

In The Belly Of A Paradox:

A Celebration Of Contradictions
In The Thought Of
Thomas Merton

Parker J. Palmer

FORWARD BY Henri Nouwen



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR Parker J. Palmer is Dean of Studies at Pendle Hill, where he and Sally Palmer and their three children – Brent, Todd, and Carrie – have lived since 1974. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley in the late sixties, and then spent five years in Washington, D.C., working in community organization. During that time he began to read Thomas Merton. Raised a Protestant, Parker found in the writings of this Trappist monk something his own tradition had not stressed: The centrality of contemplation in a life of action. A desire to learn more about contemplative action is part of what led the Palmers to Pendle Hill and to an exploration of Quaker faith and practice.

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Foreword

This pamphlet is a happy surprise. It is a surprise because of the smiling way in which it calls our attention to the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. In this, it differs from most writing on him. Merton, who never thought of himself as a scholar, has probably inspired more scholarly theses than any other contemporary spiritual writer. In the ten years since his death, numerous “Merton and . . .” books have appeared: *Merton and Prayer*, *Merton and Peace*, *Merton and Social Criticism*, *Merton and the Self*. Few un-systematic authors have been so thoroughly systematized.

Thus, this pamphlet is a surprise. It touches the spirit of Merton precisely at the point of his deep awareness of the danger of systematization. Parker Palmer has been able to evoke the brilliant capriciousness that made Merton such an endearing author. The same Merton who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* with few kind words for the world and its illusions also made it clear through his poems, photographs, drawings, and numerous articles that he loved the world more than most people do. The same Merton who published endless studies on contemplation also said, ‘If we are always thinking about contemplation, contemplation, contemplation . . . we overlook the ordinary, authentic, real experiences of everyday life as things to enjoy. . . .’ The same Merton who sent serious letters to James Baldwin, Boris Pasternak, Evelyn Waugh, and Roman Cardinals also wrote a hilarious series of clownish anti-letters to his life-long friend Robert Lax. Merton was a deeply committed Christian, but more open to the spirit of Buddhism than

most Christians; he was a very obedient monk, but more critical toward his superiors than most monks; he was a real ascetic, but enjoyed beer and champagne more than most ascetics are able to confess. He was sobering and funny, strict and open, Catholic and Zen, hard working and always available to others.

Parker Palmer, whose own life is so full of creative contradictions, has found in Merton a brother whose inconsistencies and irregularities invite us to enter them deeply and to discover there, beyond all contradictions, the One who cannot be caught, grasped, or understood but only intuited and recognized with a smile. Parker Palmer knows Merton well because he has an affinity with him. Parker has done many things people do who want to “make it” in the world. But somewhere and somehow he became as crazy as Merton. Now he lives with his wife and children in the community at Pendle Hill, is a kind of Quaker novice-master, rakes leaves, reads and writes books, serves at table, and does not seem to worry too much about how it all fits together. Parker must have loved Merton as much as he studied him, and must have understood Merton long before he had worked his way through Merton’s bibliography. This essay is short, fresh, and obviously written with a twinkle in the eye. And the greatest surprise of all is that it not only leads us closer to the spirit of Merton, but closer to Him in whose service Merton juggled contradiction and paradox.

It is a reason for joy to see these two kindred spirits together!

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Introduction

In 1953, in his twelfth year as a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton published a journal of his days called **The Sign of Jonas**. Fifteen years later, when I first read his preface, I knew I had been touched by a teacher and a friend:

The sign Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the “sign of Jonas the prophet” that is, the sign of his own resurrection. The life of every . . . Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas because we all live by the power of Christ’s resurrection. But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign . . . because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.¹

Here is Merton’s writing at its best, sturdy with religious conviction but laced with wit and fresh images of the religious life. That would have been enough for me, but I was drawn by substance as well as style, by the idea of life as a whale of a paradox!

Contradiction, paradox, the tension of opposites: These have always been at the heart of my experience, and I think I am not alone. I am tugged one way and then the other. My beliefs and my actions often seem at odds. My strengths are sometimes cancelled by my weaknesses. My self, and the world around me, seems more a study in dissonance than a harmony of the integrated whole.

More than once have I despaired at the corrosive effect of these contradictions on my “spiritual life.” I had thought that living spiritually required a resolution of all contraries and tensions before one could hope, as it were, to earn one’s

wings. But as I labored to remove the contradictions before presenting myself to God, my spiritual life became a continual preliminary attraction, never quite getting to the main event. I thought I was living in the spirit by railing against life's inconsistencies when, in fact, I was becoming more frustrated, more anxious, more withdrawn from those vital places in life where contradiction always lurks.

For me, there was light and liberation in Merton's image of life in the belly of a paradox. Perhaps one need not resolve life's contradictions single-handedly. Perhaps one could be swallowed up by paradox and still be delivered to the shores of one's destiny — even as was Jonah from the belly of the whale. Perhaps contradictions are not impediments to the spiritual life, but an integral part of it. Through them we may learn that the power for life comes from God, not from us.

Thomas Merton was well qualified to teach us about contradiction and paradox! He was a monk vowed to solitude and silence — who wrote more than sixty books and became an international figure in his own time. He withdrew from the pace and demands of worldly life to pray among Kentucky's wooded hills — and yet saw prophetically into racism and militarism and became patron saint of social activists. A Roman Catholic whose early writings are sometimes too parochial for our tastes — he became a universal religious figure, steeped in Taoism and Zen, claimed by some in the East to be an incarnate Buddha.

In the midst of his contradictions Merton found the grace of God, and that discovery is a gift to all of us whose lives are pulled between the poles. In the preface to a collection of his essays Merton writes:

I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologizing for the fact, even to myself. And perhaps this preface is

an indication that I have not yet completely learned. No matter. It is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and is still a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me; if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy.²

In this essay I want to explore and celebrate some contradictions in Merton's thought and see what he has to teach us about our own.

Contradiction, Paradox, And The Life Of The Spirit

The contradictions of life are not accidental. Nor do they result from inept living. They are inherent in human nature and in the circumstances which surround our lives. We are, as the Psalmist says, "little less than God" but also "like the beasts that perish" (Psalms 8:5 and 49:12). Our highest insights and aspirations fail because we are encumbered by flesh which is too weak — or too strong. When we rise to soar on wings of spirit, we discover weights of need and greed tied to our feet. The things we seek consciously and with effort tend to evade us, while our blessings come quietly and unbidden. When we achieve what we most want, our pleasure in it often fades.

These contradictions of private life are multiplied over and over when we enter the world of work and politics. Here are a thousand factions competing for scarce resources. Here is a realm where values cancel each other out: How, for example, can we simultaneously have freedom and equality? In this arena vision yields to compromise, the law of collective survival. This is a self-negating world

where even our finest achievements often yield negative byproducts: Medical science lengthens human life only to increase starvation in some societies and draw out the agonies of aging in others.

Beyond the private and the public realms are contradictions we might call cosmic, which implicate even God! These are the religious conundrums which have bedeviled men and women for millennia. Why do the wicked flourish while the virtuous wither? How can there be evil in the universe if God is loving, all-knowing, and omnipotent? At every level our lives are stretched and torn between opposites which seem irreconcilable, discouraging, defeating.

Thomas Merton has helped me understand that the way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. The points at which we meet and reckon with contradiction are turning points at which we either enter or evade the mystery of God, the God who said: "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe. . . ." (Isaiah 45:7).

The spiritual journey sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. And should it not be so? The wholeness of the Spirit contrasts dramatically with the brokenness of our persons and our world. The truth of the Spirit only highlights the untruths we are living. Indeed, the ultimate contradiction is the apparent opposition between God's light and our own shadowed lives.

For some of us the contrast between God and world is so great that we abandon the spiritual quest. We turn away from God's brilliance and walk in shadows because we do not wish to see ourselves in an unbecoming light. For others, the tension is resolved by disowning the dark world and trying to live in a bright but private realm. We hold the world at a distance and seek out situations which satisfy our need to stay "pure." In one way or the other, we remove

ourselves from the great dramas of life where God and world interact, where contradiction abounds.

But there is a third way to respond. A way beyond choosing either this pole or that. Let us call it “living the contradictions.” Here we refuse to flee from tension but allow that tension to occupy the center of our lives. And why would anyone walk this difficult path? Because by doing so we may receive one of the great gifts of the spiritual life — the transformation of contradiction into paradox. The poles of either/or, the choices we thought we had to make, may become signs of a larger truth than we had even dreamed. And in that truth, our lives may become larger than we had ever imagined possible!

At this point I need to define my terms and begin to use them with more precision. A contradiction (says the Oxford English Dictionary) is a statement containing elements logically at variance with one another. A paradox is a statement which seems self-contradictory but on investigation may prove to be essentially true.

Many religious insights would be judged contradictions by the standards of normal logic. But by spiritual standards these insights contain paradoxical truth:

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:34)

Before I grasped Zen the mountains were nothing but mountains and the rivers nothing but rivers. When I got into Zen, the mountains were no longer mountains and the rivers no longer rivers. But when I understood Zen, the mountains were only mountains and the rivers only rivers. (Zen saying)

Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more! (Popular song)

Spiritual truth will often seem self-contradictory when judged by the logic of the world. Where that logic wants to

separate and divide, the spiritual eye looks for what Merton called life's "hidden wholeness," the underlying unity of all things. Logic assumes that there is no truth which violates the rules devised by human mind. Faith assumes that those rules become less and less useful as our questions grow deeper. The spiritual life proceeds in a kind of trembling certainty that God's truth lies beyond all verities of logic.

But a word or two of warning before I move on. By emphasizing the possibility of paradox, I do not intend to endorse the popular view that all opposites are the same, that there are no critical differences between true and false, right and wrong. Such a view weakens the idea of paradox whose truth comes only from the fact that the world is full of very real opposites pulling vigorously against each other. We appreciate paradox not by abandoning our critical faculties but by sharpening them.

I have heard the term "paradox" used as if it were an incantation which could magically remove life's tensions and relieve us of responsibility for them. I have heard people use the word to describe the gap between behavior and belief as if the word itself would excuse the contradiction, sanctify it, and allow us to forget about it. But that is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," and nothing could be further from Merton's understanding or mine.

Our first need is not to release the tension, but to live the contradictions, fully and painfully aware of the poles between which our lives are stretched. As we do so, we will be plunged into paradox, at the center of which we will find transcendence and new life. Our lives will be changed. Both our beliefs and our actions will become more responsive to God's spirit. But this will happen only as we allow ourselves to be engulfed by contradictions which God alone can resolve. With Jonah, we will be delivered. But first we will be swallowed into darkness.

Just as Thomas Merton helps us understand ourselves through contradiction and paradox, so those principles help

us understand his thought. In hopes of achieving both goals, I want to look at Merton's treatment of three topics: Marxism, Taoism, and the way of the cross. Though these may seem contradictory ways of life, Merton shows how the tensions between them open into deeper truth. I should caution the reader that my assessment of these matters, though rooted in Merton, grows out of my own thinking as well. I hope I have not contradicted anything the monk might have said. But if I have, may paradox abound!

The Way Of Marxism

Merton's interest in Marxism probably had several sources. The fact that many Christians regard Marxism as anathema doubtless appealed to that part of Merton which loved to explore "the other side" of everything. Merton, who entered the monastery in a mood of world-rejection, learned there to love the world, and one expression of his love was to keep informed about the political philosophy by which a majority of the world lives. But above all, Merton must have been attracted by the fact that contradiction was at the heart of Marx's own life and thought, as Merton points out in a passage which reveals the monk as well as Marx:

Karl Marx would not work for his living, or even write for money. Yet he got Engels to write articles for him, which he sold to the New York **Tribune**. Engels practically supported Marx in England: Engels, who was one of the bosses in his father's capitalist firm in Manchester. Out of these contradictions springs the genial theory of alienation, and the humanism of labor. . . . Shall we on this account disbelieve everything he said? No, for he was a great diagnostician. He saw the disease of modern man, who has come to be ruled by things and by money, and by machines. . . . In

any case, there is no point in judging the inner contradictions of Marx's life with an exaggerated severity. All men, especially all who have talent, tend to be inconsistent. Their very struggle with their inconsistency seeks an outlet and a solution in creative works. But what is significant in Marx is that his analysis of society is a keenly intuitive analysis of inconsistency. He is quick to see the hidden contradictions in every ideology, every social structure.³

According to Marx (who borrowed from Hegel) contradiction is the mainspring of history, the source of historical movement. This process, called the dialectic, moves through three stages. At any given moment, history is dominated by a "thesis," or a dominant state of affairs. But sooner or later opposition develops to that thesis, an opposition called the "antithesis." Out of that tension a new and higher state called a "synthesis" will emerge. But then the synthesis becomes a thesis, a new contradiction sets in, and the historical dynamic continues.

Marx believed that the dialectic always develops around economic factors — that is, he believed that economic factors are the only real forces shaping and changing human life. The contradictions which move history arise from the different, and unequal, relations people have to the center of economic power and privilege. In modern times, under capitalism, the basic contradiction is easily described: A few people are owners who control the economic power, while the vast majority are workers who are controlled by it. Under capitalism, then, the contradiction is one of economic injustice. Many men and women are exploited through hard work and low pay so that a few may grow over-rich through no effort or virtue of their own. Marx believed that this contradiction would eventually become a conflict, with workers rising up against the owners in a great revolution.

The outcome of this collision of thesis and antithesis would be a new synthesis — the classless society, in which economic injustice is eradicated, in which each gives according to ability and each takes according to need.

Marx was explicit about the role of religion in all this: “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Marx argued that religion served merely to justify economic injustice, to rationalize the difference between the haves and the have-nots. Rich people believe that God has especially blessed them and that the poor somehow deserve their plight, while poor people hold a faith which promises a better life beyond this world, “pie in the sky when you die by-and-by.” As Marx saw it, religion possesses no power for change toward justice, only the power to drug people into acceptance of an unjust *status quo*.

On the face of it, Marxism and Christianity seem to be as far apart as two ways of thinking can be. But contradictions tend to travel away from each other on great circles which come together again, and Merton knew that Marxism and Christianity, though beginning with very different assumptions about the nature of reality, come full circle in certain respects. Despite the fact that Marx denied God, Marxism reminds us of key elements in Christian faith which Christians have a bad habit of forgetting.

Marxism and Christianity converge in the idea that “religion is the opiate of the people,” if by religion we mean its intellectual and institutional forms. Jesus, the prophets, and many mystics tried to give voice to the living experience of God against the dead forms of their times; Bonhoeffer even spoke about “religionless Christianity.” The ministry of every authentic religious leader is to break people from their addiction to inauthentic forms of faith and lead them into dependence on the one, true, and living God. Marx’s critique of religion in its institutional and intellectual forms is the stock-in-trade of every religious virtuoso.

A second convergence between Marxism and Christianity is in their common concern for the problems of the poor. Now, that claim could hardly be sustained on the evidence of the affluent American church, for here we have a primary illustration of how "religion" has become an opiate: We have largely lost that passion for the poor which so permeated Jesus' ministry. Marx was right. We construe religion to justify ourselves, and the religion of many middle-class Americans is designed to dull their sense of justice and allow them to live complacently in the midst of glaring economic contradictions. But when we read the New Testament with a clear eye, we see how often economics and salvation are linked: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20); ". . . it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). If these are not the most oft-quoted passages of Scripture on Sunday morning, it is not because they lack prominence in Jesus' view of things.

A third place where Marxism and Christianity converge is in the idea of the classless society. One of the earliest descriptions we have of a group in which each gave according to ability and took according to need is that passage in Acts which describes the church of Pentecost: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). That church is meant to be a sign of greater things to come, of a world in which all will care for all.

So there is a major parallel between Marxist and Christian hope, a parallel between the classless society and the kingdom of God on earth. The eradication of economic injustice, of hunger and hopelessness, is not the only mark of that kingdom, but it is surely an essential one. Marx was steeped in the Biblical culture of messianic

hope, a culture which proclaims that men and women and children will someday be delivered from the hateful relations of oppressor and oppressed.

A fourth convergence between Marxism and Christianity is fundamental and undergirds all the others. Both systems of thought and action assume that we are enslaved by a “false consciousness” of who we are, a false understanding of our origins and destiny as human beings. And both aim at shattering that false consciousness so that we may know the truth and the truth will set us free. Marx was primarily concerned to show people their bondage to economic powers, and to point out that revolutionary class struggle is the road to liberation. Jesus decried our bondage to sin (including its economic varieties) and proclaimed the liberation available to us through God’s justice and mercy. Though there are substantial differences between these diagnoses, the convergence remains in the midst of contradiction: Both Marxism and Christianity want to shatter our illusions with a vision of truth, and through the truth they want to win our liberation.

In each of these convergences, Marxism reveals something essential to Christianity, but something which has been obscured and forgotten through centuries of inattention and distortion. By pursuing the dialogue between Marxism and Christianity, Merton was able to develop a critical perspective on monastic life — a perspective which is not merely Marxist but stands on principles within the Christian tradition which Marxism helps to reveal. Such is the nature of a paradox: Apparently alien points of view can remind us of the inner truth of our own! I want to explore Merton’s critique of monasticism here because it applies with force to all of us on spiritual paths, monks or not.

The challenge that Merton drew from Marxism and put to monastics can be summed up in two words: Justify

yourself! In one of his talks to the novices, Merton reminds the would-be monks that every time they take a bite of food they depend on the labor of others for their very existence.⁴ Even the monk who has “left the world” is not really out of the world; as long as he has to eat he is beholden to the world’s labor. The question is, how do we make sure that these dependencies are not one-sided and exploitative? How do we live in fair exchange, so that what we consume is balanced out by what we produce? How can our spiritual labors be as useful to the people who feed us as their labors are to us?

These questions may annoy people who believe that our spiritual life, our relation to God, is an end in itself and thus needs no external justification. That is true — but only as one pole of a paradox! For it is equally true that “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). This challenge seems especially important today when the popular spirituality is narcissistic, self-obsessed, and self-indulgent. The religion of the American middle-class sometimes seems to mock the Gospels; it aims at enhancing the self-esteem of persons who have material comfort while ignoring conditions of poverty and pestilence which deprive a whole class of people of life itself, let alone feelings of self-worth. What are the fruits of your spiritual life, and mine?

When Merton responds to the challenge to justify monastic life, he reveals his capacity to transcend thesis and antithesis. For if he were to answer in a strictly Marxist mode, Merton would have to argue that the monastery should produce some useful material good. But Merton, who often carped at the monastery’s obsession with making cheese (and who used to joke about “cheeses for Jesus”), does not take that route. Instead, he argues that the monastery must repay its debt to the world’s labor by “producing people.” The same obligation applies, I think, to every kind of spiritual endeavor.

But what does it mean to “produce people”? For Merton, the answer is simple: It means that monks must develop the capacity to love. Merton makes his point to the novices by using the image of “the heart”:

If I love God, I've got to love him with my heart.
If I love him with my heart I've got to have a heart,
and I've got to have it in my possession to give.
One of the most difficult things in life today is to
gain possession of one's heart in order to be able
to give it. We don't have a heart to give. We have
been deprived of these things, and the first step
in the spiritual life is to get back what we have to
give. . . .⁵

Here Merton points to a deep and vital convergence of Marxism and Christianity. Where Marx spoke of the alienation of labor, Merton speaks of the alienation of our hearts. Where Marx argued that capitalism robbed people of both the meaning and the benefits of their work, Merton argues that modern life robs us of our hearts. Here is how Merton put it in his final talk, given just hours before he died:

The idea of alienation is basically Marxist, and what it means is that man living under certain economic conditions is no longer in possession of the fruits of his life. His life is not his. It is lived according to conditions determined by somebody else. I would say that on this particular point, which is very important indeed in the early Marx, you have a basically Christian idea. Christianity is against alienation. Christianity revolts against the alienated life. The whole New Testament is, in fact — and can be read by a Marxist-oriented mind as — a protest against religious alienation.⁶

What does it mean to be robbed of our hearts? For one thing, it means that our ability to feel connected with others,

implicated in their lives, has been stolen from us, for it is through our hearts that we feel solidarity with our brothers and sisters. It is a common malady in modern times, this inability to empathize with the stranger. Whatever one may think of Marxist politics, one must acknowledge that Marx had deep empathy for the plight of the poor, the kind of empathy Jesus called for when he said, “. . . as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). But the conditions of modern life have calloused so many hearts. We seem unable to feel, unable to have our hearts broken by the fact of children who are starving and parents who are unable to provide. Our individualized way of life makes us feel alone and unrelated; our competitive way of life makes us feel that our gains must come at the expense of others, just as their gains mean our loss. As Merton says, we don’t have possession of our hearts. They have been seized by concerns of self-preservation and self-enhancement, and by the maintenance of institutions which serve these ends. If we are to give our hearts we must get them back, and this is the first task in the spiritual life. How strange that Marxism, which seems heartless to so many Christians, would remind Merton that we must regain our hearts! Such is the nature of contradiction as it deepens into paradox.

But to be in possession of our hearts is not simply to be able to feel. Since the heart is an image for our whole being, we must also be able to translate feelings into action, to work for the kingdom. And here is where Merton and the Christian tradition diverge again from Marx, who relied on the use of violence to overthrow the powers that be. In Marx’s mind, the contradictions of history led inevitably to violent confrontation, and only through the warfare of the oppressed against the oppressors could the classless society come to pass.

There is another theory of social action which also faces the contradictions of history and yet comes to a quite

different conclusion. The theory of nonviolent change is committed to the notion that beyond every conflict there is a resolution, a synthesis, a common good, which will only be obscured by violence, but which will be revealed by patience, dialogue, careful and prayerful consideration. Since the contending parties are usually in no mood for prayer, it is the task of the nonviolent mediator to stand between the antagonists and by attitudes and actions serve as a living guide to peaceful and creative change. The nonviolent mediator quite literally “lives the contradiction.”

Thomas Merton was committed to nonviolence, and I turn now to one of its major sources in his life. Here we will see another of the many paradoxes which shaped Merton’s thought. From Marxism, which is surely the major theory of action in modern times, Merton learned not about social change but about the spiritual affairs of the heart. His understanding of action draws deeply from Taoism, which is widely (though wrongly) understood to advocate retreat from the world, acceptance of what is given, and a passive way of life!

The Way Of Chuang Tzu

Wu wei is the Chinese word for “non-action.” It occurs often in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a Taoist classic which Merton translated through his own religious understanding. It is a strange word to find at the heart of an exploration of social action, but there it is, a paradox in all its glory! Here is a poem from the sage Chuang Tzu which gives some sense of how *wu wei* is used:

Fishes are born in water,
 Man is born in Tao.
 If fishes, born in water,
 Seek the deep shadow
 Of pond and pool,

All their needs
Are satisfied.
If man, born in Tao,
Sinks into the deep shadow
Of nonaction (*wu wei*)
To forget aggression and concern,
He lacks nothing
His life is secure.

Moral: "All the fish needs
Is to get lost in water.
All man needs
is to get lost in Tao."⁷

On the face of it, the poem seems to counsel a return to the womb, a withdrawal from the problems and pressures of society for the sake of individual happiness. It sounds all too much like the new narcissism, and seems to contradict the Marxist impulse toward social engagement. If we are to see how this contradiction becomes paradox, and thus understand why Merton was so deeply drawn to the religious experience of the East, we must first understand Merton's critique of social action as it is commonly defined and practiced.

Merton became the patron saint of social activists because he spoke so clearly to their condition. He understood what it means to be driven by the desire to hasten the coming of the Kingdom:

Douglas Steere remarks very perceptively that there is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting

concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.⁸

Note that Merton is troubled not only by the cost of activism to the activist. He is also concerned about the cost society pays for a type of social action which turns out to be violence in disguise. In his essay on "Contemplation in a World of Action" he makes this clear:

He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action to which men are driven by their own Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions.⁹

Those "Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions" are the core of our problem, and Taoism aims at rooting them out. Social action requires power, but whenever we humans come close to power, trouble often follows. We think we want power as a means to other ends, but holding power tends to become an end in itself. We think we want power to work for the common good, but are tempted to use it for purposes of self-promotion and self-enhance-

ment. Not only do these tendencies deflect our action from its original aims, they often lead to acts that are simply counter-productive. Taoism thus serves to criticize and clarify our action; Chuang Tzu wants to show up our conception of power for the delusion it is and guide us toward a right relation with true power. Only by moving with the Tao, or the Way, or the will of God, can we hope to bring peace on earth.

The way in which our illusions about power defeat our best-intended actions is illustrated by Chuang Tzu's poem "The Need to Win":

When an archer is shooting for nothing
 He has all his skill.
 If he shoots for a brass buckle
 He is already nervous.
 If he shoots for a prize of gold
 He goes blind
 Or sees two targets —
 He is out of his mind!
 His skill has not changed. But the prize
 Divides him. He cares.
 He thinks more of winning
 Than of shooting —
 And the need to win
 Drains him of power."¹⁰

Note that the poem does not counsel against winning. Instead, it is a paradoxical counsel on how to win! It says that the only way to victory is to forget about victory, to be indifferent to it. When Taoism tells us not to care, it does not mean that we should be indifferent to the many needs around us, but that we should not let our desire to meet these needs drain us of the power to do so. Every thoughtful activist knows how the desire for success and the fear of failure can pervert social action, and even lead to fraud,

with the activist settling for the mere appearance of victory rather than persisting for deep and lasting change. When we get caught in the dualism of winning and losing we become possessed by false and misleading powers.

That paradox is acceptable within the Christian tradition, I think; it reminds us of Jesus' counsel that one who seeks life will lose it, but one who loses life in God will find it. But Taoism pushes us even further by insisting that our actions must transcend not only the polarity of win and lose, but also the polarity of good and evil. And here Western sensibilities are offended. Here we want to say that this paradox business has gone far enough! For surely if there is any motive force for right action, or any plumb line against which our actions can be judged, it is in ethics, in the distinction between right and wrong. What D. T. Suzuki writes about the Christian reaction to Zen can also be said of our response to Taoism:

The Zen-man . . . who talks of going beyond the dualism of good and evil, of right and wrong, of life and death, of truth and falsehood, will most likely be a subject of suspicion. The idea of social values deeply ingrained in Western minds is intimately connected with religion so that they are led to think religion and ethics are one and the same, and that religion can ill-afford to relegate ethics to a position of secondary importance.¹¹

But religion is not the same as ethics. In fact, it can be argued that as religion declines, ethics ascends to take its place. From Taoism we learn that religion is a mode of connectedness with the creative force of life. When one is thus connected one's actions are responsive to the needs of life; when one is truly part of the body of humankind, then a hurt in one part of the body will trigger remedial action in the other parts.

But when we lose this connectedness with life, with one another, then we need a code of ethics to tell us what we ought to do. When life is fragmented and disconnected, our organic relations with one another are replaced by “oughts.” And eventually these oughts, these ethics, become an abstract system of thought far removed from human needs, a creed to be defended rather than a relation to be lived. The spiritual life teaches wholeness, integration with all being, and out of that wholeness comes true power and true action. Life beyond ethics is no libertine life, no denial of moral discipline; on the contrary, to live a life of true connectedness is a spiritual discipline of the highest order. John Middleton Murray has said it well, I think: “For the good man to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a strait and narrow path compared to which his previous rectitude was flowery license.”¹²

A number of Chuang Tzu’s poems portray the “well-connected” life, the life through which the Tao flows unimpeded into creative activity. One of my favorites is “The Woodcarver”:

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand
Of precious wood. When it was finished.
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be
The work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:
“What is your secret?”
Khing replied: “I am only a workman:
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting,
I had forgotten gain and success.

After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.

“By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

“Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly,
beyond doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.

“If I had not met this particular tree
There would have been
No bell stand at all.

“What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”¹³

For me, that poem has implications for action which are endlessly rich. Let me draw out only a few. First, the woodcarver, as Merton comments, “does not simply proceed according to certain fixed rules and external standards.”¹⁴ In our age, which is so dominated by method and technique, this comes near to being heresy! But deep down we know that mastery in any realm goes beyond rules and methods

(just as truly responsive action goes beyond ethics). Instead of rules the great artist follows the spirit, the internal flow, the nature of the thing at hand. This is the way of greatness whether we are speaking of woodcarving, music, or human relations: It is based on a deep mutuality between the carver and the tree, the pianist and the music, or between persons. It is not based on a code.

Second, this mutuality can be achieved only through discipline. It is not incidental that the woodcarver fasted before beginning his work — let fasting stand for all those disciplines by which we attain (in Merton’s words) “detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit.”¹⁵ Only through such disciplines can we transcend those anxieties about self and success which distort our actions. Only through such disciplines can we discern the intrinsic nature of the problem or persons to whom our action relates.

Third, the action of “The Woodcarver” requires a belief that things and people do have a “nature;” that is, limits and potentials. The modern mind does not hold this belief. Instead our culture teaches that all things from trees to people are infinitely changeable, malleable, plastic, and can assume whatever shape machine or method can create. Today a bell stand would be made from whatever tree is available (within the limits of economic feasibility) and produced by machine. If we want to change our human shape, physical or psychological, there are a variety of technologies which promise to do so. Most of our social action is based on this assumption, I think; that people can be seduced or compelled into whatever form fits the activist’s conception of how things “ought” to be.

The woodcarver’s message is clearly different. Here, true action, effective action, action that is full of grace, beauty, and results, is action based on discernment of and respect for the nature of the other. The reason is simple:

Only through such a relationship to the rest of reality can our action flow with the action of the Tao. Only so can we be channels for real power. Oh, we can make bell stands any way we wish. We can hack and hew through forests with no regard for the nature of the wood. We can produce a stand that will hold a bell without bothering about Tao. But we do so at great cost to the world and to ourselves. Not only do we endanger our own survival when we misuse and abuse the forests, but we also deprive our lives of quality. So it is with much of our social action, action which does not respect the nature of the other, action which depends on human power and is perverted by human pride. Through Taoism, Merton learned another image of action. It is one which we need to know in our own strained and frantic time.

Although Taoism stands on premises quite different from Merton's Christianity, and seems to contradict Christian tradition at key points (as in the devaluation of ethics), the more deeply we pursue the contradictions the more the paradox comes clear. For the Taoist image of action has much in common with the images of the New Testament. The idea that success is achieved by not worrying about success intersects the notion that we find our lives by losing them. The idea that we should act without fear of the consequences finds its counterpart in Jesus' counsel "do not be anxious about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). And the Taoist notion that we must empty ourselves to serve as channels for the Tao is echoed in the life of Jesus — he who renounced all worldly power, he who "emptied himself and "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," so that God's power could be shown (Philippians 2:7,8).

But still the contradiction persists, and the mention of the cross reminds us why. The man or woman of Tao is always portrayed as the invisible person, the person who attracts no attention and encounters no opposition. In the words of one poem,

If you can empty your own boat
Crossing the river of the world,
No one will oppose you,
No one will seek to harm you.¹⁶

And yet, in Christian tradition, the person who embodies God's word is the person who ends up on the cross. Opposition, harm, indeed betrayal, are, in the Christian view, potential consequences of "speaking truth to power." So, another contradiction! And one that was pivotal to Merton's life. For wherever his thought took him, through Marxism, Taoism, and much more, the cross remained his central symbol and reality.

The Way Of The Cross

The cross is, first, an historical fact, and it reminds us of one of history's major contradictions. Throughout the human story men and women have yearned for truth and goodness to touch their lives. But when these appear among us in human form, we are so threatened that we murder the one who fulfills our wish.

So the historical cross is also a symbol of contradictions. Its very structure suggests the oppositions of life — left and right, up and down. It symbolizes the way we are pulled between this person and that, between our conflicting obligations on life's "horizontal" plane. And the cross gives mute testimony of the way we are stretched upon the "vertical" dimension of life, between the demands of the divine and the fears of flesh. To walk the way of the cross is to be impaled upon contradictions, torn by opposition and tension and conflict.

And yet the way of the cross is also the way toward peace, toward the center where contradictions converge. The cross speaks of the greatest paradox of all: That to live we have to die. To walk the way of the cross, to allow one's

life to be torn by contradiction and swallowed up in paradox, is to live in the reality of resurrection, in the sign of Jonas. For the cross overcomes all contradictions. In symbol and in reality the crossing point is a point of transformation.

Let us see how the way of the cross transforms the insights Merton gained from the ways of Marx and Chuang Tzu. From his encounters with Marxism, Merton drew the paradoxical reminder that Christians must regain their alienated hearts in order to give them. Marxism, for all its materialism and atheism, begins in profound sympathy for the wretched of the earth, a sympathy which has been largely lost in affluent Christian circles. We are afraid to recover our hearts, afraid we will feel too much and be overwhelmed with pain. We fear the example of Jesus, that “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).

The problem with Marxism is not that it fails to feel pain, but that it has no way to transform that pain into a creative force. Instead, Marxism allows pain to pursue its natural and inevitable course toward anger, violence, and self-multiplication.

Suffering, unmediated and unalloyed, has only one outcome: More of the same. It may enlarge within the person who suffers, or that person may pass it on to others in a futile attempt at personal relief. The natural economy of suffering requires a continual inflation of the currency.

Thus, Marx’s prescription for a suffering society calls for violent revolution followed by a “dictatorship” of the working class. Somehow, these steps are supposed to lead to a society of equity and peace. But one knows that the pain will persist. We have no reason to believe that change by violence and dictatorship foreshadows anything other than more of the same. At best the Marxist revolution might cause oppressor and oppressed to switch roles (and there would be grim justice in that.) But Marxism has no means of transforming pain into peace.

In contrast, the cross signifies that pain stops here. The way of the cross is a way of absorbing pain, not passing it on; a way which transforms pain from destructive impulse into creative power. When Jesus accepted the cross, his death became a channel for the redeeming power of love. When we accept the crosses and contradictions in our lives, we allow that same power to flow. When we give our hearts to the world, our hearts will be broken. But they are broken open to become channels for a love greater than our own. Only as pain is transformed by love will the real revolution come, the revolution which promises to take us toward the peaceable kingdom.

With its emphasis on suffering, the way of the cross may be misunderstood as masochistic, especially in an age so desperately in search of pleasure. But the suffering of which Jesus spoke is not that which unwell people create for themselves. Instead, it is the suffering already present in the world which we can either ignore or identify with. If pain were not real, if it were not the lot of so many, the way of the cross would be pathological. But in our world, with its hungry and homeless and hopeless, it is pathological to live as if pain did not exist. The way of the cross means letting that pain carve one's life into a channel through which the healing stream of the spirit can flow to a world in need.

That stream recalls Taoism, "the watercourse way," whose aim is the same as Christianity: To bring our beings and our actions into the flow of a power which is beyond all names. But Taoism seems to say that once we enter the stream we float along in ease, while Christianity insists that the stream is full of obstacles and dangers, that the flow of the spirit will bring us to the cross. Small wonder that Taoism has had such appeal in the West where we endlessly look for an easy way out (and where we casually ignore the rigor and discipline inherent in the culture from which Taoism comes). Small wonder that Christian faith is more often preached than practiced!

But if the stream of spirit brings us to the cross, it also takes us beyond. The way of the cross is finally a way not of despair but of joy. If Jesus was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” he was also the one who said “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). For what we lose on the cross is the burden of falsehood and illusion. What lives beyond the cross is the uplifting power of love. The great paradox of the crucifixion is Christ’s victory over the illusion that death is supreme. The paradox of our own crossing points is that pain kills illusion so that truth can bring joy.

The way of the cross reminds us that despair and disillusionment are not dead-ends but signs of impending resurrection. Losing our illusions is painful because illusions are the stuff we live by. But God is the great iconoclast, constantly smashing these idols on which we depend. Beyond illusion lies a fuller truth which can be glimpsed only as our falsehoods die. Only as we have the faith to live fully in the midst of these painful contradictions will we experience resurrection and the transformation of our lives.

Merton spoke often of two illusions which must die on the cross if we are to become channels of the spirit. The first is our false sense of self, for that self separates us from God and from each other, and such separation is the basic form of sin. This is the self, full of pride and pretense, the self which tries to control life for its own benefit. This is the self which wants to resolve all contradictions by ignoring or denying them, the self which hopes to live without ambiguity or pain. This is the idolatrous self, the self which thinks it is God and wants to create the world in its own image. This false self must die if we are to live, but since it is the only self we know we struggle to keep it alive and often lose it only when we are overwhelmed by the cross.

Here, as everywhere, there is a paradox of course! In order to lose one's ego one must have an ego to lose. There seems to be a need for each person to build up a false sense of self, of difference from others, before the spiritual struggle to become part of the "hidden wholeness" can begin. And deeper still, there is the paradox that not until the false self dies does the true self come into being. The destruction of ego does not mean a loss of personhood. The individual in whom the false self has been shattered is not a faceless cipher or a pale imitation of the real thing. Instead, this is a person in whom flow all the currents of life, human and divine.

The second illusion which must die on the cross is our false conception of the world. The two illusions are related since much of the false self is built around our notion of what "the world" wants and demands of us. Merton was especially sensitive to our images of the world since he saw monasteries filled with men motivated by world-rejection. He fought this tendency in the religious life, this temptation to see the world as evil and the spiritual life as pure. As always, he insisted that we live out the contradictions and discover the underlying paradox.

In one of his talks to the novices, Merton chides them for thinking of the world as an independent entity, a thing "out there," capable of imposing demands and conditions on their lives." It is wrong, he says, to come to the monastery in order to escape the world so conceived, for the conception is false. The world, Merton insists, does not begin at the monastery gatehouse. It is *within* each one of us. We are the world! The world will have power over us only insofar as we grant it that power. The world will be a force "out there" constraining and diverting our energies only if we grant that illusion reality and let it govern our lives.

Again, the pain of living the contradictions is partly the pain of having our illusions shattered. We construct

the illusion of a powerful world “out there” because it lets us off the hook: “The world made me do it.” When the contradictions of life show us how incoherent and chaotic that world really is, we are loath to give up our excuse. It is somehow more comforting to believe that the world is a monolith which forces us into certain ways of life than to accept the fact that we have the freedom to respond fully to God’s will.

Freedom, finally, is what the cross is all about. After the tension, after the suffering, after the death, and after the resurrection comes freedom. As Merton put it, “The cross is . . . the only liberation from . . . servitude to the illusions which are packaged and sold as ‘the world.’”¹⁸ The cross liberates us from the idea that the world is “out there,” over and against us; the experience of the cross reveals that the world is in us, in both its glory and its shame. So we can see, in Merton’s words, “that the world is a matter of interpenetration and is not something absolute like a brick structure. The world isn’t something we have to adjust to. It’s something we adjust.”¹⁹ Since the world is in us, we are responsible for the world; and the shape the world takes depends on how we live our lives. The cross brings freedom, but with that freedom comes responsibility, or “the ability to respond” to the claims of justice.

And the liberation the cross gives us goes further yet. Not only are we freed from illusion and freed to respond; we are also freed in the knowledge that the world is redeemed by a God who suffers contradictions with us. As long as we see the world as unredeemed, we will want to redeem it ourselves. The consequences of that impossible expectation are well known: Frustration, anger, impotence, guilt, and despair. But in the light of the cross we can see the world and ourselves in a new way. For God is already at work here, suffering brokenness but always offering the gift of reconciliation. By accepting the cross in our own lives, we

will be brought into the stream of God's mighty work and given the gift of hope.

So, in the manner of paradox, we come full circle. By living the contradictions we will be brought through to hope, and only through hope will we be empowered to live life's contradictions. How do we break into this circle which goes round and round with no apparent point of entry? Some day, far out at sea, heading away from the place where the Lord has called us and lost in contradictions, we will be swallowed by grace and find ourselves, with Jonah, with Thomas Merton, and with all the saints, traveling toward our destiny in the belly of a paradox.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), p. 11.
2. Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), p. 16.
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (NY: Doubleday and Co., 1966), pp. 12-13.
4. Thomas Merton, "Conscience of a Christian Monk," cassette tape produced by Electronic Paperbacks, 1972.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (NY: New Directions, 1973), pp. 335-336.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (NY: New Directions, 1969), p. 65.
8. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 73.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (NY: Doubleday and Co., 1971), p. 164.
10. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 107.
11. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (NY: New Directions, 1968), pp. 103-104.
12. Quoted in Elizabeth Watson, *This I Know Experimentally* (Phila: Friends General Conference, 1977), p. 16.

13. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 110-111.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
17. "Conscience of a Christian Monk."
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*

All Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.