

Striving toward Authenticity: Merton's "True Self" and the Millennial Generation's Search for Identity¹

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Introduction

To find grounding in an increasingly fragmented world is a formidable task for any person. However, it remains a uniquely challenging endeavor for today's young people who have only known a postmodern, globalized and pluralistic world. While we can confidently claim that personal identity has become progressively more fluid since the dawn of the Enlightenment and the "turn toward the subject," today we might say that personal identity has reached a level of superfluidity to a degree unlike anything known before. This is in large part due to the advances in technology, travel and communication that have forever changed the way we view the world, interact with others and understand ourselves. As David Buckingham has recently written, "All these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty, in which the traditional resources for identity formation are no longer so straightforward or easily available."² Although the outlook first appears grim, I believe that Thomas Merton's work to elucidate an authentic spiritual foundation for understanding one's identity, articulated best as the discovery of one's "true self," provides a helpful compass for the members of the Millennial generation to reflect upon and uncover their true identities.

In this paper I will explore one of the challenges Millennials face in their journey to discover their identity, giving special attention to the way technology has complicated this generation's search for authentic self-understanding. Then I will present an overview of Merton's understanding of the "true self" and offer some reflections on how it might serve as a model for reorienting

1. This paper was first presented 11 June 2009 at the Eleventh General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY.

2. David Buckingham, "Introducing Identity," in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008) 1; subsequent references will be cited as "Buckingham" parenthetically in the text.

today's youth toward an authentic vision of their identity.³ Although Millennials face a myriad of challenges while navigating this postmodern world, laden with technological advances that often introduce disconnections within relationships and among persons, Merton's prophetic message continues to provide a living and relevant example that appeals to many today. He speaks a word that is inspirational and might better aid the Millennials' spiritual quest to better know God and themselves.

The Millennial Search for Identity

Today's young adults, those men and women born in or after 1982, face a particularly daunting undertaking as they search to discover their identity and find meaning in our contemporary setting. The sociologists and generational observers who study the Millennials continue to grapple with the most appropriate way to describe the cohort,⁴ leaving this generation's collective identity in a state of flux, subject to adaptation, modification and change. While there

3. I should note here that I am familiar with the work of Suzanne Mayer and Fred Herron on Merton's appeal to members of the Millennial Generation. This paper is not intended to replicate their earlier work, but to expand their theses and contribute an updated perspective to the conversation on Merton and the Millennials. See Suzanne Mayer, "Merton and the Millennials," *Spiritual Life* 50 (Winter 2004) 229-39; Fred Herron, "Merton and a Spirituality for Millennials," *Review for Religious* 63 (April 2004) 148-57; and the expanded version of Herron's article in his book *No Abiding Place: Thomas Merton and the Search for God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005) 53-60.

4. Some of the names given to them during the past decade include "Generation Y" because they follow Generation X (see Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation* [Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006]); "Generation Next," an unoriginal term from the title of a PBS documentary; "Generation We," the term given by Eric Greenberg from his book by the same name (see Eric Greenberg with Karl Weber, *Generation We: How Millennial Youth Are Taking Over America and Changing Our World Forever* [Emeryville: Pachatusan, 2008]); "Digital Natives" because of their second-nature technological aptitude (see John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* [New York: Basic Books, 2008]; subsequent references will be cited as "Palfrey and Gasser" parenthetically in the text); "Generation OMG," from Kate Zernike's *New York Times* article of the same name in which she also refers to the cohort as "The Recession Generation" (see Kate Zernike, "Generation OMG," *The New York Times* [8 March 2009]); "Generation S" because of their penchant for volunteer service (see The Editors, "Generation S," *America* 200 [2 March 2009] 5); and, of course, "The Millennials." The list of names could continue for several pages, each term highlighting a particular characteristic or feature exhibited by today's young adults.

are many approaches to uncover the struggles and challenges Millennials face in understanding their identities, perhaps the characteristic most unique to this group, and therefore a logical starting point for consideration, is the role technology plays in forming identity.⁵

John Palfrey and Urs Gasser in their book *Born Digital* explore the manifold ways technology has influenced, impeded and re-shaped adolescent identity formation in recent years. Palfrey and Gasser suggest that it is possible to demarcate generations into two groups: the "digital natives," a term that is roughly synonymous with Millennials, and "digital immigrants," a term that describes everybody else. The Millennial generation, unlike Generation X, the Baby Boomers or any other previous cohort, has grown up in a technologically hegemonic era. For example, most members of this generation have had access to computers, the Internet, cable television and cellular phones long before entering high school. Or, as one author says, "For many kids using the new technology is as natural as breathing."⁶ Furthermore, with electronic books, virtual worlds, GPS navigation systems, and so forth, there is hardly anything exempt from its duplicate electronic or virtual counterpart. To say that Millennials take technology for granted is

5. For decades Erik Erikson's stages of development have shaped the way we talk about identity formation. Rooted in an understanding of psychological conflict encountered and overcome at each level, Erikson's eight stages provide a system for understanding identity formation over the course of one's life. At the stage of adolescence, the stage at which many Millennials are found today, the conflict is between "identity" and "role confusion." The resolution of this conflict is found in the adolescent's ability to discover a settled role in life, at which point he or she can progress to the next stage of early adulthood. Erikson sees adolescence as a key developmental stage because of the long-term effects (both positive and negative) that will influence later stages of development, especially in the realm of self-understanding and the ability to accept adult responsibility. This framework for broadly understanding identity formation serves as the guide for this study, offering us the question: in what way has the omnipresence of technology in the lives of Millennials impacted this critical period of identity formation? See Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968) and Buckingham 2.

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

an understatement. Millennials live in and have, for the most part, only ever known a technologically advanced and digital world.

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

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

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

On the one hand, it could be argued that the internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been denied or stigmatized [S]uch arguments presume that media can be used as a means of expressing or even discovering aspects of one's "true self," for example, in relation to sexuality. Yet on the other hand, these media can also be seen to provide powerful opportunities for identity play, for parody and subversion [H]ere, the emphasis would lie not on honesty and truth, but on the potential for performance and even for deception. (Buckingham 8-9)

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

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

"Digital Self" as "False Self"

As often as Merton discusses the "true self," he returns to the theme of the "false self" frequently in his writings.⁷ It might be helpful here to recall Merton's famous remarks on the false self in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton wrote:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist,

7. For good discussions on the ubiquity of the "true self" in Merton's work, see Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real Self," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978) 298-308; and William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Quest for Self-Identity," *Cistercian Studies* 22 (1987) 172-89.

because God does not know anything about him. . . . My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.⁸

The false self with its illusionary nature is the identity that appears on the surface, that which we show to others and purport ourselves to be. William Shannon notes well that the false self “is a human construct that we bring into being by our own actions, especially our habits of selfishness and our constant flight from reality. It is an empty self.”⁹ This is the self that we protect at all costs and shelter with fabrications.¹⁰ It has been difficult enough through the ages to shed the masks worn and the false selves exhibited, but for those born decades after Merton's death, the challenge appears even greater.

In *The Inner Experience* Merton wrote that the false self, or the “exterior self,” was becoming more problematic in the contemporary world.¹¹ Even in the 1960s Merton recognized the stumbling blocks posed by new technologies (and this was long before the advent of personal computers, the Internet, iPhones and MySpace). Merton poetically articulated this point when he wrote that the “tragedy of modern man is that his creativity, his spirituality, and his contemplative independence are inexorably throttled by a superego that has sold itself without question or compromise to the devil of technology” (*IE* 129). He lives in “a world in which men are alienated, enslaved to processes and to machines” (*IE* 128). How much more applicable is that sentiment today?

I suggest that to the list of synonyms for the false self offered to us by Merton (i.e. exterior self, empirical self, outward self, shadow self, imaginary self, illusory self, and so on) we might add “the digital self.” It only seems fitting that a generation reared in a technologically hegemonic era might understand its collective false self as digital. The digital self is the identity (or identities)

8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 34; subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.

9. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) 89.

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

11. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003); subsequent references will be cited as “IE” parenthetically in the text.

formed on Facebook, communicated in the “tweets” of Twitter, and constructed as an avatar in virtual worlds like “Second Life.” The digital self is the constantly shifting, changing, fluid public image that is intended to represent the person the Millennial thinks he or she is. The digital self, however, is just another manifestation of the exterior and false self that remains alien to both the true self and God.

Merton’s “True Self” in a Digital World

If the digital self of the Millennial generation is the false self of Merton’s writing, then what is the true self? Simply put, the true self is who we are as seen in the eyes of God (see *IE* 11). Unlike the false self, which is manifested in many forms, the latest of which is what we have named the digital self, the true self remains constant. It is unchanging and is authentic because, as Merton so famously wrote, “The inner self is not a part of our being, like a motor in a car. It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life, and it is life” (*IE* 6). While the false self or digital self is an application, addition or accidental quality that we intentionally or unintentionally fabricate, the true self remains always real and present as the very core of our being. It is indestructible and enduring.¹² The problem is that the true self can be incredibly elusive.

Merton understood the true self to be “hidden in the love and mercy of God” (*NSC* 35). The discovery of our true identity necessarily requires our discovery of God. Since we are created in the image and likeness of God, Merton sees the true self as something of a mirror in which God not only sees God’s self, but also at the same time reveals God’s self through the mirror to the core of each one of us (see *IE* 11). It is at this point, at our core, at the heart of our very existence, that we can identify – if only vaguely – the nexus of God’s revelation and the location of our true self. Merton goes on to explain, “our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self” (*IE* 12). If we do not look for God, we cannot find ourselves. This is precisely why the true self is so elusive for so many. The true self appears hidden, almost secret, not because it does not exist, but because it exists where we do not look.

12. Paul Kline, “Merton’s ‘True Self’: A Resource for Survivors of Sexual Abuse by Priests,” *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (2007) 732; subsequent references will be cited as “Kline” parenthetically in the text.

In his reflections on the meditative and contemplative practice of prayer that leads to finding one's true self, Merton recalls that the Christian mystical tradition teaches that one cannot find one's innermost self – and therefore find God – as long as he or she remains preoccupied by the activities and desires of the outward and false self (see *IE* 15). The true self only *appears* elusive because we are too concerned with our false self (or selves) to turn toward God. We are held back from our own authentic self-discovery by our dependence on self-gratification, pleasure-seeking, love of comfort, proneness to “anger, self-assertion, pride, vanity, greed” and so on (*IE* 15). While Merton confirms the challenge of discovering one's true self, at times speaking metaphorically of it as a “shy wild animal” (*IE* 5), it still remains an ever-present reality capable of being “discovered” and “awakened” through contemplation.¹³

Merton is quick to caution the would-be contemplatives among us that there is no special or precise technique for discovering or awakening our true selves (see *IE* 6). Instead it is found in the living out of relationships with God and others.¹⁴ Herein lies the problem of the digital self. The digital self is a distraction of the highest degree. The need or drive to establish, maintain, adjust and purport the digital self is consuming in a way that diverts attention from authentic self-discovery in relationship with God and others, focusing instead on one's own wants, desires and insecurities.

Striving toward Authenticity

The authors of the 2001 study *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* explore the state of young adult spirituality and religiosity in the postmodern world. They conclude that today's young adult population is very much spiritual, saying that “there is no evidence that young adult Catholics today are a generation of irreligious scoffers.”¹⁵ There is statistical and empirical evidence

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

14. See Michael Sobocinski, “The Psychology of Hatred and the Role of Early Relationships in Discovering Our True Self,” *The Merton Annual* 19 (2006) 104-105; Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 153-54; and *IE* 7 and *passim*.

15. Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan Gonzales, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 152-53; see also Woodstock Theological Center, “Young Adult Catholics: Believing, Belonging, and Serving,” *Woodstock Conversations Occasional Paper* 3 (June 2007).

that suggests that Millennials are interested in both things spiritual and an authentic understanding of their identity. Authors such as Christian Smith, Robert Wuthnow, Mike Hayes and others posit that Millennials are more concerned with spirituality and authenticity in one's life than first thought.¹⁶ However, there are many obstacles, not the least of which is this generation's obsession with the digital self.¹⁷

Thomas Merton's writings on the true self provide a timely resource for today's young adults to draw on in their journey toward authenticity and true identity. Merton is always keen to acknowledge that, while technology itself is not explicitly sinful, technocratic religion and relationships will never lead to the inner self or God. Rather, it is at best a tangential path (and at worse a sinful one) that leads to the idol of God as supreme technocrat and to the proliferation of our false identities. Even GOOGLE's CEO Eric Schmidt, in his commencement address to the University of Pennsylvania's Class of 2009, urged the graduates to "step away from the virtual world and make human connections." He also told them to "find out what is most important to them – by living analog for a while."¹⁸

Merton does not provide a travel guidebook for the journey or an instruction manual *per se*, but instead holds high a road sign that clearly adjudicates pathways in a manner not unlike "WRONG WAY" or "DEAD END" street signs. What Merton does provide is a deeply personal travelogue of his own pilgrimage journey toward discovery of his true self in God. He leaves our respective journeys to each of us to chart, noting only that there might be some characteristics of the trip shared by all.

16. See Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mike Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007); and Daniel Horan and Melissa Cidade, "'Major' Changes toward Philosophy and Theology: Interpreting a Recent Trend for Millennials in Higher Education," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* (2011) forthcoming.

17. See William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000) 120: "In our day the media are often the source from which this [false] self derives its opinions and judgments."

18. Kathy Matheson, "Google CEO Urges Grads: 'Turn off your computer,'" *The Associated Press Wireservice* (18 May 2009).

I close with a few insights Merton passes on to today's young adults that might better aid their own search for identity. The landscape of authentic self-discovery is composed of peace and silence (*IE* 5; see also Kline 738). A context that stands in contrast to the noise that serves as the background and foundation for the digital self, Merton insists that contemplation is the location of encounter with God and the means to uncovering who we really are. Additionally, the true self is never a construct of our own making. Millennials can be so consumed by the apparent need to maintain, readjust and represent their false selves that they lose sight of the gift of their very being, which is permanent and real. The authenticity Millennials strive toward is only found when they step out of the world of the digital self and turn toward God to find the true self. So often Millennials fall prey to the perspective Merton speaks of in *New Seeds of Contemplation* where he wrote, "What we are not seems to be real, what we are seems to be unreal." But, as he goes on to say, "We can rise above this unreality, and recover our hidden identity. And that is why the way to reality is the way of humility which brings us to reject the illusory self and accept the 'empty' self that is 'nothing' in our own eyes and in the eyes of men, but is our true reality in the eyes of God: for this reality is 'in God' and 'with Him' and belongs entirely to Him" (*NSC* 281-82). In other words, Millennials in their search for the true self would be well served to recall the words of Francis of Assisi, someone Thomas Merton always revered and held as an example of sanctity, who wrote to his brothers, "What a person is before God, that he is and no more."¹⁹

19. Francis of Assisi, "Admonition XIX [A Humble Servant of God]" 2, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, eds. Regis Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman, and William Short (New York: New City Press, 1999) 135.

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