

“We Are Already One” Thomas Merton, Science and Wisdom

By Larry Culliford

“My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”¹ These lines, spoken by Thomas Merton in October 1968 at the end of an informal talk in Calcutta, encapsulate one of the most profound and important insights ever expressed about human beings: that we are fully kin to one another, that there is a vital, seamless and indivisible bond between every member of humanity – past, present and to come – regardless of age, gender, race, creed, color, sexual preference or any other distinguishing feature.

It is possible to declare this as an apparently objective fact, yet such an assertion remains disputable. By calling upon us to “recover our original unity,” however, Merton is suggesting that, rather than look only for verifiable facts, we also open ourselves up to experience, to a particular kind of deeply personal experience, one of immediacy and wholeness, according to which we feel powerfully, intimately and seamlessly connected to everyone else; also, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to the entirety of nature, to the universe and the divine. The words “holy” and “whole” are linked, and in some languages the word for God translates best as “sacred unity.” This is the indivisible reality we are surely justified in considering ourselves equipped to encounter, and must seek if we are to find personal integrity and fulfilment.

Wisdom and Spiritual Maturity

Such a *spiritual* experience may come upon a person suddenly or gradually and be either transient or sustained – resulting, to a greater or lesser extent, in transformational changes in attitudes and values that lead us to take increasingly mature responsibility for our thoughts, words and actions, for what we say and do, also, importantly, for what we refrain from saying and do not do. Such awe-filled moments of insight – “Wow!” experiences and silent epiphanies – can be hard to describe, and easy therefore for others to dismiss. Nevertheless, they remain subjectively incontrovertible, so that eventually seeking to grow in wisdom automatically and necessarily becomes the central aim in life, following one’s own pathway towards wisdom and spiritual maturity.

According to *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, “Wisdom becomes an increasingly important category for Merton’s thought in the last decade of his life.”² Wisdom is universal but hard to define. It can be considered a kind of knowledge – sacred, holistic, intuitive knowledge – knowledge that guides people, moment by moment, on how to be and behave for the best, for all concerned, in any given situation. People need wisdom



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in order to give of their best, and to ensure their lives are meaningful. We all need it especially to counter the destructive forces, attitudes and values that often prevail in a science- and technology-dominated, secular, materialist, capitalist-consumerist society; and we all need wisdom because of its reliable association with inner strength, discernment, courage and hope, essential ingredients for both mental health and well-being, and for the flourishing of society.

On reflection, wisdom cannot be said to depend on intellectual attainment. It cannot, therefore, be said to depend on holding to any particular beliefs – ideological, political, religious or non-religious. Can a person acquire and develop wisdom? Merton would surely answer “Yes,” pointing towards a life of contemplation, worship, service and prayer. He might have been surprised that some of the findings of science also offer help with such questions.

One Brain – Two Ways of Thinking

Since Merton’s time, for example, neuroscience research has revealed something important: that the two halves of human brains function differently, working simultaneously on separate agendas.³ Much simplified, we can say that calculation, including equation-solving, depends on the left hemisphere, which functions in a dualist, mechanical way – a *serial* processor of information. As well as computing the pluses and minuses associated with results, with worldly successes and failures, for example, this left-brain is also the primary seat of language. It thinks in words and symbols, operating an “either-or” binary system: black-or-white, right-or-wrong, good-or-bad, us-or-them, etc. It divides things into separate parts, which it acts upon like a spotlight.

The holistic, creative, intuitive, non-verbal, right hemisphere, in contrast, is a *parallel* processor of information. Rather than think sequentially, it experiences everything as immediate and whole, the parts seamlessly inter-connected – as in “both-and”: thus, *both yin and yang, both black and white (plus all possible shades of gray) and color*. The right brain sees things in context, acting more therefore like a floodlight; and its unitary approach considers everyone equal, sharing in each other’s fortunes and misfortunes, fostering thereby the sense of universal kinship we seek.

The words “kin,” “kinship,” “kind” and “kindness” are related. What we may call “spiritual” values are based on this all-important fellow-feeling, and therefore – in addition to kindness – include honesty, humility, generosity, tolerance, forgiveness, patience, freedom, joy, humor, gratitude, courage, compassion, beauty, peace, hope and love. All contribute to wisdom.

Science and wisdom are not truly in opposition. The two support and complement each other. Science represents the knowledge of facts: describing and knowing about things in terms of other things. Physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, archaeology and genetics, for example, all indicate *objectively* that we are linked not only to each other, but also to every atom, every molecule, particle, star, to every planet, all sea and land, to every creature, all plant and animal life.

However, in order to “recover our original unity” we must go beyond the mechanistic appraisal of scientifically established facts, to seek *subjectively* and with determination the irrefutable *experience* of wisdom, and so arrive at a different quality of deep-seated personal knowledge of engaged human kinship, bonding us in love and devotion to each other, the universe and the divine, bound not only physically and biologically, therefore, not only psychologically and socially, but also and essentially spiritually.

Psychological investigations tell us that achieving this depends on quieting the noisy left-brain, allowing the promptings of the intuitive right – the “wisdom mind,” as we might call it – to

break through and be more influential. To frame it differently, it involves people paying more attention to the influence of the spiritual dimension in their lives.

Five Dimensions

To explain this term, “the spiritual dimension,” it is necessary to name and describe the relationships between all five dimensions that are together sufficient to encompass the whole of human understanding and experience. Here is the list:

Physical (energy and matter) – the miracle of existence;

Biological (organs and organisms) – the miracle of life;

Psychological (mental activity) – the miracle of consciousness;

Social (relationships) – the miracle of love;

Spiritual (souls and the sacred) – the miracle of unity.

There is a kind of circular hierarchy here, the spiritual dimension appearing to operate as an originating principle, seamlessly creating, linking, shaping and thus fully subsuming the other four. Rapt attention to anything within any of these indivisibly inter-related categories can therefore take on the quality of spiritual awareness. From the (biological) perspective of neuroscience, the key element with regard to wisdom involves having a deeply personal, right-brain mediated experience of wholeness that simultaneously infuses and influences the workings of the brain’s left hemisphere too.

Restoring Balance

Wonderfully, it turns out that in saying “We are already one,” Merton was right twice over. We are already joined to each other *collectively* at soul level as humankind. We are also already unified *as individual people* through the two halves of our brains. Simple in concept, then, if sometimes challenging in practice, the plain task of recovering our original unity involves reuniting and restoring a healthy balance between these two miraculous hemispheres. Encouragingly, there is good scientific evidence that daily periods of stillness and silence are effective in achieving this over time. Silent prayer, meditation, mindfulness, “stilling” – different names for similar styles of practice – are therefore recommended, working towards reversal of unhealthy cultural conditioning, improving discernment by raising awareness, moment-by-moment, throughout the five dimensions.

The Opposite of Wisdom Is Folly

This is one proven way to facilitate the re-establishing of a healthy equilibrium between spiritual and worldly aims, ambitions, attitudes and values in people’s lives. Consider the alternative. The opposite of wisdom, its absence, amounts to folly, which is based either on blameless (but unfortunate) inexperience or on a particularly regrettable kind of willful ignorance, a turning away from or active suppression of wholesome right-brain functioning. The consequences of such rejection are everywhere. Consumerism, for example, the relentless imperative of growth economics, leads people headlong into competition for wealth, territory and resources, and so towards warfare and violence, equally to widespread pollution and massive eco-destruction, to climate change (with increasingly forceful and frequent natural disasters) contributing in turn to catastrophic famine, poverty, starvation, sickness epidemics and the displacement of millions of people.

Everything affects everything else. Multiple inter-penetrating vicious circles are operating. The kind of devastation listed above reciprocally fuels organized crime, political corruption,

racial and other forms of intolerance, terrorism and other, more general violence. Such matters, presented continually, invading our lives through the media, serve to exacerbate the growth of psycho-somatic disorders, anxiety and depression, thereby adding to the burden on public services. Similarly, the desire to numb or escape from a relentless diet of human misery fuels the use of drugs and other addictive practices: alcohol, gambling, pornography, workaholic behavior, excessive shopping, overeating-obesity, gaming and other forms of internet abuse, to name a few of the resulting modern-day scourges.

A Solution Backed by Both Science and Wisdom

The whole maelstrom represents a thoroughly malign process, one that Merton recognized in many of its aspects, and repeatedly cautioned against. Increasingly rampant today, the situation needs addressing forcefully in a way that holds out genuine hope. In his final talk, Merton prophetically announced, “The time for relying on structures has disappeared” (*AJ* 338). Due to growing mistrust in political, religious and other forms of social leadership, the solution must so clearly now be based on people taking the initiative in their own lives and spheres of influence, one by one, and doing so in a way that grows increasingly confluent among and across communities in an all-encompassing fashion – you and me included. Would Merton himself not have agreed that such a movement, now promisingly backed by science as well as wisdom, deserves our unstinting support?

People of faith already know that, in addition to embracing regular periods of silence and stillness, many other religious practices similarly foster spiritual growth. There are other activities and “wisdom practices,” too, religious *and* secular in nature,⁴ that also promote personal development in the direction of maturity. Even small steps are significant; and whenever one person makes progress, however modest, everyone else benefits in consequence. That is the nature of unity.

Merton’s Clarion Call

Merton understood, with reference to the Taoist concept of *wu wei*,⁵ that the right words and positive actions have a strong tendency to flow spontaneously, once the forces of wisdom and compassion begin to outweigh immature, ego-based impulses towards following worldly pursuits and hedonistic distractions.

In today’s out-of-kilter society, the busy, self-important, vocal, impatient, impersonal left side of our brains has come to dominate the humbler, neglected, timeless, silent, creative, more humane right. In a science-dominated, materialist techno-culture, the left-brain binary approach creates divisions. It fosters us-them splitting, emphasizing differences in terms of superiority and inferiority. It alienates people, conditioning them towards holding worldly ambitions, desiring “success” in terms of position, profit, property, possessions and power over others. Other people are treated as either supporters or competitors, friends or foes. Rivals and opponents, real or imagined, are created, apparently threatening our cherished beliefs, wealth and well-being. “If you’re not a success, you’re a failure. . . . If not with us, you’re against us!” These intolerant, destructive, die-hard, left-brain generated formulae (which, regrettably, can be seen operating as much in the domains of religion and education as elsewhere) urgently need revision if unity is to be revived and universal human kinship respected. Merton knew all this, and the appeal he made in Calcutta resonates with us, if anything, more vibrantly and urgently yet, here in the twenty-first century.

Some may find his clarion call daunting, but it can be interpreted as relatively simple: to grow comfortable with silence and stillness, to think more often and more deeply about one's aims, ambitions and priorities; about our most heartfelt values; about how we interact with other people, especially about the things we share with strangers rather than that which divides us; about how we fit in with the world of nature, and with the greater whole of existence. What gives our life meaning? From what, and whom, do we derive direction, courage, inner strength, hope and a sense of purpose? What makes us feel alive? "My dear brothers, we are already one. . . . What we have to be is what we are."

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 308; subsequent references will be cited as "AJ" parenthetically in the text.
2. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Wisdom," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 533; subsequent references will be cited as "Encyclopedia" parenthetically in the text.
3. See, for example, Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
4. See Larry Culliford, *Seeking Wisdom: A Spiritual Manifesto* (Buckingham, UK: University of Buckingham Press, 2018) 105.
5. See Patrick F. O'Connell, "Taoism": "'wu wei,' usually translated as 'non-action' . . . is not passivity or inertia or quietism; it is a renunciation of 'conscious striving' in favor of spontaneous action . . . 'action that seems both effortless and spontaneous . . . in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things'" (*Encyclopedia* 463, quoting Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* [New York: New Directions, 1965] 24, 28).