should

3. See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Random House, 1992) 40-55.

4. Wesley First, ed., *University on the Heights* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) 187-199.

5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, 3-14.

6. Merton, "Learning to Live," 3.

therefore be "to help students discover themselves—to help men and women to save their souls, and in so doing, to save society."⁷

Saving one's soul is not an antiquated concept. In fact, it is enjoying quite a popular renaissance today. Having moved beyond our churches, concern for and care of the soul has currently taken up residence on the best-seller lists and talk-show circuit. "Becoming the most that we can be is also the definition of *salvation*," Scott Peck points out in language that is congruent with Merton's own. "The term literally means 'healing.' As we apply 'salve' to our skin to heal it, so we can learn to apply the principles of mental health to our lives to heal, to make us whole, to save our souls, individually and collectively."⁸

Among other things, Merton saw society needing to be saved from "the hell of meaninglessness, of obsession, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglect, and of self-destructive futilities."⁹ A generation later, however, we find our culture in that very "hell of meaninglessness," where we market Obsession (using advertisements that in another context we would certainly label "pornographic"), where we not only condone, but actually celebrate lying, where we witness criminal evasions and neglect by the highest authorities of church and state, and where self-destructive futilities are played out in television news broadcasts night after night.

Still speaking of higher education, Merton recognized that the "danger" of education is that "it so easily confuses means with ends," or worse, that "it . . . forgets both and devotes itself merely to the mass production of uneducated graduates."¹⁰ In his best-selling book *The Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore sees that this has already happened. "Soul" has been extracted from education because we conceive education to be about skills and information, not about depth of feeling and imagination.¹¹

In a recent address, Frank Wong, the provost and vice-president for academic affairs at the University of Redlands, said of higher education: "It may be that we are losing the public trust because at some

7. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

8. M. Scott Peck, M.D., *A World Waiting To Be Born: Civility Rediscovered* (New York: Bantam 1993) 12.

9. Merton, "Learning to Live," 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 11.

11. Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) 208.

deeper level we are not providing what the public needs." Developing this idea, he further observed:

It may be that we are not so much responding to the accelerated sense of disconnection in our time but that we are reflecting it—perhaps even exacerbating it. It may be that we have unintentionally promoted a fragmented, disconnected, incoherent view of life because we have become so narrowly specialized in our separate, private visions of knowledge and the world.¹²

Carpe Diem

There is no denying that we are in a time of crisis, but I prefer the Native American approach which sees crises as opportunities to be seized rather than occasions to abandon ship. We have before us one of those rare opportunities to look at our culture and our lives woven into it, and to decide how we want to live our lives and what impact we want to have on the next generation.

In addressing the national convention of the National Education Association in 1990, Norman Lear, the celebrated writer/producer of prime-time television entertainment, conveyed deep concern about what he regards as our "unhealthy reticence . . . to discuss what may be our most distinctive trait . . . our mysterious inner life, the fertile invisible realm that is the wellspring for our species' creativity and morality."¹³

As was stated earlier, my thesis is that one antidote to our present situation is restoring the "contemplative dimension" to university life. I use the verb "restore" very deliberately, because once upon a time universities, like monasteries, were seen to offer people a way of life, not simply a career path. As Marvin Bell reflects:

A career means you solicit the powerful and the famous. A way of life means you live where you are with the people around you. A career means you become an authority. A way of life means you stay a student, even if you teach for a living. A career means your life increasingly comes from your art. A way of life means your

12. Frank F. Wong, "Integrated Vision and Disconnected Education: Do We Need a New American College Model?" Address dated February 3, 1993.

13. Norman Lear, "Education for the Human Spirit," an address delivered to the national convention of the National Education Association [NEA], July 7, 1990.

art continues to arise from your life. Careerism feeds off the theoretical, the fancified, the complicated, the coded, and the overwrought. . . . A way of life is nourished by the practical, the unadorned, the complex, and a direct approach to the mysterious.¹⁴

Using Joan Chittister's definition of contemplation as "the ability to see through, and to see into, and to see despite, and to see without blinders," I will examine four aspects of the contemplative dimension which we have lost from university life, and consequently from the culture: silence, solitude, sabbath and stability. I agree with Chittister when she writes that "in America today, perhaps as never before, there is a great need for seeing hearts, for contemplative awareness of the kind of world we are creating for tomorrow."¹⁵ Adding these four aspects of contemplation to university life, even in the slightest degree, I believe, will remove the blinders and give us "seeing hearts."

The Sounds of Silence

Whatever happened to the "sounds of silence" about which we were singing around the same time Merton was writing "Learning to Live"? Now we live with noise pollution, and many people find silence a great burden—a possibility too frightening to even consider. As a result muzak fills our elevators, and televisions blare from every room in the house from morning until night. We have the expression, "I don't have time to think," but the reality is that we no longer have the quiet to think.¹⁶

In a recent *Time* essay, Pico Iyer observed that first we have to earn silence, and then work for it—that is, work "to make it not an absence but a presence; not emptiness but repletion." Whereas some

14. Marvin Bell, "Poetry Is A Way of Life, Not a Career," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 16, 1994) B5. From the author's essay "Homage to the Runner: Bloody Brain Work" in *The Pushcart Prize XVIII: Best of the Small Presses* (Pushcart Press, 1993).

15. Joan Chittister, "Of Moses' Mother and Pharaoh's Daughter: A Model of Contemporary Contemplation," *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 62. Originally delivered at the Merton Center at Columbia University, New York, on November 12, 1987.

16. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 124.

might see silence as a pause, Iyer sees it as "that enchanted place where space is cleared and time is stayed and the horizon itself expands." "In silence," he continues, "we often say, we can hear ourselves think; but what is truer to say is that in silence we can hear ourselves not think, and so sink below our selves into a place far deeper than mere thought allows. In silence, we might better say, we can hear someone else think."¹⁷

Why such fear of silence? I think the real fear is of emptiness. Because we are so culturally adapted to having someone else fill in all our silent spaces, university students, along with others, either plug themselves in to someone else's thoughts and values, via car radio or CD player, or they fill in the silent spaces with their own inner chatter—"monkey mind," as one author calls it. The fullness we all seek is speaking in the silence within us, but we block it out with "the static of nonsense day in and day out, relinquishing the spirit of silence, numbing our hearts in a noise-polluted world."¹⁸

Flight from Solitude

"Never be alone, never be lonely" is the message pounded into people unconsciously by the entertainment industry. The image that flashes across television and movie screens is that happiness and popularity are to be found only in an endless round of the social swirl. Our cultural dualism, Parker Palmer points out, leads us to think of solitude and community as polar opposites.¹⁹ The irony is that instead of finding community at the other pole, one finds loneliness, and what has been lost in the mad dash away from even the possibility of solitude is one's self and the heart of the world. "The price for this evasion," Rollo May writes, "is a deep loneliness and sense of isolation. With these go depression and the conviction that we have never really lived, that we have been exiled from life."²⁰

In solitude, with which and for which he struggled, Thomas Merton not only came to know himself, he came to know the world.

17. Pico Iyer, "The Eloquent Sounds of Silence," *TIME* (January 25, 1993) 74.

18. Chittister, *Rule*, 61.

19. Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 57.

20. Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: Norton, 1991) 106.

Although in the passage below Merton is referring specifically to his relationship with Pasternak, it is clear (later in the passage) that he considers it possible to develop a relationship with others beyond the limits of individuality. Reflecting on this in a letter to Boris Pasternak, dated August 22, 1958, Merton wrote:

It is as if we met on a deeper level life on which individuals are not separate beings . . . known to one another in God. This is a very simple . . . obvious expression for something quite normal and ordinary. . . . each person is destined to reach with others an understanding and a unity which transcends individuality, and Russian tradition describes this with a concept we do not fully possess in the West—*sobornost*.²¹

Thomas Del Prete, who probably knows more about what Merton thought about education than even Merton knew, concludes that "Merton's fundamental social concern was for the modern, particularly Western, world's loss of a sense of interiority and therefore its disconnection from a true sense of reality and spiritual identity."²² If Merton had such concern three decades ago, what would he ever say to us today?

In the preface to *Disputed Questions*, Merton wrote, "mass society is constructed out of disconnected individuals—out of empty and alienated human beings who have lost their center and extinguished their own inner light in order to depend in abject passivity upon the mass in which they cohere without affectivity or intelligent purpose."²³

To use Parker Palmer's image, we must "catch a vision of community which supports the solitude that makes authentic inwardness possible."²⁴ Institutions of higher learning are ideal places for "catching" just such a vision and, fortunately, renewed attention is being given recently to seeing colleges and universities as "learning communities."²⁵

21. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* [CT], edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 88.

22. Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990) 6.

23. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, [1960] 1985) x.

24. Palmer, 156–157.

25. See Barbara Leigh Smith, "The Learning Community Model," *Liberal Education* 77/2 (March–April 1991) 32–39.

In a letter to Helen Wolff, Boris Pasternak's publisher, dated November 2, 1967, Merton wrote:

I think it is terribly important today that we keep alive the sense and possibility of a strong communion of seemingly isolated individuals in various places and cultures; eventually the foundation of true human community is there and not in the big states or institutions.²⁶

I agree, although I think that even a large academic institution might be the foundation of true human community. "One of the constant characteristics of mystics of all cultures and all religions in all ages," Scott Peck writes, "has been their ever-present consciousness of an invisible interconnectedness beneath the surface of things."²⁷ Wouldn't it be wonderful if that could be said of academicians as well?

Our Lost Sabbaths

In *The Silent Pulse: A Search for the Perfect Rhythm That Exists in Each of Us*, biologist George Leonard develops the thesis that the entire universe has a single pulse, sharing the same heartbeat. We experience this phenomenon periodically, label it "synchrony," and regard it with surprise. Leonard has studied the phenomenon with the discipline of a scientist and sees it as the right order of things, the "silent pulse of perfect rhythm."²⁸

Do you remember the days when our culture kept Sunday holy unto the Lord? Stores, even pharmacies, were closed. We wore Sunday clothes, indulged in the Sunday pleasures of visiting, family dinners, and relaxation. What has happened to all our lost sabbaths?

"Time," the historian Edward Thompson observes, "has become a currency which we 'spend' instead of 'pass.'"²⁹ We are all so busy that we no longer have time to relax—to sabbath. And what are we so busy doing? Studies across the country have shown that Americans spend more time shopping than anyone else. Not only do they

26. Merton, CT, 107-108.

27. Peck, 20.

28. George Leonard, *The Silent Pulse: A Search for the Perfect Rhythm That Exists in Each of Us* (New York: Dutton, 1978) 132.

29. E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967) 61.

spend a higher fraction of the money they earn, but with the explosion of consumer debt, they are now spending what they haven't earned.³⁰

The ideology of modern economics would have us believe that material progress has resulted in greater satisfaction and a sense of well-being. The reality, Juliet Schor points out in her study of the "overworked American," is that the rising workload has contributed significantly to a variety of social problems: an alarming increase in stress-related diseases, particularly among women; a "sleep deficit" among Americans, with the average person getting 60-90 minutes less a night than they should for optimum health and performance; and most alarming of all is our neglect of the children, up to one-third of whom care for themselves.³¹ The economist Sylvia Hewlett links this "parenting deficit" to a number of problems plaguing the country's youth: poor performance in school, psychological problems, drug and alcohol use, and teen suicide. Children are being "cheated" out of childhood, and there is a profound sense among the children that adults just don't care about them.³²

College students are caught up in this as well, and many today hold full-time jobs while carrying a full load of classes. A generation ago that was just not possible, but with so many businesses now operating twenty-four hours a day, possibilities abound.³³ I have several students who come to early morning classes, having just put in an eight-hour night on the job. Although it would be more conducive to education if their jobs were related to their studies and functioned more as internships, it is not surprising that money is more often the determining factor.

We are now a nation locked into a work-spend cycle with leisure—sabbathing—left out of the loop. This maniacal life-style, reflected in the university as well as in the larger society, is now seen to be a kind of drug. First you like it, then you get used to it, then you need it. Psychologists and sociologists are drawing our attention

30. Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 3.

31. Schor, 11-12.

32. See Sylvia Hewlett, *When the Bough Breaks: The Cost of Neglecting Our Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

33. See Martin Moore-Ede, *The Twenty-Four Hour Society: Understanding Human Limits in a World That Never Stops* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

now to this madness that has us "psyched up" at all hours—dealing with things, organizing bits of information, making schedules, grinding out publications. As Carol Orsborn notes, with apologies to Descartes, "I do, therefore I am."³⁴

In "Making Sense of Soul and Sabbath; Brain Processes and the Making of Meaning," James B. Ashbrook advances two interconnected speculations: that sabbathing is found in the brain's biorhythms; and that the essential structure of our unique individuality requires sabbathing for its coherent vitality. "Because our essence as human beings involves the making of meaning, the biorhythms of sabbathing and remembering are the means by which soul makes its story viable."³⁵

Memory consolidation takes time, specifically a period of one to three years. To be retained, memories must be dreamed, and dreaming involves intense emotional appraisal over time.³⁶ Without working memory, nothing is personally meaningful. We have no unique identity, no sense of continuity, we lack a sense of self.³⁷ In truth we lose our soul—that basic structuring of our unique self-world interaction.³⁸

Ashbrook recounts a wonderful anecdote which reportedly took place in Africa during the last century. He tells of a caravan of traders that had been pushing their porters hard. Eventually, the porters stopped, and nothing would get them going again. When the traders demanded to know what was wrong, the Africans explained: "We have been traveling so long and so fast that we need to wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies." While Ashbrook calls jet lag "an empirical equivalent" of "waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies,"³⁹ I think our souls are still on the losing end.

34. Carol Orsborn, *Enough is Enough: Simple Solutions for Complex People* (San Rafael: New World Library, 1992) 70.

35. James B. Ashbrook, "Making Sense of Soul and Sabbath; Brain Processes and the Making of Meaning," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 27/1 (March 1992) 32-33.

36. Robin Fox, "The Passionate Mind: Brain, Dreams, Memory, and Social Categories," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 21 (March 1986) 35-38.

37. Eugene Winograd, "Continuities between Ecological and Laboratory Approaches to Memory," in *Remembering Reconsidered*, ed. Alric Neisser and Eugene Winograd. Emory Symposia in Cognition Series, no. 2. (Cambridge: University Press, 1988) 17.

38. Ashbrook, 36.

39. Ashbrook, 32.

Talmud scholars teach that the Sabbath is important for three reasons:

It equalizes the rich and the poor, so that for at least one day a week everyone is the same—equally free.

It gives us time to evaluate our work, just as God evaluated the work of creation on the Sabbath.

It gives us time to contemplate the meaning of life.⁴⁰

In nature God offers all of us a chance to enter the crystalline state. Sabbathing is not impossible, does not require great wealth or a monumental time commitment. "To leave the disrhythmic city streets for some deserted wood or meadow or seashore is often enough in itself to trigger a period of perfect rhythm"⁴¹ and allow our souls time to catch up with our minds and bodies.

Finding Stability in an Increasingly Unstable World

"Stability," not only sounds antiquated, it sounds downright un-American. After all, we are the "westward ho!" nation that prides itself on progress—or at least on the illusion of progress. In *aikido*, you are taught to become fully aware of and take responsibility for your own center. Then your center becomes one with the center of the universe.⁴² But then that would require standing still, mindfulness, commitment—concepts that have become antithetical to this technopoly. Instead of being captivated by the holy, we are seduced by the new. "We not only believe in change," Rollo May observes, "we worship it."⁴³

Always on the move, we are unable to put down roots, we no longer have a sense of place. The increasing incidence of homelessness in American cities and towns is a metaphor for homelessness in our hearts. "Homeless people embody a deprivation of soul which we all experience to the extent that we live in an inanimate world without the sense of a world soul to connect us to things."⁴⁴ In Europe a com-

40. Ingrid Trobisch, *The Confident Woman: Finding Quiet Strength in a Turbulent World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 149-150.

41. Leonard, 122-123.

42. Leonard, 113.

43. May, 102.

44. Moore, 271.

munity's "home" is the village church. In New England villages, May points out, we probably see the last vestige of this in the "common." What has replaced common ground for the rest of us? The Mall—our "new cathedrals."

In 1992 the African nation Ivory Coast, although not without controversy and dissention, completed the largest basilica in the world. In the same year The Mall of America near Minneapolis was completed—"a retail/entertainment complex of unparalleled proportions." Is that what the world needs—yet another retail paradise?

In a presentation James Appleberry made at California State University in 1992, he observed that "the sum total of humankind's knowledge doubled from 1750 to 1900 (or 150 years). It doubled again from 1900 to 1950 (50 years), [and] again from 1960 to 1965 (5 years). It has been estimated that the sum total of humankind's knowledge has doubled at least once every five years since then. . . . It has been further projected that by the year 2020 knowledge will double every 73 days!"⁴⁵

I wonder how I will be able to cope with such relentless change. And then I remember an experience I had standing on the beach at Paradise Island in the Bahamas one day. An avid swimmer accustomed to the wild Atlantic, even I knew the surf and the undertoe were too dangerous that day. So I stood ankle-deep and admired the raging power of the usually calm Caribbean. As I did, I realized that in order to remain upright, I had to dig my feet into the sand, because the sea was stealing the ground from beneath me. "How like life!" I observed. In the turbulent times one needs to dig in deep. That's one way of practicing stability.

By Way of Conclusion

In *The Unsettling of America* Wendell Berry uses two images to illustrate these opposite approaches to life: a strip-miner and the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer.⁴⁶ The first is exploitative; the second nurturing. "The first principle of the exploitative mind is to di-

45. Quoted in President James J. Whalen, "Humanity and the Knowledge Explosion: Preserving the Delicate Thread That Binds Us," Ithaca College Convocation, August 23, 1993.

46. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco, Sierra Club 1977) 7.

vide and conquer. And surely there has never been a people more ominously and painfully divided than we are—both against each other and within ourselves."⁴⁷ What we lack in our day is a sense of peace—quiet, deep, relaxed peace.

Berry looks to the Amish as model nurturers—a community in the full sense of the word. They are able to survive because at their center is God, and they seek to live in harmony with all creation. They have not sold their souls to institutions, and so are not victimized by them. Berry calls the Amish "the truest geniuses of technology" because they understand the necessity of limiting it, and they know how to limit it, because the health of the community is their standard.⁴⁸

What Rollo May refers to as "the seduction of the new,"⁴⁹ and Neil Postman calls "our boundless lust for what is new,"⁵⁰ is basically consumerism, the addiction to consumption. People who are addicted in this way are not able to become rooted and find repetition itself boring. They have no felt connection to things, no appreciation for symbols or rituals. To be addicted is to have sold your soul. "To elevate one god," Neil Postman writes in *Technopoly*, "requires the demotion of another. 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' applies as well to a technological divinity as any other."⁵¹ When one renders to Caesar the things that are God's, one can't then render them to God.

I began my college education as a chemistry major, and I recall making various types of solutions. In a super-saturated solution, there is too much solid to be absorbed by the solution, and consequently some of the solid material is lost from the solution, and settles at the bottom of the beaker. Ours is a super-saturated society. We have too much of almost everything—noise, information, consumer goods. My concern, both as a theologian and as an educator, is that what will be lost is what we need most to survive as a people—the essence of our humanity, our soul.

47. Berry, 11.

48. Berry, 210–211.

49. Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: Norton, 1991) 101.

50. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Random House, 1992) 11.

51. Postman, *Technopoly*, 165.