

THE JOURNEY FROM THE FALSE TOWARD THE TRUE SELF

"For me to become a saint," Merton wrote, "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. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be 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 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."

"To be holy," he wrote, "is a question of appreciating where one is in life and learning to foster the vital connections that are already operative."

Spirituality, then, is simply a journey toward becoming one's true self. But this is never a straight forward path. Why? Because, first of all, our illusions about ourselves must be exposed and overcome. One comes to realize that our true identity is not that which appears on the surface. Who we really are is not the mask we wear, the role imposed by our upbringing and our society. Now, we are much more than that. In fact, much of what is on the surface is not truly us at all."

"I must manfully face... and find my center, not in an ideal self which just is...but in an actual self which does all it can to be honest and to love truly, though it still might fail."

"The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God... Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.... Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.... The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone."

"Who is more poor in spirit that the man who takes the risk of standing on his own feet, who tries to realize his fallibility and struggles in his own conscience to realize the will of God." We must "share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity." No "submersion of the personality in the social whole."

"This 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. 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."

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"Just to go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside. But I do have a past to break with, an accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk, a great need of clarification of mindfulness, or rather of no mind - a return to genuine practice, right effort, need to push on to the great doubt."

"The man who lives in division is not a person but only an 'individual'." "We must remember that this superficial 'I' is not our real self. It is our 'empirical self' but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God." "Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being." It is "a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion. One disappears and is left with freedom and the void. The exterior self centers on pride, the interior self on humility."

"The false self is annihilated by being acknowledged as truly a part of ourselves and accepted. Its power over us is diminished as it is integrated into our conscious selves as truly a part of who we are. In this way, over a lifetime, the true self gradually emerges. We are healed of the fracture between the false self and the True Self by discovering the presence of God, the True Self, within our consciousness."

"I do not have to run away from myself; it is sufficient that I find myself, not as I have made myself, by my own stupidity, but as He has made me in His wisdom and remade me in His infinite mercy... Then will I truly know Him, since I am in Him and He is truly in me."

"The Christian is left alone with God to fight out the question of who he really is, to get rid of the impersonation, if any, that has followed him into the woods. He thus receives from God his 'new name,' his mysterious identity in Christ and His Church." "We can't really find out who we are until we find ourselves in Christ and in relation to other people." We are not individuals, we are persons, and "a person is defined by a relationship with others."

Merton speaks of "the self as a non-self... a transcendent self, metaphysically distinct from the Self of God, and yet perfectly identified with that Self by love and freedom, so that there appears to be but one Self."

The perfect person, then, is not the one who has it all together - the one who has "arrived." No, perfection is never such a possession of the person. The Greek word for "perfect" means literally "brought to an end state. 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... each fulfillment contains in itself the impulse to further exploration."

"What matters is the struggle to make the right adjustment in my own life and this upsets me because there is no pattern for me to follow and I don't have either the courage or the insight to follow the Holy Spirit in all freedom... I need only seek truth as I am personally called to do in my own situation. If I were more a man of love and spirit, more a man of God, I would have no problem. So my job is to advance with the difficulty of one who lacks love and yet seeks it, in the realization that I am not supposed to solve my problems for myself. Nor am I supposed to be a man of God in the sense of 'having no

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problem.' One of the sources of futile struggle in the spiritual life is the assumption that one has to become a person without problems which is, of course, impossible."

Merton is aware that there is a danger here. There can be too much self-focus in our search for identity. He wrote: "In an age where there is so much talk about 'being yourself' I reserve to myself the right to forget about it, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else. Rather it seems to me that when one is too intent on 'being himself' he runs the risk of impersonating a shadow."

Merton was opposed to so many contemporary commercialized programs for self-fulfillment. These techniques seem to presuppose that one can become whole on one's own. "There is a kind of self-fulfillment," he warned, "that fulfills nothing but your illusory self. What truly matters is not how to get the most out of life, but how to recollect yourself so that you can fully give yourself." "We are made not only for self-definition but for self-donation, for coherence with ourselves and communion with others."

Becoming whole, finding oneself within the True Self means discovering, Merton says, "that there is a deep underlying connection of opposites." One of his most frequently cited lines is this: "We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves."

The journey from false to True Self is, in many ways, a recovery of the simplicity of our own childhood - a simplicity lost in the confusing complexities which adulthood can bring. That simplicity can be recovered not by naivete and inexperience as with the child but by choice. The difference between the simplicity of the child and that of the adult is the difference between inevitability and freedom. The child has no alternative but to remain uncomplex: the adult both embraces and moves beyond complexity by choice.

"A man would perhaps do anything to evade [union with God], once he realizes it means the end of his own ego-self-realization....Am I ready? Of course not. Yet the course of my life is set in this direction."

Merton wrote of the soul being like wax waiting for a seal. "Souls are like wax waiting for a seal. By themselves they have no special identity. 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 of 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 fulfillment."