

A Mertonian Lens on Teen Life

Review of

Authenticity, Passion, and Advocacy:

Approaching Adolescent Spirituality from the Life and Wisdom of Thomas Merton

By Thomas E. Malewitz

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Reviewed by **Jeffrey T. Kiernan**

Soon after I started teaching religion in 1975 at Notre Dame High School in Fairfield Connecticut, my mother asked me “how the kids were” and “what did they think of religion?” She continued to ask me such questions each fall for years until she developed Alzheimer’s disease in the early 1990s. We had interesting discussions. My basic answer to her questions always remained the same: “Kids are kids. They are wonderful, demanding, loving, frustrating, energetic, inconsiderate and inspiring. They may not be outwardly religious, but faith and spiritual matters are important to them. They oftentimes express this in ways that adults miss.” My mother believed that we had a “lot to learn from the young ones,” as she put it. I couldn’t agree with her more! As the years and decades of teaching rolled by, I came to realize that much of my own sense of God and of the sacred came from my interactions with students. Student comments, questions, complaints and words of thanks have nurtured my growth toward a mature Christianity. Oftentimes the depth of students’ ideas – in both verbal and written form – has been breathtaking. The Spirit moves where She wills. After I had incorporated some of Thomas Merton’s ideas and writing into my teaching religion, the richness of teens’ insights into spirituality became ever more striking. Adults can learn from such youthful insights. While it is true that adolescent spirituality has its own complexity and challenges, it is well worth the effort to engage with teens in this area.

A key challenge to adolescent spirituality is bullying, both online and in person. Thomas E. Malewitz’s *Authenticity, Passion, and Advocacy: Approaching Adolescent Spirituality from the Life and Wisdom of Thomas Merton* sets out to explore the intersection of Merton and the spirituality of teens against the backdrop of the epidemic of adolescent bullying. He roots his exploration in his reading of Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *No Man Is an Island*, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* and Merton’s journals and letters, especially those letters contained in *The Road to Joy*. The book evolved from

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Malewicz's doctoral dissertation, based on his own classroom experience.

The curriculum was used with sixteen ninth-graders over the course of ten non-consecutive days in classes that ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes. The students did not receive a grade for their activities. These included some film-viewing, reflection time after class work, guided meditation, a drum circle, and playing Jenga, the wooden block game. Students also wrote in their journals and participated in small and large group discussions. These activities were designed to help the students see the importance of self-discovery, unity, group dynamics and healthy communication skills. Themes derived from Malewicz's reading of Merton's *No Man Is an Island* (order, balance, rhythm and harmony) are linked to some of the ideas that are emphasized in the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Scholarship building upon the NSYR has focused on the themes of authenticity, passion and advocacy.

The foreword for *Authenticity, Passion, and Advocacy* was written by Thomas Del Prete, former president of the International Thomas Merton Society. Three decades ago, in his seminal work *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (1990), Del Prete pointed out that for Merton, "Education that provides for self-discovery, in enabling one to become a person, enables genuine community to form as well" (53). This truth is illustrated to some degree by Malewicz's explication of his work with his students.

The book has fifteen chapters of ten to twelve pages each. The first two chapters are devoted to the concept of adolescent spirituality and to an overview of Merton, especially as his life and work relates to adolescents. The latter chapter contains a useful annotated collection describing Merton's correspondence with young people. The remaining chapters are primarily meant to flesh out various themes of teen life as seen through a Mertonian lens. Chapters are devoted to Education, Rituals, Silence, True/False Self, Passion, Athletics, The Arts (I and II), Advocacy, Bullying, Dialogue, Community and The World. Generally, the chapters have the same structure: a relevant passage from Merton, connections between the topic and teens, classroom experiences that connect some writings of Merton to the chapter's topic, significant comments from students' feedback (oral and written), and a set of pertinent concluding questions for the educator. I found the quotations from the students to be particularly enriching. Their inclusion gives the reader the opportunity to *learn from the teens*. Such an opportunity is something rarely seen or appreciated. Some examples from the feedback are the following:

"I felt peaceful. . . . I liked the feeling of peace, healing, and safety I got from this"; also, "I felt like I was in solitude, but not alone at the same time" (57). (These students are reflecting upon a guided meditation experience.) "Everyone has a role in society and we all must work together to maintain rhythm"; also, "It reminded me that I am part of something greater than myself" (102). (These students are reflecting upon a drum circle experience.) "I learned that homeless people are the same as us, they just don't have a home. They are very friendly and welcoming"; also, "I learned that everyone has a story. We sometimes forget that [everyone] has experiences that have worth" (161). (These students are reflecting upon their community service experiences.)

Limitations of space do not allow for discussion of each chapter. However, here comment is offered about a few. "Silence: Closing the Mouth, Opening the Heart and Mind" (50-61) offers a solid weave of some of Merton's insights about silence and how those insights can help teens

navigate their struggles with silence; the inclusion of Merton's poem "In Silence" is particularly effective. "Bullying: Recognizing the Dignity and Worth of All Humanity" (128-39) presents useful contemporary research about bullying against a backdrop of Merton's own experiences, including instances involving his younger brother, John Paul; this makes for very interesting reading. The chapter "Athletics: Sports and Personal Discipline" (83-94) has a section suggesting films that can help teens see connections between athletics and spirituality. The suggestions are primarily from ESPN's "30 for 30 Series." I believe the section would have been enhanced by including some of the "30 for 30 Series" offerings that were about female athletes. (Malewitz does suggest ESPN's film about Eunice Kennedy Shriver and the Special Olympics.) I realize that the curriculum was implemented at an all-boys school – all the more reason to include some female athletes' stories. There is a similar lack in the chapter "True/False Self: Refining the Search for Authenticity" (62-72). The section offering film suggestions to stimulate discussion on authenticity contains only films with male protagonists. Of course, it is possible that suggestions regarding female athletes and female protagonists were offered verbally in class, but there is no indication of that in the text.

I would be remiss in not mentioning something that was a bit of a befuddlement – and which I think may be due to a lack of editorial precision. About halfway through the book, I began to encounter spelling, grammatical and vocabulary errors which were frequent enough to be distracting. I will not go into "chapter and verse" about these errors. Suffice it to say that they unfortunately detracted from whatever topic was at hand.

Educators and others engaged in ministry with youth will find useful tools in Malewitz's book. His work with students helped them to conclude the following: all humanity has worth and value; it is essential to establish common ground with others; peace and calm are better than aggression and anger; happiness is greater than material possessions. These four conclusions, combined with his application of Merton's insights regarding the discovery of the true self through both solitude and engagement with the world, can help students confront bullying. The work presented by the author serves as an example of the benefits that arise from presenting teens with Merton's wisdom on a variety of topics. It should also serve as inspiration for other educators to enrich their teaching with ideas from Merton. We do have a "lot to learn from the young ones," and teens (and their teachers) can learn a lot from Merton. Thomas Malewitz helps us see how authenticity, passion and advocacy enhance both teaching and learning.