

THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND

by **Arthur Middleton**

The title, "The World in a Grain of Sand," is not the author's creation. It comes from George Woodcock's study, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*.¹ Since first reading this phrase it has fascinated, or to put it more strongly, haunted me because it encapsulates the essence of Thomas Merton's spirituality. It is used in this essay as the context in which to explore that spirituality.

The "grain of sand" is a figurative way of describing the "desert," and into the "desert" we must go to find this man and monk. In Christian history the desert has always had an important significance. The desert experience of the Israelites was an essential part of their spiritual pilgrimage and the place where Moses encountered God. John the Baptist lived in the desert and Jesus went into the desert to discover amidst temptation his own identity and destiny. It was the birthplace of Christian monasticism in the fourth century, the place of solitude and prayer for the Desert Fathers of Egypt. For the Christian mystical tradition it took on a symbolic significance with cosmic and mystical associations. Not only physically but also in the spiritual sense too, it is the place of marginal life, of hunger and thirst, of

1. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (London: Canongate, 1978), p. 121. Woodcock titles his sixth chapter, "The World in a Grain of Sand."

* This paper was delivered in Newcastle Cathedral, Newcastle on Tyne, England, on 27 April 1988 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death.

heat and cold. Amidst the rigors of nature a person comes face to face with his or her own weaknesses. Therefore it is the place of testing and temptation where the shadow of death is constantly present, but it can also be the place of saintly triumph and victory, of angelic encounter.

This historic and symbolic significance of the "desert" had a tremendous fascination for Merton. As a poet it became a powerful image in his poems, the best of these desert poems being "Elias — Variations on a Theme." This is a meditation on the nature of spiritual freedom and the "variations" are variations of the desert experience. Here he gives expression to a vision of spirituality which combines spiritual maturity, liberty, solitude, the deepening of human experience, and protest against the infringement of human dignity. Merton regarded this poem as a turning point in his life, after which he hoped to find some "real solitude." Solitude, the climate of true prayer is born of the desert experience.

It comes as no surprise to find the Desert Fathers of fourth century Egypt appealing to this twentieth century Cistercian. He gathered together his favorite anecdotes and sayings from them for the publication of *The Wisdom of the Desert*. The use of the word "wisdom" in this context provides the clue to his abiding passion for the desert experience. A lecture, "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner," expounds his understanding of wisdom.² Faulkner, a religious writer, had attracted the attention of the non-Christian existentialist writer Albert Camus. Merton's fascination is with the kind of universal impact that Faulkner had made, who though he works in words produces an effect not explicable by the investigation of words alone. He has a power of "enactment," which if one is open to it, brings one into a living participation with an experience of basic and universal human values, on a level which words can point to but cannot fully attain. Faulkner, Merton tells us, is typical of the creative genius who can associate his reader in the same experience which brought forth his book.

Such a book is filled with efficacious sign-situations, symbols and myths which release in the reader the imaginative power to experience, not a system of truths to explain life, but a certain depth of awareness in which life itself is lived more intensely and with a more meaningful direction. (*LE*, p. 98).

What is being communicated here is the power of imaginative communion, and Merton claims that the only word adequate enough to convey

2. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 92. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LE*.

what Faulkner communicates is the word *wisdom*, in its classic as well as its biblical meaning. It is the highest level of cognition, of knowing and goes beyond *scientia*, which is systematic knowledge; beyond *intellectus*, which is intuitive understanding. Wisdom has deeper penetration and wider range than any of these and embraces the entire scope of human life and all its meaning. It grasps the ultimate truths to which science and intuition only point. In ancient terms it seeks the "ultimate causes," not simply "efficient causes" which make things happen, but ultimate reasons why they happen and the ultimate values which their happening reveals to us.

While wisdom has a speculative dimension, essentially it is practical, meaning that it is "lived," not merely thought about, and unless one "lives it," one cannot have it. Hence it is creative, and being expressed in living signs and symbols, it proceeds not merely from knowledge alone but from an actual possession and awareness of these values as incorporated into one's own existence. Furthermore, it cannot be inborn and though the seeds of it are there it must be cultivated. Therefore, wisdom develops, not by itself, but in a hard discipline of traditional training under the expert guidance of one who himself possesses it and who is qualified to teach it. Wisdom can never be learned from a book but acquired only in a living formation.

Merton is at pains to express that the wisdom approach to humankind is a search for identity. It is not concerned to point to hidden sources of information that will enable humankind to understand or control things. Rather is it directed at humankind's own self-understanding, seeking to help humankind liberate within at the personal level life forces which are inhibited by dead social routine, by the ordinary preoccupations of the mind with trivial objects, or by the conflict of needs and interests on a limited level. This is not a flight from reality, of having to live in a world of things and institutions where the management of everyday life is essential. Within such reality there is also a need for an overall perspective that will liberate from enslavement to the immediate, without abstracting humankind from the "real world." The awareness which wisdom brings deepens our communion with the concrete.

In the early hermit fathers of the Egyptian desert Merton found such wisdom. It was not expressed in any kind of systematic thought structure, but in sayings, nuggets of gold refined in the fire of their desert experience. These men had left a decaying materialistic society with many similarities to our own to find a way of living without slavish dependence on accepted

conventional values. As Merton points out in his "Preface," these men had ceased to be concerned about the opinions of others. "They had no set doctrine about freedom, but they had in fact become free by paying the price of freedom."³ They distilled for themselves a very practical and unassuming wisdom that is not only primitive but timeless. There is a desperate need in our own time for this kind of simplicity, a need to recapture something of the experience reflected in these sayings. It is not merely the sayings themselves that are of value but the experience which they enshrine which enforces the point that they were lived. They flow from an experience of life at its deepest levels and represent a discovery of humanity, at the term of an interior and spiritual journey, which, as Merton emphasized, is far more crucial and infinitely more important than any journey to the moon. Here is wisdom experienced and lived, the emphasis being on experience.

Though Merton's desert was different from those whom he revered in fourth century Egypt, he identifies the climate of monastic prayer as the desert. Only that kind of experience can give birth to the wisdom today's world needs. He expounded the essence of that desert experience in a book that was published under two titles. The first, a Cistercian publication, was entitled *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*; the second *Contemplative Prayer* with the intention of recommending the book to people not in the monastic life. In his "Introduction," he stated that it should be of interest to all Christians who are bound in some sense to be people of prayer. Naomi Burton Stone, one of his friends in publishing who read it, thought the general reader would get a great deal from it.

The "grain of sand" is the place of solitude the person of prayer enters in order to encounter God in his or her own direct, firsthand and living experience. The door into that experience is the heart, where in quietude one prays, one rests, and repeats with deep and simple concentration the words of Holy Scripture. The Word of God becomes the manna on which to feed, the bread in the wilderness, every word that comes from the mouth of God. More especially that staple diet is found in the prayer book of ancient Israel, the psalter, in which is distilled and revealed the secret movements of the heart in its struggle with the forces of darkness. It is a way of entering into the experience the words are seeking to articulate. John

3. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 10-11.

Cassian who had tasted this wisdom at first hand, recommends the reducing of prayer to a single phrase.

The practice of keeping the name of Jesus ever present in the ground of one's being was, for the ancient monks, the secret of "control of thoughts," and of victory over temptation. It was the essence of monastic meditation, a special form of the practice of the presence of God which St. Benedict in turn made the cornerstone of monastic life and meditation. But only the "pure in heart" can see God and in the desert this became a reality which was lived and experienced. Hence spiritual life becomes, not something theoretical and abstract, but practical, a dynamic and concrete way of life in God. It is not mere apprehension of divinity but personal participation in the divine life that Christ lives with the Father in the Holy Spirit, a partaking of the divine nature. This experience, the essence of prayer, gives birth to a lived and thereby practical wisdom directed at humankind's self-understanding and is born in the long process of spiritual transformation in the discovery of the reality of the human person.

Another level of solitude emerges in the climate of this desert experience, what is described as the existential level. Here the monk finds himself confronted with the waste of his inner self, where he must seek "the ground of his own being, searching his own heart and plunging into the heart of the world, of which he is a part, that he may listen more attentively to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from the depths of what is most truly real."⁴ Here he experiences an ever-deepening living grasp of his call to life in Christ, but it requires living without the normal props and signposts of structured life. He moves into the unknown where he discovers a freedom that is rooted, not in social approval but in a profound sense of dependence upon God in pure faith. The securing of this freedom can only come through the patient endurance of questioning doubt and the sense of dread which forces him to confront his false self, with its illusions, masks, and role-playing. The false self Merton tells us seeks to live for itself and enjoy the "consolations of prayer" for its own sake. It is therefore "pure illusion," and only when it is unmasked in the solitude of prayer is one delivered from the bondage of inauthentic existence. Only then can one hope to recover a sense of one's true self which is firmly rooted in one's own inner truth. In this experience the monk moves beyond the despair that would suggest itself as the answer to life's ambigui-

4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), p. 25.

ties, beyond falsity and illusion, to discover in the ground of his being the light of God. In this light he slowly perceives the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit who makes all things new and creates a new humanity in Christ.

The two levels of the monk's desert experience, the solitude of his desert place and the solitude of his own inner space disclose to him that he is a stranger in the world. By itself it can offer him no ultimate meaning for the life he lives in it. Such ultimate meaning will only be disclosed to him when he has transcended his own humanity and that of the world by a freedom that turns despair into hope and a life of illusion into a life of authentic existence. The climate of such desert spirituality is one of awareness, gratitude, and a totally obedient love which seeks nothing but to please God.

In his exploration and exposition of the desert experience, Merton finds himself influenced by modern Christian and non-Christian existentialist writers as well as the Egyptian desert monks. Such modern writers are concerned with the experience of human existence. They had plumbed the depths in their exploration of the dark side of the human psyche, in relation to death from which there was no escape and the apparent absurdity of life that prompted a sense of dread and nausea. He uses their terms, Kierkegaard's *dread* and Sartre's *nausea*, when talking about the way prayer exposes the person who prays to his or her own truth. He uses it to identify areas of human and Christian experience which he then elucidates. At the deeper level, he stressed in common with them the importance of human existence, the personal experience of life itself as the route into a direct contact with such truth. Personal experience of such truth is the key with which to unlock its meaning. Personal and living participation in the truth rather than a mere detached thinking about it means that one can speak from the inside. It follows therefore that a person's knowledge of living truth must begin in his or her own personal being, in a person's search for self-knowledge. This was the path that Merton himself had taken, the desert experience, the "grain of sand" in which nuggets of wisdom are refined.

From within the "grain of sand," his solitude, Merton came to a clearer vision of the world, humankind, and nature in all their problematic actuality. He saw the very nature of monastic life as one of protest and non-acquiescence and the reason why he was a monk though he came to realize that the silent protest of monasticism was not enough. He began speaking out on the social and political issues of the day and became what

René Bucks and Henri Nouwen have described as the “contemplative critic,” something quite different from the ideological critic.⁵ His desert experience was a pilgrimage into a painful discovery of his own identity and after finding his own solitude, he was led to the vantage point from which to occupy himself critically with the world. Here he discovered that real solitude and silence is a quality of the heart, and such solitude becomes false when its social dimension is not recognized. Hence the most important discovery for Merton was the discovery of his fellow human beings at the depth of his own solitude. This was not merely pure notion but an experience of a new solidarity in the depths of his silence. There, where he was most alone, he found the basis of community.

The beginnings of this discovery begin to emerge in *The Sign of Jonas* where, after ten years of solitude he reflects that it can never lead to God alone, but only to God who is together with all humankind. Hence being a monk is primarily a social calling.

The Sign of Jonas is the development of compassion in solitude. In silence Merton discovered humanity once again. The new name for desert in which he saw many of his self-constructed ambitions destroyed was: compassion. He learned to feel and respect silence in the life of another. He learned there to love his brothers, not for what they say but for what they are. He saw now, with amazement, the quietude and solitude that lived in them. Now he wanted only to be a man among people, a member of humanity.

(Nouwen, p. 47)

The Sign of Jonas is the diary of a man still on the way to discovering his own solitude. A second diary, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, is of a man who, having found his own solitude, can engage critically with his world. This discovery of his fellow human beings did not limit him to Christians, but led him to explore with anyone the nature of human existence. In this sense he was not a systematic thinker but an eclectic thinker, picking what was congenial to his purpose and weaving it into the pattern of his thought. So he found himself at one with T. S. Eliot, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, though not in sympathy with the solutions of the latter two. *Alienation*, that loss of contact with the reality of life and with one's own self is at the root of all humankind's problems. It stems from the loss of an experience with God, and Merton agreed with Gandhi that society itself will become sane

5. René Bucks, “The Contemplative Critic.” In *Thomas Merton / Monk: A Monastic Tribute*; ed. Patrick Hart; enlarged ed. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 229. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic*; reprint ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Nouwen*.

only when humankind has returned to its "right mind" and the consequences of this for a philosophy of nonviolence. The search for an experience of God, where awakened humankind recovers both the world as a significant reality and its own identity, is central to Merton. There was no method whereby this could be manipulated. It could only come through a radical transformation, a conversion of humankind's thinking and behavior. The New Testament uses the word repentance (*metanoieite*) which does not mean merely acknowledgement of and contrition for sins, but precisely a "change of mind" — a profound change of humankind's mental and emotional attitudes, an integral renewal of humankind's self which begins in self-renunciation and is accomplished and sealed by the Spirit.

Merton was realistic rather than pessimistic and shared the optimism of Pope John XXIII that the crisis of our time was an opportunity we had not yet discovered how to grasp. It was a crisis of unavoidable changes,

a huge, spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party or race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.⁶

To grow into a new society we shall have to pay what he described as the dolorous price of change. Nothing else will suffice. Nevertheless, while admiring certain radicals and being versed in the "Death of God" theology, he was concerned to avoid the excess of extremes which he discerned as relying more on secular and positivist solutions than Christian truth, types of self-defeating activist frenzy. He liked to think of himself as a progressive with a deep respect and love for tradition — in other words, a progressive who wants to preserve a very clear and marked continuity with the past and not make silly idealistic compromises with the present yet to be completely open to the modern world (CGB, p. 305). His experience in that "grain of sand" taught Merton that to be a Christian, a monk, it was impossible automatically to "reject the world," or hold the world in contempt. His role would not be an activist involvement in the strife-torn America of the 1960s, when murder, hatred, anarchy, chaos, desperation and despair produced a nation of anxiety and pushed its conscience into turmoil. He discovered his role to be the unmasking of illusion, a role belonging to the essence of the contemplative life. Having had to confront his own illusions, he was now

6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 63. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

ready to show himself and his fellow human beings that which they would rather keep hidden. He saw it as a sacred duty to search the intelligible actions of humans for some indications of their inner significance and some relevance to their commitment as Christians.⁷ These actions would include the presidential assassination, racial discrimination, violence and anarchy, Vietnam, and technology's pollution of the environment.

His concern with the problems was to search in his silence for the inner meaning and message that they held for the Christian. His commitment to nonviolence did not exclude the belief that more than ever today commitment to the Gospel had political implications. A person cannot claim to be "for Christ" and espouse a political cause that implies callous indifference to the needs of millions of human beings and even cooperates in their destruction (Nouwen, p. 57). He was able to speak this kind of language because he had been able to test his experience in solitude with that which he saw and read about his times.

Two people were important influences in assisting Merton in this unmasking of illusion: James Baldwin, a black author, and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Their influence helped him to articulate in words what he had experienced in solitude. It was Baldwin who showed Merton that the black problem was a white problem, a pertinent point that white people today must note, in those places where racism is either open or concealed.

The roots of destruction lay in the whites themselves and also in the so-called "nigger-lovers," because they don't feel that their own lives and that of their society require a radical change. As long as whites don't want to look into their own hearts and turn into themselves, all their good intentions for the black will remain only flirtations, and all their so-called help only concessions. An oppressed people cannot be controlled very long with artificial means, and it might just be that the white liberals, who want to help everyone but will not change themselves, in fact are preparing the way for revolution.

(Nouwen, p. 59)

If Baldwin helped Merton to see the black problem as essentially a white problem, it was Gandhi who cautioned him against becoming a bitter idealist and taught him again to turn to his own interiority. For Merton knew well that the sin, evil and violence he had discovered in his own heart through solitude, silence and prayer were the same sin, evil and violence he saw in the world. The impurity in the world was a mirror of the impurity he saw in his own heart. Gandhi's inspiration taught him the wisdom that the

7. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 18.

only one who has the right to speak about nonviolence is the one who wants to cleanse himself of all violence through fasting, penance and prayer. Gandhi's vision was a living and concrete manifestation in which he acted out of the motivation of love for humankind and not hatred. Such personification could only be expressed by recognizing the goodness in all people which determined that love become the basis of nonviolence, not hatred.

Merton realized that at the end of the day all we may have left is our faith and our humanity. His own experience had taught him that prayer is to make us not more religious but more fully human. Hence the later Merton is more attractive than the earlier intensely religious young monk. Tensions do occur when the religious wants to leave the human behind as if it did not exist and escape, as it were, into a world of religiosity. Christianity is about humanizing us into the humanity of Christ so that our potential or capacity for more abundant life can be realized. Julian's hazel nut illustrates the goodness of God in everything which does not seem to square with the presence of evil. What is more important is a sinful humanity indwelt by God for therein lies the glory. When the religious and the human are separated it can lead to a depreciation of the human and a false asceticism which further devalues it. It leads to unrealistic expectations which in its turn can lead to the depression that results when one's aims are not being realized. One has to be at ease in one's humanity, experiencing and knowing God in the humanness of life's experiences, allowing God to bend such a living being humanly into his way. Our spirituality will be earthed into the human rather than short-circuited into the religious, and thereby will integrate life at every level into a single rhythm in which the fullness of human experience can be enjoyed as coming from God. "Be at peace with your own soul and heaven and earth will be at peace with you" said Isaac the Syrian.

It was because Merton was so human that he had such a wide appeal. Humanity, humanizing, is used here in the Christian sense in which the true measure of being fully and completely human requires that humanity be indwelt by God in Christ. Incarnation and Transfiguration are the two poles of the Christian life. Becoming fully human in this sense means growth in God-likeness, the process of *theosis*, the deification of humankind by personal participation in the Blessed Trinity. This is the end of contemplative life, of life in the "grain of sand" where we can see the world from God's point of view. He saw this in terms of *final integration* and was

influenced by the thinking of Dr. Reza Arasteh, a Persian psychoanalyst. Full spiritual development and a supernatural, even charismatic, maturity will normally include the idea of complete psychological integration. He describes the *final integration* of which he speaks as a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment which always implies partiality and compromise.

The man who is “fully born” has an entirely “inner experience of life.” He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense “cosmic” and “universal man.” He has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being. He is in a certain sense identified with everybody: or in the familiar language of the New Testament (which Arasteh evidently has not studied) he is “all things to all men.” He is able to experience their joys and sufferings as his own, without however becoming dominated by them. He has attained to a deep inner freedom — the Freedom of the Spirit we read of in the New Testament. He is guided not just by will and reason, but by “spontaneous behavior subject to dynamic insight”

The man who has attained *final integration* is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. “He has embraced all of life He has experienced qualities of every types of life”; ordinary human existence, intellectual life, artistic creation, human love, religious life. He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, “finally giving birth to a fully comprehensive self.” He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture but all mankind. He does not remain bound by one set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. He is fully “catholic” in the best sense of the word. He has a unified vision and experience of the one truth shining out in all its various manifestations, some clearer than others, some more definite and more certain than others. He does not set these partial views up in opposition to each other, but unifies them in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity. With this view of life he is able to bring perspective, liberty, and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated man is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight.⁸

To become such people we need to embrace the world “in a grain of sand.” In applying such symbolism to the life of prayer, this “grain of sand” becomes a figure for the experiences of such a way of living, whether in monastery, hermitage, or workaday world, the place where a person’s prayerful encounter with God is lived out. The “desert” is the place where the person of prayer meets God, or as the Russians call it *poustinia*, the

8. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 211-212.

territory of the spiritual path where the diabolical and the divine are encountered. It is the place of our solitude, our aloneness with God where in stillness and silence we wait to meet the God who comes. Therefore it is the climate of all true prayer.