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# We Make Ourselves Real by Telling the Truth: Merton and Aging

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In *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton asserts that, “We make ourselves real by telling the truth”.<sup>1</sup> Where such transcendent truth uncovers the reality of the self, there is something about the “telling” of a narrative that gives life to the psyche in both the body and soul together.<sup>2</sup> When the process of ageing anchors itself in a formative journey of reminiscence and storytelling, it seeks to be grounded in the reality of spirituality, the very desire to become real. Reality then takes on a transcendent perspective in terms of awakening (to the risen Christ’s narrative of truth, love, knowledge, thinking and being cf. 1 Thess 5:6), and all that is good and beautiful. During “[t]he days of our life” (Ps 90:10), the challenge remains to make ourselves real by telling the truth – with all our strength, body, soul and heart – and to proclaim the Christ who blows embers of grace upon our memories, hopes, dreams and stories.

We may ponder whether the process of ageing signifies a call to take

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 188. Quoted in Robert Inchausti, ed., *Seeds: Thomas Merton* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> By psyche I mean the integration of spirituality and ethical responsibility into the life of the human person. The development of the psyche leads one towards the mystery and transcendence of the soul. The idea of the “psyche in the soul” suggests that the soul begins to have a more defining voice, as it were, in the self’s decisions, acting, and being because the psyche becomes – like what Levinas affirms – a “maternal body” which gestates responsibility and mercy. Where the psyche deepens its presence in the soul, we can further suggest the development or maturation of a sense of otherness. Here, the soul is the other or the gift of God’s love and grace “in me”. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 67 and p. 191. For a further discussion on the notion of the psyche and the soul, see Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), *The Acting Person*, Analecta Husserlina, *The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research* – Vol X, translated from the Polish by Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 220–221, pp. 256–257.

confidence and courage to tell the truth of the narrative of the Christ. In the “Gift of Years,”<sup>3</sup> by Joan Chittister, states of being like passivity, otherness and detachment, help to make ourselves real. This leads us towards a deeply intuitive and unitive reality with Christ. Yet, “making ourselves real” must engage a process of development and integration of value during “the days of our life”. In other words, the process of ageing gives time for the self to take courage (cf. 1 Thess 2:12), so as to narrate the truth. A helpful concept here is bodiliness, akin to the sense in which the psyche relates to growth and otherness in the body and soul. Bodiliness tells the truth of the body and soul through a narrative of ethical transcendence: of making ourselves real through the story of the risen Christ-in-us. The bodiliness of ageing can tell a formative and transcendent truth about openness towards the divine gift. In telling the truth, the wisdom of ageing brings to light the challenge of detachment from “natural and selfish desires”.<sup>4</sup> Such hard-won learning in the gift of years adds a corrective to any gnostic or docetic images of Christ, so that one may speak the truth of the personal narratives, memories and hopes which animate the body and soul.<sup>5</sup>

To come to an appreciation of ageing, the theologian would be amiss to be apathetic to the way God’s hand lays upon raw experiences, memories and hopes with “knowledge that is too wonderful to me” (Ps 139:5–6). God’s intent surely aims to bring us towards holiness, hemming all our years with opportunities for growth and generativity, knowledge and wonderful works. However, thinking about God can seem immense and overwhelming (“How weight to me are your thoughts, O God!” (Ps 139: 17)). Yet, to gather and explore thoughts, feelings and hopes about God may seem obscure (cf. Eccles 1:2), as we traverse through life’s strange, mundane and at times surprising encounters, events, twists and paths. And it is here that Thomas Merton has been a veritable guide through recent decades for many; and not just for the novice, religious or theologian, but especially for the one who “walks in the midst of troubles” and who hopes in the Lord’s enduring and “steadfast love” (Ps 138:7, 8). Thomas Merton’s rich discourse, reflections and stories about contemplation will be our focus and guide as we explore ageing and its phenomenological and theological relation to spirituality, the soul and body, emotions and pastoral care.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to Joan Chittister’s work, *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* (Katonah, New York: Bluebridge, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, “Detachment” in *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clark, 1991), p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> See, Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1977 (Reprinted, 1993)), p. 199.

## 1. Do We See Things As They Really Are?

Merton teaches how good it is to wonder and to approach the impossible. His writings unveil an eschatological horizon and narrative about the nearness and newness of God's reign. If we listen to Merton's words, we may well begin to taste something of the good, and thereby hope to pray to God at the end of our days like the Psalmist, "See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139: 24). Such listening may through time, transform into the wonder of the imagination trying, failing and trying again to trace out a little of the light of God's goodness – enough indeed to last a lifetime. For Merton, such inner searching and transformation demands the virtue of detachment. We find here a pathway towards holiness and a spirituality of ageing that perhaps just one or two have trod so well:

I wonder if there are twenty men alive in the world now who see things as they really are. That would mean there were twenty men who were free, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even to the highest, the most supernaturally pure of His graces. I don't believe that there are twenty such men alive in the world. But there must be one or two. They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.<sup>6</sup>

If we take Merton's cue to wonder about the ideal of holiness in human life, we may well ask the questions: Do we then see things "as they really are"? Or do our ideas transform into wounds which disturb and dominate the way we tell the truth and make ourselves real? "Truthfulness" itself finds a place in the psyche amongst other key transcendental, phenomenological or ethical metaphysical qualities of being like "obligation, responsibility ... self-determination, and consciousness".<sup>7</sup> The work of the psyche, the very formative process of "making ourselves real by telling the truth", relates the enigmatic soul to the body. Although we have a direct experience of the body, for example, by way of our sense experiences, we do not directly experience the soul. The emotions, especially as they are related to values, are on the hither side of the soul. Emotions, or states of mind, like melancholy, spontaneity and vigilance, orient the intellect's understanding of the good truth of spiritual discernment.<sup>8</sup> Hence, emotions seem to act as a spiritual catalyst; they help us to understand

<sup>6</sup> Merton, "Detachment," p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, 249–250.

and connect to the work of the psyche in the soul in terms of dynamism and transcendence, holiness, detachment, prayer, ethical choices, decisions, and behaviours “holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart”.<sup>9</sup>

We can begin to see that emotions have much psychic value. They are therefore an aid to unravelling some of the enigmatic character of the soul, giving light to the “emotive dynamism” and “natural inclination”<sup>10</sup> of the psyche – “that which makes a [person] an integral being.”<sup>11</sup> In effect, emotions help to animate the formative process of transcendence: awakening to the “delicacy of the conscience”<sup>12</sup> through telling the truth and wondering “if there are twenty alive in the world now who see things as they really are”. However, the psyche is not only *in* the soul by way of “emotional fulfilment.”<sup>13</sup> It also presupposes that it is integrated *in* the body to the extent of allowing the transcendence of the soul to animate and orient the body towards “action,”<sup>14</sup> or to use Merton’s term, towards the “true contemplative life”.<sup>15</sup> We may exemplify this analogically in the case of Paul’s encounter of the risen Christ along the road to Damascus – “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me” (Gal 1:15–16).

## 2. St Paul’s Encounter with the Risen Christ

Phenomenologically we may describe what Paul encountered as the working of grace through the integration of the psyche in the soul and in the body. Opening to the Risen Christ’s word of revelation, Paul’s body and soul – spontaneously stirring with emotions – began to experience the effect of orienting his thinking towards action. The beginning of a “true contemplative life” started to form in order to overcome his: (i) zeal for doctrine, (ii) ideological urges and (iii) violent visions to persecute and destroy (Gal 1:13–14). In contrast, Paul sought to make himself real in body and soul in his radical turnabout, by telling the truth through: (i) zeal for Christ, (ii) faith and (iii) visions of mission.

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<sup>9</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 221.

<sup>12</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 250.

<sup>15</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 164.

In effect, we can envisage that Paul, on the road to Damascus, gave evidence of an archetypal experience of faith through encountering the otherness of the Risen Christ's word of revelation and love. And after his encounter with the risen Lord, it is not surprising that it took him three years to return to Jerusalem. Paul made use of this time to journey into Arabia and later make his way back to Damascus (Gal 1:17–18). We can press further then and imagine that during these three years in the wilderness and desert of Arabia, he began to “see things as they really are”, that is, to inculcate a “true contemplative life” and thus find friendship with the Risen Christ. We could well imagine Paul proclaiming a joyful, eschatological narrative in the desert with Isaiah: “For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her; thanksgiving and the voice of song” (Isa. 51:3). The desert then would be a place of hope which nurtures a sense of God's reign (cf. 1 Thess 2:12). Imagining St Paul in the desert of Arabia, embracing the “gift of years”, discovering friendship with the Risen Christ and a “deep participation in His immense joys,”<sup>16</sup> would it not be surprising to envisage that these three years gave Paul strength to see things as they really are – that Jesus is the forgiveness of sins – and to take up the call to mission, with the many afflictions and sufferings this entails (cf. 2 Cor 6: 1–10)?

### 3. The Ageing of Life: Theodicy, Spiritual Growth and Study

The relevance here in terms of ageing is in terms of foreseeing value in making a Pauline journey towards truth, to see things as they really are. For Paul, this involves something unseen (cf. 1 Cor 2:9–10). Merton describes this concept succinctly: “But above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of divine light”.<sup>17</sup> For Merton, such faith is nurtured by study in “a school of humility”<sup>18</sup> with a contemplative, spiritual character.

Following Merton, we can apply his sense of study to the “ageing of life,”<sup>19</sup> and discover its character of truth and humility, as in seeing the limits of rationality in theodicies. We may then reflect on how contemplative study can

<sup>16</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> Merton, “Faith” in *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Merton, “Renunciation,” in *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 54.

overflow into a practical domain. For example, the “ageing of life” signifies an “unexceptional responsibility” of “suffering in the offering of oneself” for another.<sup>20</sup> We may encounter such meaning through reflecting on the accidents along life’s way, which can initiate change and radical conversion, like Paul, or sharing stories of personal losses and grief provoking questions of good and evil, or through contemplation on the meaning of detachment as expressed by Merton, who wonders “if there are twenty alive in the world now who see things as they really are”.

However, in the “ageing of life,” we may falter and leave the reality of time or depart from the hope it holds, and fall into depressive spaces of uncertainty or the illusion of trying to give a perfectly rational and reasonable answer in order to explain the existence of God and all human suffering. Indeed, theodicies have their place as a means by which to begin to reflect soulfully about ultimate questions of life, yet they also fail dismally in the end. Certainly Auschwitz has given witness to the end of all theodicy, as Emmanuel Levinas points out: “The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity”.<sup>21</sup> War, totalitarianisms, genocides and other forms of hatred destroy the substance of human faith whilst seeking at the same time to contaminate and annihilate religious faith. Similarly, self-interest can do great damage to human and religious faith. In particular, where self-interest invokes a competitive urge, it dissipates the very ability to learn to tell the truth – to become real – and to discover the spiritual value and meaning of, for example, detachment and renunciation.

At the age of seventy-five years, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach wrote, “In youth we learn . . . in age we understand”.<sup>22</sup> For Merton, wisdom is a product of faithfulness, a liturgy of responsibility for life itself, and involves the nurturing of study, learning and telling the truth. He teaches us that faithfulness and learning without “love of poverty and love of the poor” does not help our spiritual growth and maturation. Whilst emphasising the value of study, Merton shares an interesting story of “an old brother” to exemplify not only the value of loving poverty and the poor, but also the temptation of not allowing the ideal of humility (which is really saintliness) to overshadow the life of intellectual study. Merton reflects:

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<sup>20</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-Of-The-Other*, transl. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia Press, 1998), p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, p. 123.



It often happens that an old brother who has spent his life making cheese or bread or repairing shoes or driving a team of mules is a greater contemplative and more of a saint than a priest who has absorbed all Scripture and Theology and knows the writings of great saints and mystics and has had more time for meditation and contemplation and prayer.<sup>23</sup>

Merton's focus here is to speak especially to the educated monk on the value of humility. So much of what we do, think and say is obscure and full of vanities (cf. Eccl 1:1). The older brother becomes therefore an analogy of being, that is, his humble and poor life teaches the intellectual monk the value of humility and faithfulness, of growing older, and of seeing things as they really are.

#### **4. Older People Have What This World Needs Most**

Joan Chittister brings a reassuring, uplifting and nurturing tone to the “gift of years”. She reflects:

Older people have what this world needs most: the kind of experience that can save the next generation from the errors of the one before them. This is a generation, for instance, that knows the unfathomable horrors of mass genocide and holocaust. This generation knows that war does nothing but plant seeds of the next one. This generation knows that there is no such thing as “rugged individualism” any more; we are in this changing world together. The older generation knows that the only thing that is good for any of us in the long run is what is good for all of us right now. That's wisdom. Wisdom is not insisting on the old ways of doing things. It is the ability to make ancient truth the living memory of today.<sup>24</sup>

Chittister brings the reader to the door of wisdom. She does not want to open the door for us directly, as it were. This would be too easy. We need to grow old gracefully in order to do this ourselves, or perhaps we need to become friends with an elderly person who will show us a glimpse of the hard-won path towards wisdom. Chittister also mentions the horrors of the twentieth century that have marked and affected the existence and life of the elderly. These experiences remain raw and even unpalatable until they are brought into an ethical and prayerful domain through meditation, contemplation and storytelling.

Chittister tells us that the world is “changing” and the wisdom of old age

<sup>23</sup> Merton, “Renunciation,” pp. 196–197.

<sup>24</sup> Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, p. 126.

brings out common sense which insists on to facing it “together,” and not by the pursuit of a nostalgic past, but in the hope of making our memories sacred for today – the present that forms our heart and mind as much as our body and soul. Merton wonders whether “there are twenty alive in the world now who see things as they really are”. He is correct to wonder and to doubt. Yet, in his theological, prayerful imagination, an answer, or rather response, is ready to be sought from the wisdom of those full of years, who have humbly set out to study and to read – with reading glasses bought at the pharmacy<sup>25</sup> – and to reflect about our world by devoting themselves to “its ideals”. Chittister again reflects:

And why must the elders in a society immerse themselves in the issues of the time? If for no other reason than that they are really the ones who are free to tell the truth. They have nothing to lose now: not status, not striving, not money, not power. They are meant to be the prophets of society, its compass, its truth-tellers.<sup>26</sup>

Today, there are no doubt elders who are on the way to seeing “things as they really are,” that is to say, who tell the truth with a sense of freedom, and allow the psyche in the soul, for example, to take up the spiritual quality of detachment, among others such qualities. And by making the person real, reflecting upon, and proclaiming the narrative of truth, the psyche is integrated cohesively in the body.<sup>27</sup> The psyche opens a sense and feeling of what Merton describes as “inner peace” leading to the gift of God’s love.<sup>28</sup> This is the peace of contemplation, nurtured by way of detachment and renunciation. Merton explains:

True mystical experience of God and supreme renunciation of everything outside of God coincide. They are two aspects of the same thing. For when our minds and wills are perfectly free from every created attachment, they are immediately filled with the gift of God’s love: not because things necessarily have to happen that way, but because this is His will, the gift of His love to us. “Everyone who has left his home or his father, or his mother, or his wife for my sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall possess eternal life.”<sup>29</sup>

If, as Chittister suggests, that the “gift of years” gives time for renunciation

<sup>25</sup> Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 221.

<sup>28</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 165 and “Sharing the Fruits of Contemplation,” in *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> Merton, “Sharing the Fruits of Contemplation,” p. 208.

and detachment – “elders ... have nothing to lose now: not status, not striving, not money, not power,” then, to take our inductive argument further, old age can be fostered with a focus on contemplation and its fruits.

The development of contemplation has much to do with the otherness of God. Mystical experience fails where it acquires “other pleasures and ambitions which have a higher and more subtle and more spiritual character”.<sup>30</sup> To Chittister’s list of renunciation and detachment for elders, we may even add, with Merton’s help, attachments to prayer, fasting, pious practices, devotions, and even meditation and contemplation. Such “inordinate love for things,”<sup>31</sup> that is to say, loving these practices within themselves, imply more a love for one’s ego-self than for God. The psyche, as it were, becomes stunted in its effort to achieve growth in the body and the soul. The mind, attaching itself to spiritual feeling, or the imagination to revelations, serves to attract the senses of the body to become addicted to these inordinate, ego-fueled projections of infantile spirituality and religion, fed by experiences that often enliven the souls of beginners on their spiritual journey. The problem here is that the ego and sense become too active. Merton’s reflection of pure contemplation exemplifies the apophatic tradition. This tradition emphasises trust in the wisdom of God working in secret ways in the soul, and learning to mind your own business!

## 5. How to Mind Your Own Business

Merton has some sober, humbling advice for aspiring spiritual directors and for those whose “mania” for religious practice overflows into inappropriate behaviour directed towards converting others beyond their care:

One of the first things to learn if you want to be a contemplative is how to mind your own business.

Nothing is more suspicious, in a man who seems holy, than an impatient desire to reform other men....

Pay as little attention as you can to the faults of other people and none at all to their natural defects and eccentricities.<sup>32</sup>

And further, Merton advises:

Often we will do much more to make men contemplatives by leaving them alone

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<sup>30</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Merton, “Detachment,” p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> Merton, “Renunciation,” p. 198.

and minding our own business – which is contemplation itself – than by breaking in on them with what we think we know about the interior life. For when we are united with God in silence and darkness and when our faculties are raised above the level of their own natural activity, and rest in the pure, tranquil, incomprehensible cloud that surrounds the presence of God, our prayer and the grace that is given to us tend of their very nature to overflow invisibly through the Mystical Body of Christ, and we who dwell together invisibly in the bond of the One Spirit of God affect one another more than we can ever realise by our own union with God, by our spiritual vitality in Him.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly a common theme in spiritual direction is that God is the director. Merton's theme of "minding my own business" reflects a deeper aspect of detachment which gives hope the ideal of "making ourselves real by telling the truth". Where we tell the truth of existence to God – of our attachment to things and people – confessing inordinate pleasures, thoughts and feelings, contemplation takes on a richer hue, so to speak, namely that of passivity and otherness. The passivity of openness to God's will, and the otherness of solicitude to my neighbour's face and to God's word stirring therein, signifies "a Definitive Testing"<sup>34</sup> in the ageing of life: of making oneself real by telling the truth of one's losses and weaknesses, humiliations, sufferings and persecutions (cf. 2 Cor 12:9–10). Indeed, as Chittister remarks "Older people have what this world needs most: the kind of experience that can save the next generation from the errors of the one before them".<sup>35</sup> We only need to listen to uncover meaning in the heartfelt stories of the aged.

## 6. Old Age Tells a Heartfelt Narrative

The "Definitive Testing" of old age tells a heartfelt narrative. In all its rawness and stark realism, the conclusion of life utters a "moan,"<sup>36</sup> expressing the spiritual and moral burden of life, fuelled by depression, dementia and delirium. Davies tells us that the Hebrew sense of moan (or sigh in the NRSV) from Ps. 90:9, ("For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh,") – "is a compound word that emphasises with double

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<sup>33</sup> Merton, "Sharing the Fruits of Contemplation," p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> James Davies, "A Practical Theology of Aging: Biblical Perspectives for Individuals and the Church," *Christian Education Journal Series 3*, 5:2 (2008): p. 282.

<sup>35</sup> Chittister, *The Gift of Years*, 126.

<sup>36</sup> Davies, "A Practical Theology of Aging," p. 282.

force the weariness that attends the end of life”.<sup>37</sup> The Hebrew word for sigh is *hegeh* [הִגֵּה], emphasising a sense of rumbling, growling or groaning.<sup>38</sup> Giving spiritual and pastoral care to the elderly as they express sighs over life’s hurts with rumbling hearts, groaning spirits and even growling words may well parallel the exercise of contemplation. Merton reflects:

Therefore the best way to prepare ourselves for the possible vocation of sharing contemplation with other men is not to study how to talk and reason about contemplation, but to withdraw ourselves as much as we can from talk and argument and retire in silence and humility of heart in which God will purify our love of all its human imperfections.<sup>39</sup>

Merton’s reflection here encourages a perspective of sharing a contemplative disposition of spiritual and pastoral care with the aged. The challenge to “withdraw ... from talk and argument” gives space to become a “good host” and nurture a “poverty of mind” as much as a “poverty of heart”.<sup>40</sup> Where for example, the aged person, sighing in spirit for death to come quickly to the point of expressing daily in raw terms, “I want to die,” demands a contemplative response. This is a “difficult adoration”<sup>41</sup> to the other. This is to say, we must traverse towards a horizon of otherness, to a point of emotional [and spiritual] communion<sup>42</sup> with the elderly person’s suffering and groaning to die. In this “difficult condition,”<sup>43</sup> there lies the freedom to “install a personal relationship worthy”<sup>44</sup> of the Risen Christ, and the courage and confidence to practice pastoral and spiritual care rooted in contemplation. The sigh of the elderly person seeking to leave the world of life for death by telling the truth of the weary spirit within, “I want to die,” demands a response, a Eucharistic *habitus*, as it were, to attend to the moans of the elderly person’s spirit.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, “A Practical Theology of Aging,” p. 282.

<sup>38</sup> Strong’s Concordance, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/1899.htm> accessed 21/11/14.

<sup>39</sup> Merton, “Sharing the Fruits of Contemplation,” p. 212.

<sup>40</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (London: Fount, 1996), pp. 74–79.

<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Loving the Torah More than God” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, “Loving the Torah More than God,” p. 144.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, “Foreword” in *Difficult Freedom*, p. xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, “Loving the Torah More than God,” p. 145.

## 7. Spiritual Reminiscence

One such response is the practice is “spiritual reminiscence”.<sup>45</sup> Mackinlay and Trevitt describe this response:

Spiritual reminiscence is a way of telling a life story with emphasis on meaning. Spiritual reminiscence can identify meaning associated with joy, sadness, anger, guilt, or regret. Exploring these issues in older age can help people to reframe some of these events and come to new understanding of the meaning and purpose of their lives.<sup>46</sup>

The practice of spiritual reminiscence, deepened by Merton’s directions on contemplation, nurtures a time of faith and hope in approaching the aged person so that love can be tasted in a communion of friendship and grace. By nurturing contemplative silence, the other, the aged person in our midst who is sighing and moaning, may encounter hospitable moments to respond. Hence, where the carer approaches contemplatively, with a spirit of poverty and detachment, there is less space for the carers to dominate the conversation with illusions of egoistic fulfilment. The carer then is called to “renounce all things for the love of God” so that the aged one may tell “a life story with an emphasis on what gives meaning to life, what has given joy or brought sadness”.<sup>47</sup> Far beyond the noise of egoistic illusions lies a caring detached from reducing the other to mere facts, interpretations or personal experience. Where the purity of silence touches the aged person’s heart, who, for example, is moaning for death and finding life a moral, spiritual burden, a sacred time comes to life to make oneself real by telling the truth, to give meaning to storytelling, memories and experiences.

Explaining the art of nurturing “spiritual reminiscence”, or “a type of narrative gerontology,”<sup>48</sup> with a contemplative stance, one could draw the analogy of a pilgrimage. To give care for the aged person, whose face and tone of voice speaks of such feelings as “anger, guilt or regret,”<sup>49</sup> demands a difficult freedom and adoration. The pastoral carer is called to make a contemplative

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth MacKinlay and Corinne Trevitt, “Living in aged care: Using Spiritual reminiscence to enhance meaning in life for those with dementia,” *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 19 (2010): pp. 394–401.

<sup>46</sup> MacKinlay and Trevitt, “Living in aged care,” p. 394.

<sup>47</sup> MacKinlay and Trevitt, “Living in aged care,” p. 396.

<sup>48</sup> MacKinlay and Trevitt, “Living in aged care,” p. 396.

<sup>49</sup> MacKinlay and Trevitt, “Living in aged care,” p. 396.

journey – like Paul’s journey into the desert of Arabia – towards healing the psyche (“that which makes man an integral being”<sup>50</sup>) in the elderly person’s soul and body, heart and mind. And here we can take some guidance from Thomas Merton. Speaking openly about his desire and readiness to make a pilgrimage to Asia, Merton writes:

I need not add that I think we have now reached a stage (long overdue) of religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.<sup>51</sup>

What we might learn from Merton here is the importance of “spiritual maturity” where we make a journey and pilgrimage to a time where the aged person feels welcome and encouraged enough to begin to reminisce about the past, to share stories, and draw out meaning. Merton also points to the context of interfaith dialogue where “spiritual maturity” is a necessary criterion and foundation to engage and learn from another faith tradition. In the same way, for those who have yet to approach old age, remaining “perfectly faithful to” their era of life is necessary, with all its hopes, challenges, dreams and calls for formation. However, where “spiritual maturity grows,” we can perceive with Merton the possibility “to improve the quality” of one’s own life through engagement with and care of the elderly, whose sharing can become an inspiration for further “renewal” in one’s life. So then, we can perceive that “spiritual reminiscence”, deepened by a sense of contemplative presence, bodiliness and openness to God’s word in the other’s face, can be mutually a fruitful experience. Moreover, this suggests that making a pilgrimage to the door of the aged person’s soul demands the “spiritual maturity” of otherness.

In effect, the development of the psyche in the soul in the fostering of “spiritual reminiscence” calls for a deeper transformation so that, I become an “other,” that is to say, the other’s storytelling and search for meaning unveils in me, in the depth of my soul, “the absolute passivity of being a creature, of substitution”.<sup>52</sup> Here, such “spiritual maturity” or bodiliness is formed by something immemorial, namely the “original goodness of creation”. We can also

<sup>50</sup> Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 221.

<sup>51</sup> Naomi Burten, Brother Hart and James Laughlin, eds., and Amiya Chakravarty (Consulting Editor), *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1973), p. xxiii.

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 121.

perceive this in incarnational terms, where substituting for the other, that is to say, giving compassion and care, draws one closer to the divine mission of Son, whose humility in taking the form of a human being, and openness (absolute passivity) to the Father's will in the Spirit, brought forward the Trinitarian of the world. The practice of "spiritual reminiscence" where the contemplative sense takes on an incarnational character signifies religious conversion to the reign of God. Hence, by giving space for the aged person to share stories and find meaning, we adore the Father, breathe hope through the Holy Spirit and walk in the light of the Son.<sup>53</sup>

## 8. Attaining Wisdom in Love

Sharing his spiritual maturity, Merton exemplifies how interfaith relationships produce a formative mutuality: "Both Buddhism and Christianity are alike in making use of ordinary everyday human existence as material for a radical transformation of consciousness".<sup>54</sup> We gain here another important insight which we can transpose to the encounter of "spiritual reminiscence" in the care for the aged. Engaging in dialogue, Merton reflects upon the sacred in the ordinary. Given that "ordinary everyday human existence is full of confusion and suffering,"<sup>55</sup> we are given opportunities for "a radical transformation" of the psyche in the soul and body. Therefore, in the case of "spiritual reminiscence" where the aged person shares stories of the ordinary, of confusion, pain and suffering, or of "the beauty of art and music, to the beauty of a garden, trees, mountains, or the sea,"<sup>56</sup> the carer, vigilant to sustain memories, can lead the aged person towards what Merton describes as attaining "'wisdom' in love".<sup>57</sup> The eyes of the aged person may open and encounter the grace of a loved one, of being valued, of being forgiven, and of coming to a sense of the original goodness of Creation in the hope "that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Ps. 90:14).

Giving pastoral and spiritual care to aged people can be a contemplative way of telling the truth and a mode of being which can make oneself real. The "spiritual maturity" necessary, of learning detachment and renunciation

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 209.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: Directions Books, 1968), p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> MacKinlay and Trevitt, "Living in aged care," p. 396.

<sup>57</sup> Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 51.



just as much as openness towards difference, can become a fecund time for transformation even to the point of conversion, a radical turnabout, as it were, from egoistic illusion to attaining “wisdom in love”. Even though Thomas Merton did not speak directly at length about ageing, there is much that can be taken from his spiritual and theological writings and journals in order to develop a contemplative approach to the giving of care for aged persons. Merton’s insights of contemplation stemming from his monastic life, and his encounters with Buddhism, together produce a stance of passivity to God’s will. It also brings forth an experience of humility, that is, bodiliness and openness towards the other. For Merton, we are called to be confronted by the “word of Cross” so that it may radically transform the “stubborn ego-centred practicality” of our lives “geared entirely for the use and manipulation of everything”.<sup>58</sup> His words point to the richness of contemplation, of God working wisdom in our soul in hidden ways. It is God who we recognise in the integration of love in our body and soul, and who is the divine Word proclaiming the nearness and newness of God’s reign. Where contemplation of God’s Word overflows into “ordinary everyday human existence,” the giving of care to the aged may one day turn towards an Edenic vision of God’s reign or a sense of Christic conversion. Let us hope we may make ourselves real in order to listen to the good truth and true beauty of God’s word that lies in the stories of the aged one, whose truth tells a heartfelt narrative of what this world needs most: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:9–10).

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<sup>58</sup> Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, pp. 50–51.