

HARPO'S PROGRESS

Notes Toward an Understanding Of Merton's Ways

by **Robert Lax**

There was a hermit who lived in the woods. He spent his days and nights in prayer, and in peaceful works that gave praise to the Lord. Though his spirit rested always in the heart of his Creator, his hands and feet were seldom idle, and neither was his mind. It might be said that the things he made were useless (he didn't weave baskets, he didn't make shoes), or if useful, only to the spirit: only to the soul in its journey toward God.

What were his works? Tracts, translations, poems, fables, drawings, photographs, dancing and drumming. So many works and all of the spirit? So many works, and all from a single source, toward a single end.

His tracts were concerned with mystical theology, both the problems and the glories of the contemplative life: but the language in them was always as simple as possible, and his examples and illustrations clear. No problem ever seemed too complex for him to tackle, and he never dropped one until he had found a solution: an insight, at least, that he was capable of explaining.

* **HARPO** is a pseudonym which Merton used in writing his "anti-letters" to Robert Lax.

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His translations: some were from Latin, from the writings and sermons of the early Church fathers; but just as many were from French, Spanish and even Chinese: poems and fables he'd found and admired and wanted to put into English so others could read them.

His own poems and fables, dramas and songs were works of the spirit, praise of the Lord, particularly of His mercy: sometimes directly, sometimes by inference; sometimes simply by the fact of their being. Ever creative, seldom didactic, they were always superabundantly alive.

The drawings, the photos? Filled with that same joy (the joy of David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant): a cause for rejoicing.

The dancing, the drumming? New dancing, new drumming: new song for the Lord. And (once when he travelled) the hermit and his friends, all dancing, all drumming, all rejoicing in His love.

Did he write letters, too? He wrote them and wrote them. Some light, some heavy. Some addressed to problems in the world, others purely to matters of the spirit: some only to include a song, some only for laughter. Yet all from a single impulse of the heart.

Where find the time for so much writing? He rose early and had no other work but to praise the Lord.

A new kind of life, and a classic one, too. In all the ages of Christianity there have been at least a few joyous hermits who have filled the world about them with divinely inspired joy. And this hermit, without at all forcing his way, is of their number. A dolphin-like personality with a lively approach to all matters divine is not new in the Christian tradition, yet each time one appears it's as though a new star were in the sky.

How did his work relate to his prayer? The work took its rise from prayer and returned to prayer. The work itself was prayer and was informed by prayer. There was no conflict between work and prayer: if conflict arose it was resolved by prayer. It was resolved (turned from conflict to creation) in the poet's -- the hermit's -- full dedication to contemplative prayer: to union with God.

Drumming: surely it's possible to pray without drumming; but not (for this hermit) to drum without praying.

Dancing, the same.

Singing, the same.

Preaching, photographing, drawing: the same.

And so with the employment of all his gifts and talents. He might, and often did, pray without visible movement. But none of his outward actions were ever unaccompanied by prayer. Nor was the final purpose of any one of them less than the ultimate goal of his whole life of prayer.

It was the force, the strength, the weakness, too, of this whole life of prayer that gave life to the works, and gives life still, even though the hermit appears, at least for the moment, to have left the woods.

being given over entirely to the love of the Lord
he did what he did with joy and energy
he did not doubt, since there was only one goal in
mind: to serve the Lord

and who is the Lord and how should he serve Him?
he learned more and more each day

he learned to express himself more and more clearly
on the nature of this love, on the meaning of the life
he had entered upon, as a river runs into the sea

(when a river runs into the sea it stops being a
river: its molecules are invaded by the molecules of
the sea, and while it loses nothing, it gains new
being in the sea)

the closer he came to knowing God, the closer he
came
to knowing himself, his true self

the closer he came to knowing God and himself, the
more clearly he saw how they were related: how like
they were, and how unlike

his work was work
his play was play

did he play
seriously?

his play was work
his work was play

he played
seriously

his work and play
were prayer

lightly and
seriously
at once?

his prayer was
work and play

lightly
and seriously
at once

did he play
lightly?

he played
lightly

HARPO

FINDS

THE LORD

he looked for him
and found him

found him
living
within his
own heart

he hadn't gone
to see him
to steal
fire

he had gone
to see him
because he
knew he
should

if he is the
ruler

it is the
ruler
i must
find

all the skeins
that had been
twisted

now came straight
for him

all the knots
that had been tied
now came
undone

he knew he had
found

the one he
sought

and now
could speak
quite
freely

could point out
a path

that others
might take

to find
the one

he had
found

the road moved
in only
one direction

(once one
had found it)

the paths
through the
woods

which led
to the road

were
wandering

one needed
a guide

for every
step
of the
way

whom would he have gotten along with
in history?

with rabelais?
surely

with donne?
yes

with blake?
yes, yes

with augustine?
surely

chaucer, shakespeare?
yes

louis armstrong?
yes

how would he have felt
about the abbey of
theleme?

he might not at all
have disliked it

not by wanting
but by doing

not by doing
but by being

not by being
but by growing

he grew to be
the person

he knew
he was

he chose
& kept
choosing

chose &
stood firm
by his
choices

took on
the jobs
he was meant
to do

took on,
and carried
them through

sees
& can say
what he
sees

the closer
he comes

to the
center
of the
circle

the better
he sees
the whole

with speed &
direction

certainty
& joy

he bowls
down the
hall

like a
ball
of light

or, sitting
at ease

his back
erect

he plays
the bongos
between his
knees

Robert Lax

hands hover,
fall & fly

his fingers
fly

on the
white
paper

his thumbs
beat out
the rhythm

what do his
drawing brushes
do?

fly, too

flight &
control

they leave
a character

that of the
moment

What of his dancing? His dancing was a dance of grace and wit: a ritual that consumed itself in performance. Not just anyone's dancing, but his own: own limbs and sinews responding to the music of his spirit: a celebration and a cause for joy.

And so, in all he did, he praised the Lord; in all he did, rejoiced in the gift of living.

A four-year-old child is seated at a desk, his feet planted squarely before him. He is writing or drawing; absorbed in his work. His sitting posture is erect; his expression serious. He is engaged in a work he enjoys. Events will interrupt this moment, but it will be resumed years later, when seeds of this early planting flower.

he rejoices
in the Lord

rejoices in
the liberty
of the children
of light

rejoices in
it and turns
it to song

rejoices,
and turns it
to light

he draws
his song

from the
wells
of contemplation

and the song
leads back
to the
source

his world

is just like
the one
we know

but it has
more dimensions

his world
contains
discoveries
and wonders

news, good
news, that
rings
with joy

a child
of light
rejoicing
in light

he lives,
not he,
but Christ
lives in him;

in praising
him,

we praise
the Lord