MERTON AND EDUCATION:

The Theme of Self-Discovery

by **Thomas Del Prete**

While the work of Thomas Merton cannot be considered otherwise than educational, it has rarely, if at all, been considered in terms of the insights it might lend to a discussion of education itself. It is in the interest of establishing some focus and direction in this relatively unexplored area of Merton scholarship that this article is written.

It is vitally important in Merton studies to recognize that one cannot enounter Merton's work without to some extent encountering Merton himself, and, finally, oneself. Merton's words in his introduction to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* might very well, in this respect, provide perspective for those who would indulge in Merton studies: "Therefore, most honorable reader . . . . I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self."[1] As reflected here, Merton's message — and I am suggesting that this is the case in any context, but especially when it involves education — is personalistic, personalistic to the point where the

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1. Thomas Merton, *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1981), p. 47. Hereafter referred to in the text as *IEW*.

message and the receiver are ultimately in some sense one and the same.[2] The starting and ending points of a study of Merton and education are likewise the same — ourselves; whatever insight we might gain vis-a-vis the purpose of education will be gained in proportion to our openness to understanding and deepening our understanding of our own selves.

If, without knowing Merton's explicit thoughts on education, we were to consider his work in terms of what he might tell us about education, it is clear that we would have to turn our attention to understanding the possible relationship between education and his understanding of self. We would then want to decide how education so understood might be carried out; how, in other words, to borrow again Merton's words, might education speak to the "self;" how might it become truly personalistic (not simply personalized, where everyone knows each other by name, as important as this is), truly a deepening personal experience in which one's self is somehow more real? Essentially, the aim of this essay is to build a foundation upon which this question and the effort to answer it can rest secure. Its focus and inspiration come from Merton's ruminations on education in what is probably his most focused treatment of the subject apart from a more strictly monastic context, his essay "Learning to Live."[3]

This study is interpretive in nature: it offers a perspective on the purpose of education through the spiritual lens that Merton provides as much as it might elucidate Merton's actual views on education. It is a starting point from which other approaches to understanding education through Merton's work or his own example as a teacher might be derived, or, of at least equal importance, from which those of us who teach (conceived in its very broadest sense) might deepen our own sense of vocation.[4]

"Self-discovery" expresses the basic purpose of education identified by Merton in his essay, "Learning to Live." The concepts of "self" and "self-discovery" are clarified here as central themes in Merton's spiritual writing. The depth and breadth of Merton's idea of educational purpose

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2. See especially Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," *Love and Living*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 3-13. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Learning."

3. For Merton's thoughts on education in a monastic context, see, for example, "The Need for a New Education," *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), pp. 198-204, or listen to Conference Tape #306B, "Monastic Education," 17 September 1968 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky).

4. For a broader and more comprehensive treatment of the subject of Merton and education, see Thomas Andrew Del Prete, " 'The Formation of the Whole Person': An Interpretative Study of Thomas Merton's Ideas on Education," unpublished doctoral dissertation (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1987).

can be illuminated best by exploring the roots of these concepts in his Christian, contemplative philosophy.

DIMENSIONS OF SELF-DISCOVERY

"The danger of education," Merton writes, ". . . is that it so easily confuses means and ends" ("Learning," p. 10). In his own reflections on education, Merton aims to focus and draw attention to the "ends." Thus, in his principal essay on the subject, "Learning to Live," he states the purpose of education as ". . . to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world." He elaborates:

> The world is made up of the people who are fully alive in it: that is, of the people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it. The world is, therefore, more real in proportion as the people in it are able to be more fully and more humanly alive: that is to say, better able to make a lucid and conscious use of their freedom. Basically, this freedom must consist first of all in the capacity to choose their own lives, to find themselves on the deepest possible level . . . . The function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover himself: to recognize himself, and to identify who it is that chooses.
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> ("Learning," p. 3)[5]

"The purpose of all learning," Merton subsequently declares, is "to dispose" people to have this basic self-discovery, in his words, to activate their "inmost center . . . [the] 'spark' which is my true self" ("Learning," p. 9).

Among the salient themes introduced in these selections from "Learning to Live," including freedom and relationship, self-discovery clearly has a pivotal status. The term reflects Merton's deep belief that the reality of human existence is found through an inner experience, and, moreover, that it is through this experience alone that fully mature and authentic human being becomes possible. It represents, as well, his essential message for education — that communities must ultimately provide for this discovery, and thereby safeguard the personal capacity for free, creative, and genuine relationship with the world.

Merton's view of the purpose of education as self-discovery is

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5. As indicated in this quotation, Merton freely and extensively uses the masculine pronoun in his writing. At the same time, Merton's awareness of the feminine should also be noted, especially as manifested in such pieces as *Hagia Sophia*. It is difficult to eliminate in quotation what was a common practice for Merton without altering basic structure; while I have done this in some instances, in recognition of the limited perspective represented by the masculine pronoun, for the most part I have retained Merton's original wording.

quintessentially "personalistic" ("Learning," p. 7). For Merton the fruit of education is not a "what," whether that "what" be defined as a self measured in terms of academic degrees or a particular expertise, but ultimately "who." This "who" is not some ideal version of the "true self," that is, not an object for self-reflection, an image, or an abstract conceptual realization; rather, it is the existential who, the whole person in existential reality, "the radical self in its uninhibited freedom" ("Learning," p. 7).

In keeping with its existential quality, self-discovery for Merton means more than a personal experience in the narrow sense of individual or separate. In fact, it has a broad communal dimension, implicated both in the paradoxical terms with which Merton often characterizes self-discovery, and the concept of unity to which he often refers in describing it.

One must find oneself, Merton observes in *No Man is an Island*, "in and through others."[6] This paradoxical prescription for self-discovery becomes more understandable when viewed as an indication of a dialectical pattern of growth involving self and other. This paradoxical, dialectical pattern is implicit in Merton's elaboration of the discovery process: "We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others, yet at the same time before we can go out to others we must first find ourselves" (*NMI*, p. 44). The paradoxical nature of self-discovery indicates something more basic than a dialectical pattern of growth, however. It suggests a deeper existential relationship in which self and other are united: only in this way can the paradox be understood.

In more ontological terms, the discovery of self in other entails the discovery of both in the common ground of existence or "being," God. To explain this ontological reality, Merton refers to the Christian existentialist belief which holds that persons share a life in common, in Christ; in the words of St. Paul quoted by Merton, "We are all members of a race which is intended to be one organism and 'one body' " (*NMI*, p. xxi). This fundamental unity provides the basis for the formation of community, and informs the self's understanding of personal difference in terms of complementarity and plurality rather than separateness and diversity (*NMI*, pp. xxi-xxii).[7]

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6. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955), p. xv. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NMI*.

7. See also Thomas Merton, "The Power and Meaning of Love," *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), p. 111; hereafter referred to in the text as *DQ*. On "unity" in a more general sense, see Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 78-79, 82; hereafter referred to in the text as *BT*. See also Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 56; hereafter referred to in the text as *NSC*.

At the same time that it is deeply personal, then, self-discovery is inherently relational and communal. It also implies a dialectical pattern of growth involving self and others. As expressed in the language of Christian contemplation, these dimensions of self-discovery reflect discovery of Christ in oneself, and the corresponding discovery of oneself and others in Christ (*DQ*, pp. 119, 207). Expressed in more universal terms, they suggest the person as "one in the unity of love" (*IEW*, p. 92). This theme will figure prominently in the more comprehensive discussion of person and community composing the latter part of this essay.

It should be noted that the significance of Christian existentialist belief for discussion of self-discovery is not *specifically* in its theological validity. It lies, rather, for the purpose of this interpretation, in how it illuminates Merton's sense of the self or person for whose discovery education should aim. In this case, the doctrine of "the mystical body of Christ" illustrates both the source of Merton's understanding of self in relationship to others, and the deep personal quality of that relationship; as well, it provides an important basis for understanding how the concepts of unity and complementarity help to explain the meaning of self-discovery.

In general, the capacity of language to express the meaning of self-discovery is limited. The concepts of self, person, and community in particular evoke the personal and transpersonal qualities of self-discovery. However, like the paradoxical mode of expression, they are meaningful only insofar as they point to the "objective" yet "mystical" reality of existence on which self-discovery is predicated (*NMI*, p. xv). Merton was acutely aware of the limitedness of language, and, moreover, of its power to mislead. As Merton points out in "The Inner Experience": "One may isolate the reality in a symbol, but then one must remember that it is not the symbol, and the symbol itself is incapable of communicating the full reality."[8] Failure to maintain this distinction between symbol and reality can easily result in misinterpretation of self-discovery as an ideology which is in some sense programmable. Such a fabricated ideology would be antithetical to Merton's personalistic view of education, and the spontaneous "freedom within" that self-discovery implies (*IEW*, p. 345).

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8. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Prospects and Conclusions (VIII)," *Cistercian Studies* 20:4 (1984), p. 343; hereafter referred to in the text as IE. Merton's concern for language "as the medium which unites or divides" is noted by Michael Mott in his authorized biography of Merton, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 381; hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*. See also Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1956), p. 86; hereafter referred to in the text as *TS*

Recognizing the limitation as well as the influence of language, one can proceed to examine more closely the concepts of self, person, and community as they are developed or implicated by Merton in his writing, and as they help to elucidate the full, rich meaning of self-discovery as the purpose of education.

As described in "Learning to Live," the "true self" is

> the mature personal identity, the creative fruit of an authentic and lucid search, the "self" that is found after other partial and exterior selves have been discarded as masks . . . . This inner identity is not "found" as an object, but is the very self that finds. ("Learning," p. 4)

Subsequently, Merton writes that "Learning to be oneself means . . . discovering in the ground of one's being a 'self' which is ultimate and indestructible" ("Learning," p. 4).

Three themes make these passages typical of Merton's writings on the self. Most prominent is the distinction made between an exterior (often the "external," "false," "empirical," or "ego-") self and inner (often "true" or "real") self. Less evident, but no less important, is the implied distinction between the self as "object" and the self as subject ("the very self that finds"). Association of the inner self with the "ground of one's being" constitutes another elemental theme in Merton's writing. When examined in the context of Merton's contemplative philosophy, these themes offer valuable insight into the nature and characteristics of the self to be discovered through education.

"For man to be free," Merton asserts, "he must be delivered from himself" (*IE*, p. 345). In another instance, he writes that "in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I have to die" (*NSC*, p. 47). Not surprising vis-a-vis understanding Merton's work, the meaning of these statements derives more from their characteristically paradoxical nature than their actual language (*TS*, p. 84; *NMI*, p. xvii; *BT*, pp. 81-82). The contradictions they express cannot be reconciled except in terms of some deeper reality that they cannot directly convey, or, put in another way, that they can intimate only by being contradictions. In some sense, then, their paradoxical nature is a witness to faith in something else, something "out of ourselves."[9] In this case, the "something else" is a self radically different from the self alluded to — a self which can be free, which can be found, and which lives. As William H. Shannon has pointed out the found self is the

9. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 114. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NM*.

"true self," and the lost self is the "exterior" or "false self."[10]

Much of Merton's spiritual writing is replete with references to the "false" and "true" selves, or their various synonyms.[11] It should be emphasized that Merton's distinction between the two is conceptual, not meant to imply that we in fact have a dual nature, but more to illustrate the difference between an incomplete and more whole existence; hence, they are important to differentiate here. Merton's words, written in 1966 after many years of reflecting on the "self," will help put this discussion in perspective. "I must . . . find my center not in an ideal self which just *is* (fully realized) but in an actual self which does all it can to be honest and to love truly, though it still may fail" (*Mott*, p. 453).[12] Often, the false self serves as a kind of foil for its genuine counterpart. Its different manifestations, though more interrelated than discrete, can be grouped conveniently as psychological, social, and temporal in nature. Their explication will provide a rich counterpoint for discussion of the different manifestations of the true self.

THE FALSE SELF

Psychologically, the false self consists in witting or unwitting subjection to its drives and desires, convinced, in its self-centeredness, that they are the source of its existential reality.[13] It therefore mistakes the "individual and empirical ego" for the true self.[14] Responsible fulfillment of individual needs becomes the sole basis for self-realization, and the predominate measure of its maturity.

According to Merton, the false self harbors a spurious view of reality because it prescinds from the spiritual basis in which alone the true self is found. "But when the outward self knows only itself," he offers, "then it is

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10. William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real Self," in *The Message of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 193.

11. See especially *New Seeds of Contemplation, Faith and Violence, Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and "The Inner Experience."

12. Mott quotes from what are until 1993 Merton's "Restricted Journals" (the passage is from Merton's entry of 4 June 1966). Merton's reflection is in part a response to his love for the nurse from Louisville whom he met at this time.

13. Thomas Merton, "The Climate of Mercy," *Love and Living*, p. 186; hereafter referred to in the text as "Climate." Also Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 22; hereafter referred to in the text as *ZBA*.

14. Thomas Merton, "A Note on *The Psychological Causes of War* by Erich Fromm," *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 112-113. Hereafter referred to in the text as *FV*.

absent from my true self. It never acts according to the need and measure of my true personality" (*NMI*, p. 221). In his essay, "A Note on *The Psychological Causes of War* by Erich Fromm," Merton elaborates this point of view:

> The Christian concept of man . . . is one which sees man as a spiritual, or self-transcending being. That is to say that man . . . does not find his fulfillment or self-realization merely on the level of his own nature . . . . When our empirical ego is taken, without further qualification, as the true "person," the true "self," as the being who is the genuine subject of life, freedom, joy and fulfillment . . . then we arrive at the most tragic frustrations and errors, because this implies a radical alienation of our true being. (*FV*, pp. 111-113)

As exemplified in this passage, differentiation of the false and true selves clearly depends on distinguishing their corresponding psychological and spiritual origins.

In his essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros," Merton suggests that two of the strongest psychological attributes of the false self are its "fear of death and the need for self-affirmation."[15] The fear of death has temporal implications to be discussed below; the need for self-affirmation engages the self "in a futile struggle to endow itself with significance." The false self thus acts as its own source of being and fulfillment; in terms of interaction, it is "challenging and defying . . . seeking either to dominate or to placate all that it confronts" ("Climate," p. 186).[16]

In its psychological manifestations, the false self is maintained by pride, "a stubborn insistence on being what we are not and never were intended to be" (*NM*, p. 101). Merton develops this theme in *The New Man*:

> Pride is a deep, insatiable need for unreality, an exorbitant demand that others believe the lie we have made ourselves believe about ourselves. It infects at once man's person and the whole society he lives in. It has, as a secondary effect, what theologians call concupiscence: the convergence of all passion and all sense upon the self . . . . It sees all things from the viewpoint of a limited, individual self that is constituted as the center of the universe. (*NM*, pp. 101-102)

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15. Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 18. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Rain."

16. Although establishing a broad comparative perspective is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is significant to note that Merton's description of the psychological aspects of the false self corresponds to similar accounts by other well-known spiritual writers. Of these, the most notable twentieth century figure is perhaps Martin Buber, the Jewish mystical philosopher whose work was familiar to Merton. Buber states in *I and Thou* that the capacity of an "I" to enter into a direct and genuine relationship with another (a "you") depends on that "I" giving up the "false drive for self-affirmation;" Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1970), p. 126. One might also consider comparatively *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose anonymous fourteenth century author advises that one "must lose the radical self-centered awareness of [one's] own being if [one] will reach the heights of contemplation in this life;" *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 102.

A singular irony is implicit in Merton's account of pride: it is precisely individual pride and self-centeredness which create in society the collective illusion that in turn minimizes the self-satisfaction sought by the individual; put in another way, the individual conforms and thus acquiesces to society both as a result and in spite of the self-centered compulsion of pride.[17] This is one way in which the "hidden drive to self-assertion" which characterizes the false self is mirrored and magnified in the collective realm of society.[18]

> The world we live in has become an awful void, a degenerated sanctuary, reflecting outwardly the emptiness and blindness of the hearts of men who have gone crazy with their love for money and power and with pride in their technology.[19]

As exemplified in this statement, Merton's view of the state of Western society is often incisive, harsh, and uncompromising; inasmuch as he incorporates language characteristic of his descriptions of the false self, his views often portray society as a collective macrocosm of the individual. Thus, themes of willfulness and power recur in his observations, as in this passage from "Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity":

> The West has lived for thousands of years under the sign of the Titan, Prometheus, the fire stealer, the man of power who defies heaven in order to get what he himself desires. The West has lived under the sign of will, the love of power, action, and domination.[20]

Even more indicative of these themes, Merton writes in "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World":

> . . . the busy and impatient men of the West . . . seek, in a word, the triumphant affirmation of their own will, their own power, considered as the end for which they exist. Is not this perhaps the most foolish of all dreams, the most tenacious and damaging of illusions?[21]

In a subsequent passage, Merton fervently and forcefully answers the question he poses, distinguishing the illusory perceptions of the individual self, magnified in society, from the contemplative view of reality.

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17. A perspective indicated by Merton especially in *The New Man*, pp. 103-104; *Faith and Violence*, pp. 112-113; and "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18:2 (1983), pp. 3-4.

18. Thomas Merton, "Blessed are the Meek," *Faith and Violence*, p. 23. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Blessed."

19. Thomas Merton to Abdul Aziz, 17 November 1960, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 45. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

20. Thomas Merton, "Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity," *Love and Living*, p. 181. Originally written as a preface for the Japanese edition of *The New Man*; see *Introductions East and West*, pp. 107-116.

21. Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World," *Faith and Violence*, p. 219.

This passage perhaps best illustrates Merton's understanding of the dynamic through which the false self's need for self-assertion achieves an aggregate effect:

> The contemplative way requires first of all and above all renunciation of this obsession with the triumph of the individual or collective will to power . . . . The aggressive and dominative view of reality places at the center the individual self with its bodily form, its feelings and emotions, its appetites and needs, its loves and hates, its actions and reactions. All these are seen as forming together a basic and indubitable reality to which everything else must be referred, so that all other things are also estimated in their individuality, their actions and reactions, and all the ways in which they impinge on the interests of the individual self. The world is then seen as a multiplicity of conflicting and limited beings, all enclosed in the prisons of their own individuality . . . all seeking to find a certain completeness by asserting themselves at the expense of others . . . . Thus there arises a spurious, inconclusive unity: the unity of the massive aggregate. ("Contemplative," pp. 219-220)

The ethos of power and domination which results from the false self's need for self-assertion is thus maintained in a confusing web of impersonal, competitive activity. Inferentially, it is clear that this ethos, once created, has a reciprocal effect, sustaining itself by reinforcing the self-centered orientation of the individual. As Merton maintains: "When you say 'I think' it is often not you who think, but 'they' — it is the anonymous authority of the collectivity speaking through your mask" (*IE*, p. 3). He also makes clear that the alternative to the mutually destructive dynamic in which self and others are engaged involves "the contemplative way" — the way by which the wisdom of compassion, understanding, and love supplants "will" ("Contemplative," pp. 220, 224).

Just as the false self lives imprisoned in the illusory world created by its efforts at self-assertion, it is entrapped in its conceptualization and corresponding experience of time. This perspective is especially clear when Merton describes "Time and the Liturgy" in terms of the contrasting images of "the natural man" and "mass man."[22]

The false self, Merton states in "The Inner Experience," is "the 'I' of temporal finalities" (*IE*, p. 4). It finds nothing redeemable about time. Viewed in terms of the seasons, time is a cycle whose renewal only promises death ("Time," pp. 50, 53). Viewed in a more linear sense, time is like the unceasing flow of a river; the false self is carried along helplessly in its current, concerned about the "lapse of time" or fearful of what lies ahead

22. Thomas Merton, "Time and the Liturgy," *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), pp. 45-60. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Time."

("Time," p. 47). Consequently, the false self lives permanently uprooted from the present and the natural cyclical rhythm of life. Merton suggests that this unsettled state is a "linear flight from nothingness, a flight from reality and from God, without purpose and without objective, except to keep moving, to keep from having to face reality" ("Time,"p. 51).[23]

Conditioned by its fear of death, the false self regards time as an enemy ("Rain," p. 18; "Time," p. 45). Time is responsible for the calamitous ending to its life; because of time its superficial needs and desires will not ultimately be fulfilled. The false self anticipates no ultimate self-affirmation in death. Thus it exists in painful awareness of its transience, in continuous tension with time ("Notes," p. 113). In its modern guise, the false self endeavors to hide from time in the relentless pursuit of the contemporary; that is, it seeks relevance and identity by conforming to whatever is currently "right."[24] Merton explains in "Godless Christianity?":

> To be contemporary is to maintain one's place, to survive in the highly organized and breathless dynamism of the ephemeral. It is a kind of existentialism of fashion, in which there is no solid ontological ground of being, only the constant unpredictable flux of existence. ("Godless," p. 275)

By living in this contemporaneous mode, the false self effectively inures itself to the cold, enemy hand of time.

This portrayal of the false self in relation to time, inasmuch as it is inferred from various references made by Merton, is somewhat overdrawn. This quality, however, may also be considered a measure of its validity. In keeping with Merton's general approach to discussing the self, it fulfills the instructional purpose of providing a vivid contrast and counterpoint for discussion of the life of the true self.

In flight from time, caught in a collective web of illusion woven by its attempts to fulfill a psychological need for self-assertion, and futilely engaged in establishing its identity over and against others in conformity to arbitrary external criteria of its own invention, Merton's false self constitutes a kind of mirage or anti-image vis-a-vis the true self. It thus provides perspective: knowing what is counterfeit helps in distinguishing what is real as the "self." In so doing, it helps to clarify what Merton means by

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23. See also Merton's commentary on time in the context of a discussion of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 499-500, and in *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1970), pp. 52-59.

24. Thomas Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 274-275, 277-278. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Godless."

"self-discovery" as the purpose of education, and suggests fundamental areas of personal growth which can be fostered by education in the effort to dispose one for the personal breakthrough that is self-discovery.

THE TRUE ("REAL" or "INNER") SELF

The true self embodies a consciousness and orientation to reality wholly different from its false counterpart. While this difference can be delineated comparatively in terms of the psychological, social, and temporal manifestations of the false self, it can only be understood fully as something much more fundamentally whole and unifed than these distinctions imply. To the extent that this difference is clarified, the purpose Merton identifies for education will be better understood. Toward that end, this section focuses on establishing and explicating the qualities, manifestations, and characteristics of the true self.

In *Day of a Stranger*, a personal essay to Latin American friends, Merton writes: "In an age where there is so much talk about 'being yourself' I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else."[25] This self-effacement reflects Merton's own effort to eschew identification in terms relevant to the false self.[26] In characterizing himself as a stranger, Merton was stating that his identity existed outside the realm of society, that is, outside, the realm of "multiplicity, activity, uncompleteness, striving, and desire" (*NSC*, p. 279). Thus he was stating his intention to live simply as who he was in his reality as a whole, undifferentiated being, that is, in the eyes of God. The false self lives divided, identifiable in such individual fragments as body, soul, personality, mind, and social image. In contrast, the true self is indivisible, the self in its totality, integrated (*IE*, p. 3). The false self tends to identify itself in terms of its external activity, its output; it must be engaged in doing something in order to experience itself as real. The true self simply is. It does not have to do in order to be, though in being it is quite capable of doing. The difference is that its doing is motivated by love, reflected in the quality (not quantity) of its actions (*NMI*, pp. 118, 123).

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25. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*; edited by Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 31.

26. Suggested in a general way by Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 366.

Much more than an experience, which implies a self considering itself, the true self is the lived experience of its own wholeness (*NSC*, p. 283).[27] Therefore it does not possess itself either as an idea or an image. Put in another way, the true self, unlike its self-conscious counterpart, is a lived consciousness, rooted in its actual being.

The true self is real for Merton precisely because it cannot be self-constructed — a being cannot endow itself with life. Rather, and with the profoundest of implications vis-a-vis the reality of the true self — life has been given to it. Therefore, in contrast to the illusory life that the meaning-making false self is devoted to creating, the life of the true self is free (*NMI*, pp. 11-13; "Learning," pp. 7-8). At the same time, recognizing the sources of its being outside itself, it is conscious of its fundamental connectedness to all living beings. Therefore, the true self does not assert itself over and against the world as an object, nor does it seek to possess the world (*ZBA*, p. 22). Its consciousness is more of wholeness and unity; in what Merton calls "a kind of ontological openness," it apprehends the world more as a living expression of being, of love, of God (*ZBA*, pp. 25-26). In "The Inner Experience," Merton describes the true or "inner self" as

> our entire substantial reality itself, on the highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life and it is life . . . . It is the life by which anything else in us lives and moves. It is in and through and beyond everything that we are. If it is awakened, it becomes a living awareness of itself: and this awarness is not so much something that we have, as something that we are. It is a new and indefinable quality of our living being. (*IE*, pp. 5-6)

As depicted in this passage, the true self is a dynamic fusion of what is common — "life" — and what is unique or "most personal" — the individual person. In "Learning to Live," Merton refers to this dynamic quality of the true self as "a fusion of freedom and unfreedom, being and unbeing, life and death," and as a "spark," an "event," and an "explosion" ("Learning," p. 9). True self-realization is a creative, life-affirming event in which the self and its life-giving source meet.

The dynamic metaphors that Merton uses to describe self-discovery suggest its mystical quality. Viewed from a Christian spiritual perspective, this signifies, on one level, an experiential awareness of the indwelling presence of Christ, and, on another, mystical union with God, the source and ground of all being (*NM*, p. 169). For Merton, the ultimate signifi-

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27. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 39, 78. Hereafter referred to in the text as *ZBA*.

cance of this event can only be understood from this perspective. However, he does not consider it exclusively in this way.

Precisely because it denotes for him a living reality, Merton was able to enlist a rich language replete with metaphors such as "life," "consciousness," "freedom," "love," and "presence" — to describe self-discovery (*NSC*, p. 283; *ZBA*, p. 25). In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton confirms the validity of this "nonmetaphysical way" of expressing the ontological reality which is the true self (*ZBA*, p. 16). This question of validity needs to be addressed in order to make the idea of self-discovery, and its significance as the purpose of education, as understandable and accessible as possible. To limit discussion of the true self to theological terms, or, conversely, to preclude discussion because of the true self's theological import, is to proscribe it in a way that Merton certainly did not, and mistakenly to consider it less in terms of a lived reality than as a matter for conceptual debate. While the language Merton uses to describe self-discovery may be distinguishable, and importantly so, as metaphyiscal or nonmetaphysical, and theological or nontheological, only when understood in its Christian spiritual meaning is the deeply personal nature of self-discovery fully conveyed (*HGL*, p. 314).

Reflected in its mystical quality, the true self is discovered wholly in a loving personal encounter, the person in existential contact with God, the source of life (*NMI*, p. 225; ZBA, p. 75). "Encounter," in this context, hardly denotes a chance meeting; rather it refers to direct, concrete experience of the infinite and eternal presence of God in oneself, and of one's being in God (*ZBA*, p. 16). It is a living recognition of the contingent reality of one's life in the unlimited expanse of God's love, and a simultaneous recognition of that reality for everyone else — with whom one is fully identified in unity and love. In the language of Christian contemplative spirituality, the true self is fully identified with Christ, living "in" or "as" Christ, just as Christ is present in the true self (*DQ*, pp. 124, 207; ZBA, p. 75). Likewise, in contrast to the self-limited terms of the false self, others are seen as co-persons in Christ (*DQ*, p. 111). In its power to transform radically one's consciousness and orientation to reality, this personal encounter is no less than an "explosion" for Merton ("Learning," p. 9). One sees from an entirely new viewpoint (*IE*, pp. 121-122). The false self's arena of activity is replaced by a new landscape; reflecting a personal relationship with Christ, one stands in a new relationship with persons and the material world (*NM*, pp. 125-126). Yet, precisely because it reflects true and real identity, this new vision and

relationship has an old, ordinary quality as well. As Merton says in his chapter on "Realism in the Spiritual Life" in *Life and Holiness*: "Paradoxically, on this new level we recover our old, ordinary selves . . . . The "new man" is totally transformed, and yet he remains the *same person*. He is spiritualized . . . in Christ."[28] In personal identification with Christ, the true self is enabled to live more "awake," more simply, and more fully in the concrete, everyday world (*ZBA*, p. 30). Put in another way, the true self embraces the great gifts of freedom and love in its everyday life. The dynamic, radical change which the true self represents can only be fully understood as an inner, enlivening, and personalizing experience, involving the individual person and the Person of Christ (*NMI*, p. 225; *IE*, p. 124). Actualized as person, thus conscious of the living unity of all persons in Christ, the true self is able to see and relate to the world in its personal, *subjective* reality.

Merton often distinguishes the true and false selves in terms of their subject-object orientation (*DQ*, pp. 97-126). The false self, in the extreme, regards persons and things equally, in proportion according to its own needs. The false self knows only what it can prove to itself. Its knowing is an act of self-reflection, if not self-ingratiation. It only holds forth as meaningful what it can tell itself. It thus limits its interaction with the world (implying nature as well as people), in the extreme manipulating it to its own image, less dramatically, viewing the world as an obstacle course of objects that it must successfully negotiate. It does not view truth as a reality that can be experienced on any level deeper than its own self-defined "reality," in accordance with its efforts at "self-assertion" and "self-affirmation."

The true self, on the other hand, stands in relation to objects more as they are, or, more accurately, allows them to be and to mean what they are (*IE*, pp. 121-122; *NSC*, p. 29; *ZBA*, p. 30). By virtue of its inner orientation, therefore, it enters into a wholly different qualitative relationship with the external world. Similarly, in what can be described as a *true self to true self* relationship, the true self identifies with persons as subjects (*DQ*, p. 103). It lives in awareness of the mutual subjectivity and complementarity of persons; put in another way, in awareness, of existentialist unity and complementary uniqueness (*IE*, p. 123). The true self's world becomes personalized and relationship subjectified through love. In his most relevant and illumi-

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28. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), p. 50; also germane, *The New Man*, p. 126.

nating essay on this topic, "The Power and Meaning of Love," Merton explains the dynamic and effect of this essential way of relating:

> Love brings us into a relationship with an objectively existing reality, but because it is love, it is able to bridge the gap between subject and object and *commune in the subjectivity of the one loved*. Only love can effect this kind of union and give this kind of knowledge-by-identity with the beloved . . . . (*DQ*, p. 103; *Mott*, p. 244)

Subjectivity clearly does not refer here to the self-aware or ego-centered experience that Merton suggests elsewhere dominates the modern, Cartesian-inspired consciousness. Quite otherwise, it refers to the whole subjective reality of the self in a communion of personal love (*DQ*, p. 126; *ZBA*, p. 24; *NM*, p. 19).

Two fundamental characteristics of the true self are set in relief by this discussion of its subjective nature. The first is its deeply personal quality, in which all others are implicated as subjects, because all subsist in the personal love of God. Secondly, just as it ultimately enters into personal relationship through subjective identification, the true self views the world of objects in a direct, unprejudiced way; or rather, it simply sees things as they are. In "The Inner Experience," Merton characterizes this way of seeing as "direct knowledge," a kind of simple apprehension of the truth of things (*IE*, p. 122). Thus, self-discovery implies not only an ontological reality, but an epistemology that stands in direct contrast to the way of knowing of the false self — whose knowledge of the world, and relationship to others is mediated, in varying degrees, by its efforts of self-affirmation.

In the limited space of this essay, it is not possible to provide a full analysis of Merton's understanding of psychological development in relation to the true self; consequently, neither is it possible to establish a strong foundation for discussing how education, in providing for particular aspects of psychological development, might fulfill the purpose of self-discovery. However, inasmuch as this was a topic of important personal and intellectual concern for Merton, and one which bears significantly on this effort to explain self-discovery, it is appropriate to address it in a general way here.[29]

Merton establishes firmly that the true self is in no sense a psychological self-realization (*NM*, p. xv; "Note," pp. 111-112). The true self simply is

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29. In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 289-291, Mott describes Merton's intellectual and personal involvement with psychoanalysis.

not identifiable in psychological or empirical terms.[30] It is not the looked-for result of some process of psychological adjustment, in which the ego or empirical self may or may not play a prominent role; nor does it imply a distinct self which has found or attained to something it can identify as part of itself.

Whereas self-realization for the false self would entail fulfillment of its psychological need for self-affirmation and will to self-assertion, "true" self-realization entails inner discovery of the "someone that one already (potentially) is, the person one is truly meant to be;" that is, "the very self who finds" ("Final," p. 207; "Learning," p. 9). The interior, spiritual nature of the true self precludes psychological definition or explanation ("Final," p. 211). As explained earlier, the true self lives in personal awareness of its ontological source of being in God, and in the "unity of love" in which it is fully identified with others (*IE*, p. 123). Its life, therefore, is moved by the love which creates the bonds of its relationship to God and others. At the same time, however, that he emphasizes the fundamental difference between psychological self-realization and self-discovery, Merton enthusiastically affirms the importance of paradigms of psychological growth which implicate qualities and characteristics of the true self. For example, in a letter to Erich Fromm, the well-known philosopher and psychoanalyst, Merton expresses his total agreement with Fromm's thesis on the humanistic conscience, and its central themes of freedom and responsibility; he specifically notes its basic compatibility with Christianity (*HGL*, p. 309).

Merton makes a similar comparison in his essay, "Final Integration —Toward a Monastic Therapy," in which he reviews the work of a psychoanalyst, Dr. Reza Arasteh ("Final," pp. 205-217). In particular, he delineates those qualities which Arasteh attributes to the fully integrated personality that can also be considered hallmarks of the "saint" (essentially the true self). Included among them are a transcultural consciousness, a deep inner freedom, and "a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being" ("Final," p. 211). Merton also notes that one who has achieved the psychological integration that Arasteh describes,

> apprehends . . . life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own . . . . is in a certain

30. Thomas Merton, "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy,' " *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p. 211; hereafter referred to in the text as "Final." See also "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue," Appendix IV, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 310.

> sense identified with everybody . . . . [and] is guided not just by will and reason, but by "spontaneous behavior subject to dynamic insight."
> ("Final," p. 211)

While recognizing the full correspondence of these qualities with those of the true self, and their importance to the well-being of society, Merton points out the significant difference of their psychological and spiritual origin.

Merton's comparison of psychological growth and self-discovery, especially as represented in his essay on final integration, is instructive. It indicates, first of all, his commitment to making self-discovery as broadly comprehensible as possible, particularly in light of the propensity of his society to posit personal identity in psychological terms. Secondly, it indicates his belief that many of the characteristics of the true self are approximated at the highest level of psychological maturity, and expands the conceptual language with which characteristics of the true self can be described. In particular, Merton shows that he is at ease with "integration," "transcultural," and "universal man" (implying a universal consciousness rather than any kind of cultural homogeneity) as concepts which can be applied in a discussion of the attributes of the true self.

How growth to psychological maturity might be related to actual self-discovery is less clear in Merton's comparison. In his preface to *No Man is an Island*, Merton suggests that self-discovery, as a salvific event, "to some extent presupposes, and usually effects and always transcends" psychological self-realization (*NMI*, p. xv). Similarly, in his final integration essay, he mentions that the maturity evident in the "saint . . . normally includes the idea of complete psychological integration" ("Final," p. 211). The fact that Merton does not identify a causal relationship between psychological maturation and self-discovery underscores his belief that self-discovery is exclusively a spiritual event, encompassing the full reality of the self; therefore, it cannot possibly be enacted within the confines of the psychological realm.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton states, "I must look for my identity somehow, not only in God but in other men" (*NSC*, p. 51). In *No Man is an Island*, as noted earlier, he suggests that one must find oneself "in and through others" (*NMI*, p. xv).[31] Echoing these thoughts he concludes, in "The Inner Experience," that "it is probably safe to say that no man could

31. Echoed in "Love and Need," *Love and Living*, p. 31.

arrive at a genuine inner self-realization unless he had first become aware of himself as a member of a group — as an 'I' confronted with a 'Thou' who completes and fulfills his own being" (*IE*, p. 123). Taken together, these insights point to a central aspect of Merton's understanding of self-discovery — that it is founded on relationship. "One must not forget," he counsels in "Learning to Live," "the dimension of relatedness to others" ("Learning," pp. 7-8).

Merton characterizes Western society, built in the image of the false self, in terms of power, aggressiveness, multiplicity, and division. Members of society exist atomistically, as anonymous individuals or "mass-men;" the society exists as a disunited aggregate or "collectivity" (*DQ*, pp. ix, x; "Rain," p. 16). This "mass society," in Merton's estimation

> 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. (*DQ*, p. x)

Merton's message is clear: there is no "ground," no identity in mass society beyond its own created, mesmerizing, and stultifying illusions.

The true self, enabled by love to enter into relationship with its whole, subjective being, helps move society from the realm of individual anonymity to a realm of personal identity; and from the realm of collectivity to the living and fruitful realm of community (*DQ*, p. xi; *NSC*, p. 55).[32] As recorded in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton's retrospective account of an experience in Louisville at "the corner of Fourth and Walnut," filled with the joy of recognition, indicates his own concrete awareness of the personalization of self and society:

> I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race .... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.[33]

Only from a consciousness that understands what persons "really are," that is, understands the "invulnerable inner reality" or "spark" in which personal identity is realized, can the relationships necessary for building a fully

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32. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 17; hereafter referred to in the text as *WCT*. See also Conference Tape # 265B, "Growing Up in Society (Beyond the Social World)," 18 February 1968, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

33. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), pp. 156-157. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

personalized and therefore a more genuinely communitarian society be formed ("Rain," p. 15; *CGB*, p. 158; "Learning," p. 9).

Unlike the false self, whose will to self-assertion defines its relationships, the true self does not seek to control or dominate others as "object." Rather, it identifies with them as subjects, thus sharing in the subjectivity which is intrinsic to them both, and which signifies the loving presence of God in which they both subsist. Recognizing this significance, the true self seeks to create a dialogue with the other that will enable both to "listen" and respond more fully to love. This is what Merton calls "person-oriented" thinking; he introduces this theme in the context of a discussion on Christian nonviolence ("Blessed," pp. 27-28).

The principles and philosophy of Christian nonviolence, which Merton explores in, among others, his essays "Blessed are the Meek" and "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant," offer an especially rich perspective on the nature of true self relationships ("Blessed," pp. 14-29).[34] Inasmuch as it is predicated on a fundamental respect for the human person, and thus faith in the spiritual identity common to all persons, the nonviolent approach aims to allow others to develop their own inner response to a situation ("Blessed," p. 27). Dialogue thus involves mutual understanding of personal subjectivity, and loving response. Merton explains: " 'Person-oriented' thinking . . . does not seek so much to *control* as to *respond*, and to *awaken responses* . . . . All it seeks is the openness of free exchange in which freedom and love have freedom of action" ("Blessed," p. 28). Merton thus indicates a particular quality of relationship as the basis for the true self, a quality accentuated in the context of nonviolent response. The true self, in its humility and corresponding vulnerability, acts as a witness to and catalyst for awakening a sense of truth ("Blessed," p. 18; "Gandhi," p. 19). This posture, as Merton suggests, is an outgrowth of the true self's orientation to the basic unity of persons in love ("Blessed," p. 15). In this way, the true self seeks to help others discover the loving unity in which it lives. To understand self-discovery as the purpose of education, then, it is clear that it must be considered as inseparable, in a very concrete sense from "other-discovery." Self-discovery, in a word, is relational in nature.

Unlike the false self, the true self does not exist in tension with time. It does not love in fear of the inevitability of death; therefore, it does not

34. Thomas Merton, "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant," in *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 1-20. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Gandhi."

perceive struggle with time as an enemy whose final victory is certain. Its life does not consist in the futile activity of asserting its will over and against its own mortality. In conventional temporal terms, the true self orients its life to the present — "The present is our right place," writes Merton (*NMI*, p. 219). In more Christian spiritual terms, its life is oriented to "presence," to the actual, near, living presence of God — as Merton notes, "actuality of God's presence is something that does not belong to the past or to the future but only to the present" (*NMI*, pp. 225-230). Since it is oriented to "presence," time for the true self is "utterly transparent" ("Time," p. 59). Put in another way, living in the presence of God means, for the true self, living in the "fulness of time, in God as the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end."[35] Thus, time is not, as in the terms of the false self, either a means or a deterrent to an end, but a living fulfillment of the end.

Merton's understanding of the true self's relation to time is deeply rooted in his Christian eschatological vision. "The Christian 'present,'" he explains, "has something of the character of eternity in which all reality is present at once" ("Time," p. 48). In the *present* is the eternal and abiding *presence* of Christ (*TS*, pp. 95). The true self's relationship to time also reflects the personalism inherent in self-discovery. Orientation to the present is orientation to a deeply personal reality; in contrast to the restlessness of the false self, it implies living rooted in the "ground of being." Self-discovery, then, implies what Merton calls in *The Sign of Jonas* "sinking into the heart of the present."[36] The true self is in a sense freed from fundamental concern about time. It lives not *for*, but *in* the moment.

Broader understanding of the present-orientation of the true self is closely linked to the vivid metaphors of "awake" and "aware" to which Merton's explanations of discovery of the true self often defer (*BT*, p. 89; *NSC*, pp. 295-297).[37] In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, for example, Merton writes: "To have an identity, [the individual] has to be awake, and aware. But to be awake, he has to accept vulnerability and death . . . for the sake of the invulnerable inner reality which we cannot recognize (which we can only *be*) but to which we awaken only when we see the unreality of our

35. Thomas Merton, "Time and Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 498-514, passim; see also Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1970), pp. 52-59.

36. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 319.

37. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from* The Protreptikos (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 10.

vulnerable shell" ("Rain," p. 15). In this context, awakening denotes an opening up of the whole self to its personal, existential identity. It in this sense implies awareness of the "presence" of love, of God, in its life. In this way, the metaphors "awake" and "aware" help to describe the true self's relationship to time. The life of the true self is nothing but concrete and real for Merton. At the same time, however, metaphors such as "awake" and "aware" fulfill the important purpose of evoking particular qualities of that life.

"Awake" and "aware" implicate the life of the true self in the presence of God's love. They suggest, in particular, attitudes of receptivity, openness, and listening — not only to "presence" in an interior sense, but to "presence" as manifested in the lives of others and in the natural world. And this presence, tantamount to life itself, is alive, vivifying, even playful (*BT*, p. 79; *NSC*, p. 296). Merton beautifully portrays the presence of God as a "cosmic dance":

> For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast . . . we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance. (*NSC*, p. 297)

Viewed in comparative perspective, the meaningfulness of "awake" and "aware" as metaphors which illustrate the life of the true self appears strengthened. The Buddhist concept of "mindfulness," whose clarification Merton sought in a final intellectual and spiritual odyssey in Asia, provides one basis for comparison.

In the words of Bhikku Khantipalo, "Mindfulness is the awareness of what one is doing while one is doing it, and of nothing else."[38] According to Bhikku, one who is mindful has "brilliant awareness of *NOW* all the time" (*AJ*, p. 298). At least in Bhikku's conceptual terms of "awareness" and "*NOW*," mindfulness has a clear analogy to "awake" and "aware." In meaning, they seem more compatible than congruous, most obviously because the "*NOW*" of mindfulness does not evoke the "presence" implicit in wakefulness. While clearly needing further study, the apparent compatibility of these concepts helps broaden understanding of what the

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38. Bhikku Khantipalo, "On Mindfulness," in Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 297; hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*. Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk and a friend of Merton's, has written similarly that "mindfulness" refers "to keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality;" Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 11. Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 126: "The one thing needful" to "go forth" from the "It-world," according to Buber is "the total acceptance of the present."

true self's capacity to live rooted in the present means.

As compelling and potentially of greater relevance to an understanding of "awake" and "aware" is the concept of "attention" developed by Simone Weil, philosopher, mystic and teacher, in her essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."[39] She writes:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (*Weil*, pp. 111-112)

The openness ("empty, waiting") and receptivity ("ready to receive") which characterize "attention" in this explanation recall these same characteristics in the awareness of the true self. The living quality Weil attributes to "object" is even more comparatively striking, evoking the true self's openness to "presence." Weil's explanation of this living quality confirms the basic connectedness of "attention" and "awake" and "aware": "Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth" (*Weil*, p. 112). Weil's "living Truth" can be considered tantamount to the "presence" of God.

The meaningfulness of this basic comparison of attention with qualities of the true self lies not only in the broader view of self-discovery that it provides, but also in the concrete perspective that it begins to build on how this purpose of education might be fulfilled. In this respect, Weil's concept of attention seems well-established as an area deserving further study.[40]

As explained and interpreted thus far, self-discovery clearly refers to the dynamic, simultaneous discovery of one's own identity and the identity of all in a single, living, loving, deeply personal unity with God. Less clear, but hardly less significant, is what self-discovery enables one to become — a person. "And what is the person?" Merton asks. "Precisely," he answers, "[the person] is one in the unity which is love" (*IEW*, p. 92; "Learning," p. 13). In a word, the person is the human manifestation of the love of God, the true self uniquely animated in love. Just as "love," for Merton, is the "key to the meaning of life," it is the key to understanding what he means by

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39. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), pp. 105-116. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Weil*.

40. See Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983). Palmer's concept of "obedience" (in its etymological sense of "to listen") would provide a provocative basis for broader comparison.

person (*DQ*, p. 123). The person subsists in love; the life of the person is determined in and by love. "Our whole life," Merton relates, "is a participation in that cosmic liturgy of 'the love which moves the sun and the other stars' " (*DQ*, p. 99). Love, then, is not a self-contained emotional quality harnessed to the wishes of the false self. It is rather the all-embracing, all pervasive essence of God, present in all things and everyone, the sole motive and actualizing force of the person.

To live in the unity of love implies both solitude and relationship. The person becomes attuned to the presence of God and the existential wholeness of the true self in the solitude of silence — in the inviolate interior space inaccessible to the influence of the collectivity or the vagaries of the false self (*TS*, pp. 93-94). Neither solitude nor silence indicates isolation however (the condition of the false self). As Merton emphasizes in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, the person is realized only in relationship (*WCT*, p. 17). Thus, personal relationship reflects, however imperfectly, the fundamental spiritual unity of all persons in God, and the personal relationship of each person with God (*IE*, p. 124). For Merton, the "other" is realized in solitude, just as the true self is realized in the other (that is, in relationship). In other words, the growth of the person occurs dialectically, the unique and common identity of both finally realized in "the unity of love" (*DQ*, pp. x-xi; *NM*, p. 91).

Self-discovery, as the discovery in which one's full identity as a person is realized, is clearly a discovery of love in Merton's view, but love understood as an expression of the infinite depths of God's being intimately present in all life, and uniquely reflected in the human capacity to love. Considered from this perspective, Merton's concept of person cannot be confused with secular humanistic or libertarian formulations which posit the growth of the person in such terms as freedom, responsibility, and integrity. At the same time, Merton's idea of person to some extent presupposes humanistic criteria for personal maturation, Merton acknowledging, in fact, a fundamental congruence of meaning and significance for these terms as used in secular or Christian humanistic contexts. Considered *apart* from this perspective, Merton's idea of person in reality becomes something likewise apart, a single, isolated entity disconnected from its true existence in ontological unity and relationship.

Merton was fully aware that the love of which he wrote, though present and accessible to all, was not easily discovered in a society habitually diverted from the life of the inner or true self, and the silence and

solitude in which alone it could be recognized and understood (*TS*, p. 13). As he concludes in "Christianity and Totalitarianism":

> Love cannot exist except between two persons. For there to be love, we must first of all safeguard the liberty and integrity of the human person. We must provide an education that strengthens man against the noise, the violence, the slogans, and the half-truths of our materialistic society. (*DQ*)

In a passage from *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton amplifies those qualities that need to be safeguarded in order to ensure the growth of the person — and society — in love:

> To be a person implies responsibility and freedom, and both these imply a certain interior solitude, a sense of personal integrity, a sense of one's own reality and of one's ability to give [oneself] to society — or to refuse that gift. (*TS*, p. 13)

Merton's message is clear: in order to be able to live in society as a person, one must know who one is, that is, have discovered one's real self and, thereby, one's existential relationship with others. In order to make this fundamental self-discovery, one must have a sense of personal existence apart from the veneer of society, that is, a sense of one's existential freedom and responsibility in love. More generally, Merton suggests that a society, particularly as reflected in its educational priorities, that does not aim to provide an environment in which the formation of the whole person will find acceptance and support is clearly alienated from what is true and real.

Merton's view of person in relation to society supports another important conclusion for this essay: education that provides for self-discovery, in enabling one to become a person, enables genuine community to form as well. It is precisely in standing in some sense outside society that the person can form genuine community. The distinctions Merton establishes between individual and person, and collectivity and community help clarify this seeming inconsistency. In direct correspondence to the distinctions he makes between the true and false selves, Merton often contrasts person and individual in terms of their social counterparts, community and collectivity. "The person," Merton says in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "must be rescued from the individual," that is from a life of uprootedness and division, in which identity is determined by the impersonal "mass" (*NSC*, pp. 38, 48; *DQ*, pp. x, xi). According to Merton:

> Individualism is nothing but the social atomism that has led to our present inertia, passivism and spiritual decay . . . . This individualism, primarily an economic concept with a pseudospiritual and moral facade, is in fact mere irresponsibility. It is, and has always been, not an affirmation of genuine

> human values but a flight from the obligations from which these values are inseparable. And first of all a flight from the obligation to love. (*DQ*, p. x)

In contrast,

> the vocation of the *person* is to construct his own solitude as a *conditio sine qua non* for a valid encounter with other persons, for intelligent cooperation and for communion in love. From this cooperation and communion . . . there grows the structure of a living, fruitful, and genuinely human society. (*DQ*, p. xi)[41]

Especially clear from this passage, person and community implicate one another. Just as the growth of the person depends on relationship, the growth of the community depends on the person's capacity for genuine relationship in love.

To recall the qualities of the true self, the person relates wholly, capable of communing "in the subjectivity of the one loved." It is relationship in this existential sense that enables community to form. Much more than place, what is common in community so formed is a shared personal identity in love. In keeping with their root meaning (essentially, "common"), communication in such community implies the kind of knowledge-by-identity and participation in the common life of love that Merton associates with the true person. This participation again implies openness, receptivity, responsiveness, and responsibility in dialogue and community activity; that is, a ready willingness to be moved by love rather than individual need or desire.

In comments that he made at a conference aiming to promote open dialogue between Eastern and Western monastic traditions, Merton explains the basis for this view of communication:

> And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity . . . . What we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.[42]

Self-discovery — learning to be what we are — ultimately means, then, learning to communicate on this deepest level.

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41. "The Christian in World Crisis," *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1964), pp. 163-164.

42. Thomas Merton, "Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism," Appendix III, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 308.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND PROSPECTS

The aim of this essay has been to explicate and interpret "self-discovery" as Thomas Merton's idea of the purpose of education. Fulfilling this aim has entailed delving into the Christian contemplative view of life exemplified both in Merton's writing and in his life. In particular, the meaning of self-discovery has been established in relation to several principal themes in Merton's writing, namely, the "false" and "true" selves, "person," and "community." A host of concepts have been introduced to help develop these themes, including "ground of being," "unity," "love," "subjective identification," "life," "freedom," and "relationship." Essentially, self-discovery has been viewed not as an indication of something particular to be found, but as an existential realization which implies a consciousness and orientation of one's whole being in love. Self-discovery, in its existenial quality, is at once made and lived.

Merton emphasizes that self-discovery means becoming no more than who one is, albeit who one is in the eyes of God, not in the eyes of the "ego" or "false" self, or society at large. This implicates first and foremost the free, whole, and indivisible person to whom Merton refers as "the very self who finds" ("Learning," p. 4). Secondly, it implies personal recognition of individual freedom, dignity, and responsibility. Finally, it implies a deepening interior growth in which the individual person humbly becomes more open to love. As Merton expresses it simply to friends in a letter: "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an even greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."[43]

Providing for self-discovery as the purpose of education clearly means, then, understanding and *providing* for an understanding of individual freedom, dignity, responsibility, and personal wholeness. It implies as well discerning and responding to the presence of love in oneself and others. The metaphors "awake" and "attentiveness" help to vivify this aspect of self-discovery. The deepening quality of growth that Merton describes suggests its dialectical nature. Self-discovery, at the same time that it means "a fantastic awakening to the truth and transcendent value of one's *ordinary self*," can be described as a dialectical process in which

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43. Thomas Merton, "September 1968 Circular Letter to Friends," Appendix I, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 296.

existential awareness of self and other in "the unity of love" is opened and re-opened ("Note," p. 114). Through self-discovery, one moves from being an individual living in an improbable mass to being a person capable of creating and living in community. This movement is made possible because of the capability of the person to identify wholly with others in love, or put in another way, to *commune* "in the subjectivity of the one loved" (*DQ*, p. 103).

In its implication of wholeness and unity, self-discovery has a particular ontological basis; in the capacity of the person to identify subjectively with others in love, and to see things in their own unique identity, it implies, as well, a particular epistemology — involving "knowledge-by-identity," or knowledge by and through love (wisdom). In this respect, self-discovery stands in marked contrast to conceptions of educational purpose which stress exclusively cognitive attainments or individual achievement. Considered from its particular ontological and epistemological perspective, self-discovery as the purpose of education implicitly suggests the means for its own fulfillment. Education which aims to provide for self-discovery must strive, in other words, to exemplify self-discovery in all its manifestations. To educate for self-discovery — whether in the context of "school" or the broader life of the community — one must educate in some sense from "within" it, that is, educate as a person. Inasmuch as self-discovery means finding out who one really is, such education seems indeed possible.

Specifically, what might education viewed from the perspective of "self-discovery" developed here involve? I would suggest orienting discussion initiated by this question to the following related questions or topics:

* The subject of self-discovery, the true self is the whole person. What are some of the fundamental areas in which the growth of the whole person can be fostered?

* What are basic characteristics of a person-oriented or personalized approach to education, particularly as reflected in teaching?

* Given Merton's assertion that all learning should dispose one for "self-discovery," how might we ensure that the nature of what is learned, and, moreover, that the quality of the learning experience itself, helps foster this disposition?

* the nature of "seeing" so as to apprehend things in their own reality, that is, as they are, respecting their unique identity; the nature of similar faculties of the whole person, such as listening, hearing, and speaking.

* the possible application of disciplines associated with the spiritual life, such as openness and attentiveness, to learning and personal growth, and to such activities as listening, speaking, and writing associated with traditional education.

* the distinction between knowledge which is experienced or apprehended and knowledge gained through reason and analysis.

* Merton's understanding of wisdom in terms of truth and love ("Logos"), and his belief that wisdom is manifest in persons and nature; what, in fact, might "sapiential" teaching entail?

* Creating an environment which gives credence to interior life and subjectivity, and which reflects characteristics of the true self. Merton suggests that such an environment "favors the secret and spontaneous development of the inner self" (*IE*, p. 6). Such an atmosphere also suggests the importance of distinguishing personal growth and formation from individual achievement.

* The prospect of fostering genuine dialogue, in accordance with self-discovery; that is, dialogue which respects the personhood of participants, and in which listening, responding and awakening responses are seen in terms of becoming attentive to the movement of love, of truth, of Christ in oneself, and in one's community. In this respect, the principles associated with the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi and Christianity can be very instructive.

* Basic characteristics of Merton's own teaching and understanding of teaching.

* Recognizing the implications of one's existential identification with others through community service and responsibility, in dialogue, and for personal vocation.

To be "educated," in Mertonian terms, ultimately means having developed an "active and creative awareness of love" (*ZBA*, p. 69). It is for this awareness that education conceived in the name of self-discovery should aim. This is Merton's central message: in order to become who we are, in order to live fully and wholly as human persons, we must recognize first of all the reality of our inner selves, our capacity for love, and our true existence in the unity of love. This entails growing in a wisdom accessible only through and realizable only as love. One who personifies the purpose of education as self-discovery has learned that to live and love are the same thing.