

OF MOSES' MOTHER AND PHAROAH'S DAUGHTER: A Model of Contemporary Contemplation

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The Talmud instructs: "If you expect to see the final results of your work, you have simply not asked a big enough question."

Well, if the major problem of a meaningless world is narrowness of vision then, our age certainly need not fear. In the lifetime of many people, Thomas Merton laid before the world a question the scope of which may well decide its future. All of his adult life, Thomas Merton struggled — and provoked us to struggle — with the question of contemplation. His biographers record that at various stages of his life — depending on his own circumstances — Merton either made fun of contemplation or lusted after it, or argued its meaning or poked at its veneer, or wrestled with its demands.

Merton read about contemplation and wrote about contemplation and talked about contemplation everywhere he could. He researched the ancients on it and moved to the woods to find more of it and then left the woods both to teach it and learn it. And, in the end, went to the East to plumb it only to discover there that he had already identified it and left it at home.

He said of contemplation: "It is the mark of the true mystic that, after their initiation into the mysteries of the unitive life, they are impelled, in some way, to serve humanity." And in the course of it all, in one of the most chaotic moments of history, Thomas Merton, contemplative, influenced more people than any other religious figure of his time.

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He questioned often whether or not his own contemplative order was really contemplative. He struggled to find a balance between contemplation and social activism and most of all, by the honesty of his grappling and the tenterhooks of his very singular, very double, very separated, very involved life, he called the rest of us to contemplation as well.

The question is: What is it to be called to contemplation? And why? And where is such a thing to be found? Well, Merton's call is not a new one. The call to contemplation is, in fact, the basis of every great wisdom of the world. Among the sayings of Hasidim it is written: "What matter that the eye be sound if the heart is blind." And the Sufi tell of the disciples who asked the master for a word of wisdom that would guide them through life's journey. And the master smiled knowingly and said, "Of course. Awareness." But the disciples were only more perplexed. "That's far too brief," they said, "couldn't you expand on that a bit?" And so the master, fixing his gaze on them, said, "Well, then: Awareness, awareness, awareness." "But what do these words mean?" the disciple said. And the master said, with no small amount of agitation: "Awareness, awareness, awareness means AWARENESS."

Contemplation, it seems, is the ability to see through, and to see into, and to see despite and to see without blinders. In America today, perhaps as never before, there is a great need for seeing hearts, for contemplative awareness of the kind of world we are creating today for tomorrow. In the United States, there is an awesome kind of blindness in vogue. In this culture the blind count happiness in things. The American philosophy of happiness, it seems, teaches that life must always be easy and life must always be comfortable and life must always be personally fulfilling and life, at least American life, must always be secure, and life must always look the way we think it should look.

In this world, consequently, it is success, not learning, that has become the goal of education. In America, it is the salary scale rather than the work itself that has become the measure of the job. And money rather than character has become the standard of success. And things rather than values have become the mark of personal achievement. And what we can't take with us rather than what we have left behind so that others can live has become our definition of the quality of life. And what we got for ourselves instead of what we helped to provide for everybody else has become the boast of our ability. And, as a result, pathological individualism and materialism cloud the vision and choke compassion.

And, out of that way of seeing, consequently, we have created the end of the world and we're storing it in the cornfields of Kansas and we call it "defense." Out of that way of seeing, we have the mentally ill sleeping on the heating grates of our cities and we call it "personal freedom." Out of that way of seeing, we have thousands dying from AIDS and we ignore them in the name of morality. Out of that way of seeing, we have women by the score living in poverty because our welfare programs are designed to punish people who need help rather than to help people whom life has already punished enough and we call it "motivation" or "woman's role." Out of that way of seeing, we have an entire generation of youngsters underfed, undereducated and underdeveloped because we care more about giving money to the contras than we do about providing services for our own children. We spend more on bombs than we do on babies; we allocate more for human destruction than we do for human development. And, oh, yes, our pride is that we are not a welfare state; but we can, apparently, be a warfare state and not even have the grace to blush. Indeed, there is blindness aplenty in us.

And what should we do about it? I suggest that we must begin to struggle, as Merton did, with the difference between complacency and contemplation. We must begin to struggle, as Merton did, with the difference between true and false contemplation. Because indeed there is a contemplation that is for its own sake. This kind of contemplation seeks comfort in prayer and consolation for the spirit and interventions by God to save us from things not created by God but by ourselves. That kind of contemplation is, at its best, some kind of transcendental complacency that is at least lulling, but probably infantile and certainly unconscionable. That kind of contemplation makes a blessing out of blindness and anoints the unaware who, in the name of Christianity, practice civil religion instead, and who, in the name of citizenship, sell their souls to the separation of conscience from civil life. That kind of contemplation cares more for ritual than for righteousness and maintains law rather than justice.

But there is another kind of contemplation that came to the prophets but was expected of watchers on the city walls as well. Ezekiel writes:

If someone hears the sound of the horn, but pays no attention, the sword will overtake them and destroy them and they will have been responsible for their own death. If, however, the sentry had seen the sword coming but had not blown the horn and so the people are not alerted and the sword overtakes them and destroys them, the latter shall indeed die. But I will hold the sentry responsible for that death. And I have appointed you as sentry (*Ezekiel, 33: 1-7*)

I have appointed you to contemplate the situation, I have appointed you to search for the truth behind the truth, the whole truth. I have appointed you to see the whole truth, to grasp all of what is there. I have appointed you to be aware. That kind of contemplation is not for its own sake. On the contrary, as the Sufi say, "The candle is not there to illuminate itself."

But where shall we go for a model of that kind of contemplative consciousness; we who often feel more weak than we ever do strong; we who usually feel more alone than part of a rising human consciousness; we who commonly rank ourselves more with the powerless than with the powerful.

I suggest that what the world needs anew is to reflect on the model of contemplation that illuminates the life of two simple women who lived in a world environment not very unlike our own. I suggest as a model of contemporary contemplation the biblical figures of Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter were two unlikely contemplatives if ever the world were in search. The scripture reads:

Now a certain man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman who conceived and bore a son. Seeing that he was a goodly child, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took a papyrus basket, daubed it with bitumen and pitch and putting the child in it, placed it among the reeds on the river bank. His sister stationed herself at a distance to find out what would happen to him. Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her maids walked along the river bank. Noticing the basket among the reeds, she sent her handmaid to fetch it. On opening it, she looked, and lo, there was a baby boy, crying! She was moved with pity for him and said, "It is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" "Yes, do so," she answered. So the maiden went and called the child's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will repay you." The woman therefore took the child and nursed it. When the child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son and called him Moses. (*Exodus 2: 1-10*)

The implications are clear. Moses' mother was a member of the outcast people. Pharaoh's daughter was pure establishment. But both of them had plenty to lose from seeing. Moses' mother, who had nothing, risked the loss of even more — not simply her child's life, but her own life, and the life of her family, and the life of her entire people. They were low class now; to confront the law could only make them even lower. And Pharaoh's daughter? Well, Pharaoh's daughter risked the loss of everything, too! Pharaoh's daughter risked the loss of status and approval by "the right

people” and acceptance by her family and the judgment of orthodoxy. And her future: what would the Pharaoh do when he discovered her defiance? What would the people think about her consorting with the enemy? What would the neighbors say about her raising a minority child? How would the government respond to her harboring a refugee?

Here in a situation where the law is very clear that these kinds of people, these foreigners, these defenseless ones are to be controlled because it is good for the government, and it is good for the economy, it is good for all the security and power and affluence we value — that’s why! And because it was even good for the Jews themselves, surely, whose role in life — God-given we must obviously presume — was to be a slave. Here in a situation like this two women defy the political nothingness that being female implied — then, as now, now as then.

Because they saw life differently than did the people around them, two women — one inside an oppressive system and one outside that oppressive system — simply joined hands across national boundaries to subvert a sinful system. Two women are aware of the sinfulness of the system and simply refuse to accept it; two women contemplate a greater good and simply must respond to it; two simple, contemplative women save the Jewish people — not simply Moses.

So why did they do it? And what does their doing it have to do with us? The answer, I believe, lies in the nature of contemplation and the nature of the times. The answer lies, I think, in what Merton means when he says: “Contemplation is sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the real within all that is real.” When Moses’ mother and Pharaoh’s daughter saw the circumstances, suddenly they saw a law above the law, a life above life, an end without end, a sight beyond what was seen. Together two contemplative women cut through the male system of nationalism and patriarchy and extermination. The Jewess entrusted her baby to the enemy. The Egyptian saw value in the Jew. The kingdom of God became the native country of both. And power came to the powerless to confront the powerful whatever the cost.

It was a moment that spoke of the presence of God in life. It was a very contemplative moment. “Contemplation,” wrote Merton, “is the response to a call, a call from the God who has no voice, and who speaks in everything that is, and who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being words meant to answer to God, to echo God, and even in some way, to contain God and signify God.” Contemplation, in other words, is the ability to see as God sees. Contemplation is the awareness of the divine in

the natural. Contemplation is the call to co-creation. And contemplation, therefore, — if the model of Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter — has any meaning at all, must obviously have four dimensions. For contemplation to be real, it must have consciousness, conviction, courage, and constancy.

To see the cosmic sin of the obliteration of the Jewish race in the death of its first-born males was an instance of contemplative consciousness. But contemplation means that consciousness compels. To take the child from the bullrushes and commit oneself not only to save the child but to save the tradition rather than to need to convert or control it — “Yes, go; get one of his own to nurse him,” — Pharaoh's daughter decides — is an act of contemplative conviction. Contemplation means that consciousness commits. To judge the system and then to fly in the face of the system, as Moses' mother did when she challenged the conscience of one of its own, and as Pharaoh's daughter did when she used her position in behalf of the innocent, is an act of contemplative courage. Contemplation requires that consciousness cry out in witness. To commit themselves to the long-term cost of seeing the vision through — despite the pain and the losses and the dull, dull demands of dailiness — is an act of contemplative constancy. True contemplation, you see, demands that conscience contend to the end.

Contemplation is the ability to see a whole world instead of a partial one. Contemplation is the awareness of the holy in everything. Contemplation is conscience co-creating. The problem is that the people are in peril again and contemplation, it seems, is today at a premium.

Three issues of our time call in a special way for contemplative consciousness:

Nuclearism — the notion that massive evil can be permitted in the name of resistance to evil;

Globalism — the notion that those who starve in Africa while our barns are full of wheat have claim on our conscience; and

Feminism — the notion that women are just as graced and as gracing as men.

The simple truth is that in a world that is linked by a single camera, under the threat of destruction from a single trigger, drawing from a single resource pool, and ruled only by the male model, no one can with integrity ignore the call to contemplate the effects of all this on creation and our own commitment to it.

We ignore at our peril the biblical frieze of Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter who saw their situation, contemplated its implications in the light of eternal truth, confronted the powerful in their sin, cooperated across differences, refused to demonize one another, mentored the next generation in their midst, preserved the enemy and saved the nation.

As sure as the baby in the bullrushes, the signs of the fragility of our own world and the chaos in our own system are everywhere. Women are the poorest of the poor, in this country as well as everywhere in the world, because their work is undervalued, their talents are overlooked, their life development is circumscribed and, right to the end, even when they have done exactly what the system wanted them to do — stay home, raise a family, be a good wife and mother — the system conspires to cheat them out of social security monies by giving the widow less than the widower of money that was supposed to have been jointly theirs. Who can contemplate such a contradiction, who can see with the compassionate eye of God, and do nothing?

Or, imagine in your mind's eye three tin pails: now in the first tin pail, drop 2 BB's. Those BB's represent the total amount of firepower — including the two atomic bombs — that was used in all of World War II. Now, go to the second tin pail and, one at a time, slowly, drop into that bucket 32 BB's. Those 32 BB's represent the amount of firepower it would take to unleash nuclear winter on this planet and destroy all life on earth. Finally, in your mind's eye, stand in front of your third tin pail. Into that pail, slowly, one at a time, drop 2, 32, 100, 1,000, 1,500, 2,000, 2,500, 3,000, 3,500, 4,000, 4,500, 5,000, 5,500, 5,600, 5,700, 5,800, 5,900, 6,000 BB's. Those 6,000 BB's represent the total amount of nuclear firepower now existing in American and Soviet arsenals.

And while the poor the world over struggle to eat, and the illiterate struggle to get educated, and families struggle to raise children, and the homeless struggle for their dignity if not their dreams, the superpowers build and buy five more nuclear bombs each, every single day.

With the factory system what it is, why? With agriculture what it is, why? With the national debt what it is, why?

"Hatred," the philosopher wrote, "is simply a slower form of suicide."

Isn't it time to contemplate what it is that makes our enemies enemies?

And who decided it?

And over what?

One day they told us that the Japanese were fundamentally dishonest and that Germans were essentially cruel. The next day, the Germans and the Japanese became our most important allies and our most ardent supporters. What happened to the "fundamentals?" Whatever became of the list of "essential elements?" Isn't the "enemy" really only whoever someone else tells us that they are?

Young men die in old men's wars, they say. And that's true. But only after enough brainwashing and enough fear and enough demonizing of the enemy has been done to send German boys against Russian boys unthinkingly; or American boys against Vietnamese boys uncaringly; or Palestinian boys against Israeli boys willingly — with great ideals in mind and the drumbeats of glory in their ears.

The problem is that in a world where every decent thing that humankind has ever done is now in peril — both our future and our past — both Shakespeare and the space shuttle — we may no longer have the luxury of allowing our government to choose our enemies for us. Hate is indeed simply a slower form of suicide and in our society we are already beginning to feel its atrophying effects.

SDI is already the largest item in the Pentagon budget while funds for education, and food stamps, and subsidized housing, and day care — all women's issues and children's issues — get smaller every day.

Who can truly contemplate such a situation, who can see what creation was meant to be but is not, who can see with the compassionate eye of God and say nothing?

A polluted planet, the growing numbers of poor in the Garden of Paradise, the lust for a kind of "progress" that diminishes the prospects of the next generation all cry for contemplative consciousness.

According to World Watch Institute's "State of the World, 1987," in the tropics, ten trees are being cut for every one tree planted. As a result, forests are shrinking at a fairly predictable rate. Large-scale depletion of the ozone shield and the development of chlorofluorocarbons, population concentration and the overtaxing of local water sources, fuel supplies and disposal capacities all bring into relief the fact that the very notion of "progress" is ripe for redefinition.

Who can contemplate poverty in affluence; power for profit; women, as a class, in oblivion throughout the world; or prejudices enthroned as morality? Who can contemplate all this with the compassionate eye of God and do nothing, say nothing, change nothing, stand for nothing?

But contemplation is not without cost. To see what should be instead of what is; to see what could be instead of what will be if things go on as they are; to see what is possible instead of what is probable; to be conscious and compassionate and courageous and constant about it, costs.

"The duty of the contemplative life," Merton wrote, "is to provide an area in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices beyond routine choice become manifest." "Contemplative time," he went on, "is compassionate time; contemplative time is time open to others."

But to do the civil disobedience, the "citizen diplomacy," the act of conscience of Moses' mother and Pharoah's daughter, to cry out like the sentry in the night, takes its toll. But once we begin to see, what other choice is there? Once we become seeing souls, how can we not? An Arab proverb reminds us: "I will set my face to the wind and scatter my handful of seeds. It is no big thing to scatter seeds, but I must have the courage to keep facing the wind."

Yet in the midst of all the effort that consciousness, conviction, courage and constancy take to become compassion, the monastic literature of the ancients shows us clearly what it takes to rise to heights of contemplative awareness.

The story is told that a young person came to the monastery disillusioned with life but wanting to find a short cut to enlightenment for fear that a hard, slow process of study and meditation would only lead to failure. And so the Elder said: "Ah, yes, there is a shorter way to enlightenment. I will put you to playing chess with one of our old sisters. Whichever one of you loses, I will cut off your head. If the old sister loses she will wake up in Paradise. If you lose, since you have done nothing so far with your life, you will simply deserve it."

When the game began the youth played for her life. The chessboard became her entire world; she was totally concentrated on it. And though the early stages of the game were a near equal struggle, the youth finally took the advantage and the old sister's position began to crumble. And then the young person saw the worn face of her opponent and its intelligence and its sincerity and a wave of compassion came over her. And deliberately she began to make one blunder after another in her opponent's behalf until finally her own position was completely defenseless. And then the master leaned forward and upset the board. "There is no winner and no loser," the Elder said. "There is no head to fall here."

"Life requires of us only two things," the master said to the youth, "concentration on what is important and compassion for the other, and

you have just learned both. Pursue that spirit and your enlightenment is sure.”

That’s the kind of contemplation that put Moses in the river and that’s the kind of contemplation that took him out. And that’s the kind of contemplation for which Merton called. And that’s the only kind of contemplation with its consciousness, and conviction, and courage and constancy that will preserve this planet and its peoples in our own time.

That’s the awareness, that’s the insight, that’s the call to alarm, that’s the kind of contemplation that must grow in our lives. And it is, I believe, that kind of contemplative consciousness to which Moses’ mother and Pharaoh’s daughter in this time call us all.

Why?

Because there truth is alive; there all creation is one; and there God’s face shines — as it should — in us.