

FROM ILLUSIONS TOWARDS TRUTH

Thomas Merton's 'True Self' and Gay Spirituality

Patrick W. Collins

IN THE LAST DECADE OF HIS LIFE Thomas Merton's writing was dominated by a passion for human growth. References to a fixed human nature receded in his writing; he wrote in 1966: 'I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers'.¹ What he says here resonates with the experience of many same-gender orientated people, which often raises profound questions about identity. Like Merton, gay people are in search of their unique, God-created identities, and Merton's appeal for gay people comes from a lifelong search for truth, which was neither guided nor limited by the need for final conclusions.

Merton viewed sexuality as opening the way towards personal wholeness and communion with others. He had learned this through the vicissitudes of his own experience; in his last years he had reaffirmed his commitment to monastic life out of the depths of his evolving humanity, following a brief but intense relationship with a young nurse.²

Coming Out and Coming In

Spiritual growth for those orientated towards their own gender involves two distinct, although not necessarily separate, movements. First they must *come out* of the closet of denial and repression. They come out to themselves, to other people who are important to them,

¹ Quoted in *Passion for Peace*, edited by William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 3.

² Robert Nugent, 'Thomas Merton and Sexual Wholeness', *The Merton Annual*, 1 (1986), 9-11. See also Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 435 onwards.

and to the One who created us all. Full spiritual maturation is unattainable from a closeted environment. But subsequently, or simultaneously, they must also *come in*, to an awareness and an appropriation of their own uniqueness, which includes their spirituality. As Tim McFeeley writes:

The coming out process and the quest for spiritual transcendence are affiliated journeys, and the skills acquired in leaving the closet are useful in understanding our spiritual needs as well.³

The process relates to what Merton called the journey from the false self toward the True Self, which is the God-self within each person. On that journey same-gender orientated people, like everyone else, need to learn to stop looking primarily outside themselves to find their identity and their truth. Being and identity are discovered on the journey into their interiority. One gay writer, Ed Steinbrecher, put it this way:

Many gay men are looking for something outside themselves when they should be looking within themselves and creating this incredibly satisfying inner man. You're not going to find it at all unless you go within and do the work of consciousness.⁴

But the quest is not simply individual. Merton wrote that the transformation of human consciousness will 'liberate the truth in each person, with the idea that it will then communicate itself to others'.⁵ If same-gender orientated people go through the processes of *coming out* and *coming in*, they can receive a deeper, richer sense of true identity with which to come back out again, liberated, to serve society.

³ Tim McFeeley, 'Coming Out as Spiritual Revelation', *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, 3/4 (Fall 1986), 9-11.

⁴ Ed Steinbrecher, quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Mark Thompson (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 204. This article specifically addresses the experience of men rather than women; the two experiences are in some ways similar, though in others quite different.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975) 332-333.

Gay Spirituality, the Gay Wound, and the True Self

Thomas Merton wrote about the True Self:

I must therefore know myself, and know both the good and the evil that are in me. It will not do to know only one and not the other: only the good, or only the evil. I must then be able to live the life God has given me, living it fully and fruitfully, and making good use even of the evil that is in it To live well myself is my first and essential contribution to the well-being of all mankind and to the fulfilment of man's collective destiny To live well myself means for me to know and appreciate something of the secret, the mystery in myself: that which is incommunicable, which is at once myself and not myself, at once in me and above me.⁶

So how might gay people 'live well' and 'contribute to the well-being of all' at the beginning of a new millennium? What must be courageously faced, and what must be joyfully appreciated, in gay realities?

Same-gender orientated people are as varied in their life-histories and experiences as straight people. Nevertheless, there are things which they have in common that shape their spirituality. In most cultures such people begin their journeys toward self-identity and self-affirmation several steps behind heterosexuals. Heterosexuals at least think that they understand their orientation and their identity. Straight reality is assumed to be 'normal' by society, by the Churches, and even by some gay people. In the past everyone was assumed to be heterosexual; only now is that assumption beginning to be less current, and openness about sexual orientation growing.

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Gays can be considered abnormal, at least statistically. Yet, throughout history, a minority has always been same-gender orientated—and it has included creative, spiritually aware and inspiring people in every age. But their gifts have not usually been understood as coming from their full human identity, which of course includes their sexual orientation. This part of their identity has been unknown, or denied, or dismissed.

Thomas Merton was deeply aware that God deals with human beings in and through their vulnerability, their wounds. It is at the

⁶Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 95.

point of their apparent powerlessness that divine power can act to make them whole. Heterosexist and homophobic assumptions and attitudes have created what has been termed the 'gay wound'—the internalisation of homophobia. As Guy Baldwin has said: 'At this time in history, homophobia is the single most defining element in ... gay consciousness'.⁷

Same-gender orientated people grow up feeling, acting and being different in a straight society which sets the standards for 'normality'. Some try to live out these standards, while others deliberately express themselves in a way quite contrary to straight traditions. Either way they have implanted within them a sense of being misfits and aliens. This can create a profound self-loathing which often leads to self-destructive behaviour and an unhealthy self-stereotyping—reactions which in their turn reinforce prejudice among straights. Ram Dass says: 'One of the deepest issues plaguing gay men is inner-directed hate'.⁸ Yet this suffering can become the gateway to deeper truth, healing and wholeness.

At least until relatively recently, most gay people have begun their life-journeys in self-hatred. This deep wound often causes them to spend too much time consumed by sexual orientation issues. No one has to struggle with an orientation toward the opposite sex. The same-gender

orientated, on the other hand, must engage with their sexual identity as something making them different. In the process there can be a tendency to focus more on questions of some unique 'lifestyle' and on particular genital acts than on the quest for their unique human identity. Gay people can too readily come to experience their identity as primarily focused on sexuality. The reasons for this are not



⁷ Quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 190.

⁸ Quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 164.

straightforward. We cannot simply claim that same-gender orientated people have an unintegrated sexual identity. Many are well integrated, yet we must recognise that the psychic damage caused by society's homophobia can make gay people compulsive about sexuality. But there are possibilities here, too. As Andrew Harvey, a gay contemplative writer, says,

From the deepest wound of my life grew its miraculous possibility ... transforming the pain of self-betrayal into self-discovery Had I not been so wounded, I wouldn't have constantly hungered and searched, certainly not with the intensity I have.⁹

But how can this wound be healed? Through personal and communal prayer, and through sound spiritual companionship, gay people may be opened to their whole being in a non-judgmental way. They can realise that the wound is in their ego personality—or, in Merton's terms, in their 'false self'—rather than in the depth of their soul where the True Self, the God within, resides. For being gay is not a person's central, defining characteristic. The core of the self—the True Self—is more than the person's psychic states, more than such things as thinking, willing, feeling, remembering, imagining or sexuality. None of these states form the basis of personal identity. To mistake what is merely a part of the self for the whole is, in Merton's terms, to live out of the false self—to live out of a partial self and a partial truth. The truth of who we ARE—the 'I AM' of us all—is larger than any single modality or description. Indeed, it is more than all of them combined.

In Merton's later writings, the True Self is presented as our whole self in God. In Christian terms, this is the self found in and through Christ, in which Spirit merges and meshes with spirit. It is the self whom God is creating us to become from the inside. We become who we are. Merton puts it this way:

At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This

⁹Quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 51.

little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.¹⁰

The True Self is the person of whom St Paul speaks when he says: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). One might add that there is 'neither gay nor straight, married nor single'. In Christ all are whole and all are one.

When someone *comes out* from hiding their true sexual orientation from themselves, from others and from God, and begins to *come in* to their deepest truth, they are able to grow from self-hatred towards self-appreciation. Those who have successfully come out and come in feel full, in Richard Isay's words, 'of something that they have never experienced before: a sense of power. That power is caused, in part, by freeing the energy that [they] have previously been using to deny and disguise [themselves].'¹¹

Starting on this journey, deliberately and with passion, is what it means to become true, whole and holy for all people, in every age. Thomas Merton wrote of this with great clarity and beauty:

For me to become a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my True Self. ... God leaves us free to become whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects, and if we lie to ourselves and to others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it ... We are called to share with God in creating our true identity.¹²

Honesty is the path.

¹⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 142, quoted in James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978), 19, 149.

¹¹ Richard Isay, quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 41.

¹² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 31-32.

If they answer the call toward the True Self, those orientated towards their own gender can come to understand and experience their inner realities and their innate feelings of attraction and love as a blessing rather than a curse. Many are forced to live closeted, untrue lives, both by the homophobia that permeates our culture and some religious teachings, and by their own internalised homophobia. Such self-hatred obstructs the journey toward their own unique reflection of the image and likeness of God, and may inhibit the inner and outer freedom that they require if they are to create with God their true identity.

This 'falseness', of course, is not unique to those who are same-gender orientated. Merton wrote: 'Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self'.¹³ True identity is not that which appears on the surface. Who we really are is not the mask we wear or the role imposed by our upbringing and our society. We are more than that, and much of what is on the surface is not truly us at all.

The Second Closet

Merton's spiritual insight is sound for gay people. It encourages them to leave the closet, and to reject the deceptions, roles and masks of the false self imposed on them by heterosexist and homophobic definitions and expectations. But, regrettably, at least some of them can then become trapped in another closet, created by gay people themselves: the gay subculture. Being 'that way' can become more of a lifestyle issue than a matter of integrating one's sexual orientation into one's personal identity. The so-called 'gay lifestyle' creates a 'second closet' of uncommitted and irresponsible promiscuity and/or materialism and consumerism.¹⁴ Fortunately many who 'come out' today are not seduced by this lifestyle, but are moving towards greater maturity and greater spiritual depth.

This second closet, like the first, confines members of the gay subculture within prescribed places, behaviours, images and stereotypes. While there is clearly a value in safe places and in joyous and comfortable sharing with people of the same orientation, the

¹³ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34.

¹⁴ See Urvashi Vaid, *New Republic* (May 1993), and also Bruce Bawers, *A Place at the Table* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 31-33.

danger is that this can produce a new kind of isolation through separatism. The second closet is not imposed by heterosexism, but rather freely chosen by same-gender orientated people themselves. When they isolate themselves for the sake of security, they avoid an engagement with heterosexuals which could stimulate the spiritual growth of both. Mature spiritual growth leads towards the integration of the whole of creation.

Gay spiritualities need to be especially aware of this second closet and its entrapments. Like everyone, gay people need to transcend the cultural location of the ego personality and of the false self, and discover themselves more profoundly in the True Self. Speaking to those who may become trapped in the gay subculture, Ram Dass reflects on the wisdom of creating a more integrated gay identity—something which is increasingly happening among the maturing gay population today. He encourages those who live largely in the gay subculture to let go of their models of gay existence and to live in the richness of the moment:

Sex and social relationship is not enough ... eventually you will be driven into spiritual awakening

Awakening is the recognition that there are many planes of consciousness and that you exist on all of them. You are limiting yourself incredibly to define yourself only in terms of the physical/psychological planes, as if they were absolutely real You've reduced yourself to a shadow of who you are ... through clinging to concepts instead of understanding that the true nature of being is not knowing you know, it's simply being There is something else going on, and realising this is awakening¹⁵

Ram Dass would probably agree with Merton: 'If what people want is food and sex, let them have that, and see if they can get along with that only, and without meaning'.¹⁶

But how are gay people to overcome the falsity and the illusions created first of all by heterosexist and homophobic attitudes, and then by the gay subculture? How are they to escape from the second closet? Once again Merton's words seem relevant:

¹⁵ Ram Dass, quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 161 and 166.

¹⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 301.

The difficult ascent from falsity toward truth is accomplished not through pleasant advances in wisdom and insight, but through the painful unlayering of levels of falsehood, untruths deeply embedded in our consciousness, lies which cling more tightly than a second skin.¹⁷

It is like peeling away the layers of an onion—tears and all.

Many such people live—or try to live—the lies of the first closet, having experienced years of homophobic self-hatred. Coming out joyously into the light of gay identity and self-affirmation with others who share the same sexual orientation is an awesome, liberating experience for them. But there is more to learn and still more falseness to face. Being gay is not a lifestyle, but a unique way of being in, of and for the world, and of relating to God, for a great variety of people. The illusions of the gay lifestyle must be confronted. Sexual orientation must become a friend, a servant and a midwife to the birth of the True Self.

**Being gay
is not
a lifestyle**

Same-gender orientated people can become defensive when confronted by the falseness permeating the gay subculture. Yet such confrontation is unavoidable if their liberation is to be spiritual as well as sexual. Quoting C. G. Jung's *Spiritual Disciplines*, Merton wrote: 'People will do anything no matter how absurd to avoid facing their own psyches'.¹⁸ And he could have been describing people trapped by the limitations of the gay subculture when he said:

This false, exterior, superficial, social self is made up of prejudices, whimsy, posturing, pharisaic self-concern and pseudo-dedication. The false self is a human construct built by selfishness and flights from reality. Because it is not the whole truth of us, it is not of God. And because it is not of God, our false self is substantially empty and incapable of experiencing the love and freedom of God.¹⁹

The gay subculture—that is, a subculture within the culture of same-gender orientation—reacts against straight lifestyles by constructing its own world of bars and bathhouses, promiscuity, and extremes of both effeminacy and hyper-masculinity. Yet it can also

¹⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 296.

¹⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 251.

¹⁹ Quoted in *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 148.

imitate the materialism and consumerism of straight society. This subculture cannot provide an authentic path toward the True Self. It marks a phase that some gay people may go through, but they need to pass beyond it. Otherwise what may have seemed a journey towards freedom, like the Exile of the Hebrew Scriptures, can become a new oppression. The theologian Richard Cleaver suggests that the movement toward liberation has been sidetracked into,

... a system of commercial products and institutions We have created a new Egypt, where we can feel as if our liberation has already been won. Such outcomes are inevitable once gayness and lesbianism are conceived of as lifestyles rather than as membership in an oppressed class. We have tried to buy ourselves out of bondage²⁰

A good number of gay people—who are unlikely to have children to support—have the disposable income to do just that. Their security comes to reside in what they have rather than who they are. Their quest for more and more is insatiable because it is doomed to be unsatisfying.

To grow spiritually, gay people need to journey through, and then beyond, the familiar territory of gay sexual orientation—not only the gay lifestyle, but also the more serious concerns of sexual and genital behaviour, relationships and unions, AIDS, human rights, ethics, Church teachings and societal attitudes. Having *come out* of the first and the second closets, they must also *come in*, moving into the depth of the soul where sexual orientation is not seen as a curse but as a divine blessing.

The Shared Journey

Reaching out and embracing the True Self cannot be done alone. Spiritual companioning is essential at this stage in the inner and outer liberation of same-gender orientated people. This is particularly true because of the second closet and the trap of gay illusions. Susan Rakoczy describes such spiritual sharing as,

²⁰ Richard Cleaver, *Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 24-25, 39, 35.

... a privileged meeting of hearts. Built on trust in the bond of the Spirit of God, two persons come together in faith to hear the story of the workings of the Spirit in the life of one of them. For the person who shared her or his experience of God, there is always the moment of 'stepping out on the water' as one begins to speak of what is most sacred in life. The listener, who is companion on the journey, is called to receive that sharing in trust and love, with encouragement and support, and, at times, with the invitation to challenge to further growth, even at the cost of pain and suffering.²¹

In the process of spiritual searching with a companion or companions, such spiritual seekers can discover what Merton understood so well.

The perfect person ... is not the one who has it all together—the one who has 'arrived'. No, perfection is never such a possession of the person It is not a matter of achieving some impossible and inhuman saintlike condition, but of being fulfilled as the person we were created to be. Perfection is rather a pursuit, ever moving forward deeper into the mystery of God ... and each fulfilment contains in itself the impulse to further exploration.²²

For everyone, whether gay or straight, becoming whole and finding one's True Self means discovering 'that there is a deep underlying connection of opposites'.²³ But this is especially important for gay people because of the difficulties that they face in coming into communion with the True Self. Becoming whole means passing through the wilderness of the false selves which are imposed by others and which can also be constructed by same-gender orientated people themselves. On the spiritual journey such people may well understand, from painful yet rich experience, one of Merton's most profound statements: 'We must contain all divided worlds within ourselves'.²⁴

Merton's description of the stages of the human spiritual journey also has particular application to the divided worlds which exist both within and around gay people:

²¹ Susan Rakoczy, *Common Journey, Different Paths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 9.

²² *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, 54.

²³ *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, edited by Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 61.

²⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 21.

In the first part of our life, our psychic energy flows outward in the construction of our social role or persona. The more rigid the society, the stronger the mask—till we get so far out of touch with our True Self that a neurosis may develop which stops the outward flow of energy. Our psychic energy then seems to be dammed up, it returns to us and often we find a reintegration more in tune with our deepest selves. This permits us to experience and reach an inner unity, which is the noblest effort man can make for his own good and for the good of all men.²⁵

Gayness as a Gift for All

All spiritual journeys are for the good of all, not just for the one on the quest. And gay spiritual journeys can be a gift to humanity. As Andrew Harvey says:

Gays have a unique function in registering the cruelty and craziness of patriarchy and working to transcend it We've had a false masculine presented to us, an ideal of control and domination that is really a frozen hysteria, a condensation of fear and panic. It has nothing to do with the real masculine. In fact, gay men are closer to the real masculine than the so-called masculine ones are. Gay men in the way in which they interpret and live masculinity might be models for straight men, models for a deepening of the heart, a more tender and playful humour, a greater acceptance and tolerance of diversity.²⁶

A real man is a whole person. Harvey's sense of the gay mission in culture may sound somewhat rhetorical but it represents a significant challenge.

For C. G. Jung, those who are same-gender orientated have a profound gift for friendship, one of particular significance in these violent, competitive and materialistic times. Jung writes of the gay person's,

... great capacity for friendship, which often creates ties of astonishing tenderness between men, and may even rescue friendship between the sexes from the limbo of the impossible. ...

²⁵ Quoted in William Peatman, 'Spirituality Reunites Us with Selves', *National Catholic Reporter* (8 December 1995), 26.

²⁶ Quoted in *Gay Soul*, edited by Thompson, 62.

Often he is endowed with a wealth of religious feelings which help him bring the *ecclesia spiritualis* into reality, and a spiritual receptivity which makes him responsive to revelation.²⁷

Gay experience can become redemptive for others, too, in helping them to appreciate the importance and the delight of the human body in responsible, reverential and relational ways. During too much of its history Christianity has suffered from a negative attitude towards the body. A spirituality which ignores or denigrates the body was unacceptable to Thomas Merton, because such a spirituality would block the total response of healthy and fruitful living:

The 'spiritual' life thus becomes something lived 'interiorly' and in 'the spirit' or worse still in the 'mind'—indeed in the 'imagination'. The body is left out of it, because the body is 'bad' or at best 'unspiritual'. But the 'body' gets into the act anyway, sometimes in rather disconcerting ways, especially when it has been excluded on general principles.²⁸

Gay spiritual journeys begin with a *coming out*, and then become a deeper *coming in* to the whole identity of the soul, only a part of whose truth is that it is gay. But, in the end, identity and sexual orientation are not there only for the person making the journey. That person must *come out again* for the sake of others, indeed, for all creation. This awareness that the gay gift is for others is important if gay people are to avoid the pitfall of narcissism. They must return to the rest of the world. The same-gender orientated are uniquely well placed to help humanity expand its imagination about what it means to be human and to be in loving relationships.

People who are gifted with an orientation to their own sex, and who make the journey 'out and in and out again', will undoubtedly experience the searing flames of life. But this is a necessary and inevitable purgation of the unique 'untruths' which have been given to and assumed by gay people. As Merton wrote, surrendering to the fire of the Spirit within—the True Self—is essential for all human growth. Poetically, he described all human souls as being like wax, waiting for

²⁷ Carl Gustav Jung, *Complete Works*, volume 9, part 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), 71.

²⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 277-278.

the seal of true identity to be impressed upon them. By themselves souls have no identity, he believed.

Their destiny is to be softened and prepared in this life, by God's will, to receive, at their death, the seal of their own degree of likeness to God in Christ. And this is what it means, among other things, to be judged by Christ. The wax that has melted in God's will can easily receive the stamp of its identity, the truth of what it was meant to be. But the wax that is hard and dry and brittle and without love will not take the seal; for the hard seal, descending upon it, grinds it to powder. Therefore if you spend your life trying to escape from the heat of the fire that is meant to soften and prepare you to become your True Self, and if you try to keep your substance from melting in the fire—as if your true identity were to be hard wax—the seal will fall upon you at last and crush you. You will not be able to take your own true name and countenance, and you will be destroyed by the event that was meant to be your fulfilment.²⁹

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²⁹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 161.