

CHAPTER I

In the Belly of a Paradox

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 canceled by my weaknesses. My self, and the world around me, seem 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in the spirit by railing against life’s inconsistencies when in fact I was becoming more frustrated, more anxious, more withdrawn from those vital places in life where contradiction always lurks.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 my taste, he became a universal religious figure, steeped in Taoism and Zen, hailed by some in the East as 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 that surround our lives. We are, as the Psalmist says, "little less than God" but also "like the beasts that perish" (Psalms 8:5; 49:12). Our highest insights and aspirations fail because we are encumbered by flesh that 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 public world of work and politics. Here is a realm where values cancel each other out: how, for example, can we simultaneously have freedom and equality? Here, as a million factions compete for scarce resources, vision yields to compromise, which is the law of collective survival, or to the law of nature red in tooth and claw. Here is a self-negating world where our finest achievements may yield

negative by-products: 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 public worlds are contradictions we might call cosmic that implicate even God, the religious conundrums that have bedeviled men and women for millennia. If God is loving, all-knowing, and omnipotent, why is there evil in the universe? And why do the wicked sometimes flourish while the virtuous wither? At every level of our lives, we are stretched and torn between opposites that seem irreconcilable, discouraging, defeating.

Thomas Merton understood that the way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. The moments when we meet and reckon with contradiction are turning points where we either enter or evade the mystery of God. After all, this is the God who said, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe" (Isaiah 45:7). It is a statement that Christians seldom take seriously, preferring to blame the Devil for all the darkness and woe.

We embark on the spiritual journey in hopes of achieving wholeness, but long before we get there, the journey only sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. The truth of the Spirit contradicts the lies we are living. The light of the Spirit contradicts our inner shadow-life. The unity of the Spirit contradicts our brokenness.

For some of us, the tension between Spirit and self is so great that we abandon the spiritual quest: we turn away from

the source and walk in shadows because we do not want to see ourselves in an unbecoming light. Some of us resolve the tension by denying our own darkness and trying to walk where the lights are on all the time: we hold the dark world at bay and seek out situations that satisfy our need to stay “pure.” In one way or another, we remove ourselves from the great dramas of life where God and world interact, where light and dark cohere, 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 we want to do that? 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 ever imagined possible.

A contradiction, says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is a statement containing elements logically at variance with one another. A paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory but on investigation may prove to be essentially true. The insights of many wisdom traditions would be judged contradictions by the norms of conventional logic. But by spiritual norms, 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)³

Love is something if you give it away, you'll end up having more! (popular song)⁴

Spiritual truth often seems self-contradictory when judged by conventional logic. Where logic wants to separate and divide, the seeker looks for what Merton called life's "hidden wholeness," the underlying unity of all things. Logic assumes that whatever violates the rules of rationality cannot possibly be true. Spirituality assumes that the deeper our questions go, the less useful those rules become. The spiritual life—whose territory is the nonrational, not the irrational—proceeds with a trembling confidence that God's truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or. It can be apprehended only by the complexity of both-and.

But before I move on, a word or two of warning. By lifting up the promise of paradox, I do not intend to endorse the simpleminded view that all truth is relative, that there are no critical differences between true and false, right and wrong. That kind of silliness weakens the idea of paradox, whose promise comes partly from the fact that the world is full of very real opposites pulling vigorously against each other, opposites that can never be resolved into paradoxes. 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 that 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 and even sanctify the contradiction, allowing 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 whose heart we will find transcendence and new life. Our lives will be changed; our beliefs and our actions will become more responsive to God's spirit. But this will happen only as we become engulfed by contradictions that God alone can resolve. With Jonah, we will be delivered, but only if we allow ourselves to 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 would seem to be contradictory ways of life, Merton shows how the tensions among them open into deeper truth.

My reflections on these matters, though rooted in Merton, grow 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. He entered the monastery in a mood of world rejection, but he soon learned to love the world. That love led him to stay informed about what made the world tick, and in Merton's time, Marxism was a key part of the clockwork. The fact that many Christians regard Marx as the Antichrist no doubt appealed to the contrarian in Merton, who loved to explore "the other side" of everything, especially if it might puncture Christian piosity. And surely Merton was attracted by the fact that contradiction was at the heart of Marx's own life and thought, as Merton points out in a passage that reveals the monk as much 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.⁵

According to Marx (who borrowed from Hegel), contradiction is the engine 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 dialectical drama continues.

Marx believed that the dialectic always develops around economic factors, that economic factors are the only real forces shaping and changing human life. The contradictions that move history arise from the different, and unequal, relations people have to the center of economic power and privilege. In the modern era, under capitalism, the basic contradiction is easily described: a very few people are owners who control

economic power, while the vast majority are workers who are controlled by it. Many men and women are exploited through hard work and low pay so that a few may grow overly 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 as each gives according to ability and each takes according to need.

Marx minced no words when he named the role of religion in all this: "Religion is the opiate of the people." Religion, Marx argued, serves merely to justify economic injustice, to rationalize the difference between the haves and the have-nots. Rich people believe that God has blessed them for their merits and that the poor deserve their plight. Poor people believe that God has promised them 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 contrary as two belief systems can be. But contradictions tend to travel away from each other on great circles that come together again. Merton saw that Marxism and Christianity, though originating in very different assumptions about the nature of reality, come full circle in certain

respects. Despite the fact that Marxism denies the reality and power of the Spirit, it reminds us of dimensions of Christianity that Christians have a bad habit of forgetting.

For example, 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, and Bonhoeffer advocated “religionless Christianity.” The hope of every authentic religious leader is to break people’s addiction to dead forms of faith and lead them to dependence on the living God. So Marx’s critique of religion in its institutional and intellectual forms is the stock in trade of every religious virtuoso.

Marxism and Christianity also converge in their shared concern for the plight of the poor. Of course, that claim cannot be sustained by looking at the affluent mainstream of American religious life. Here is a classic illustration of how religion has become a drug to dull consciousness, extinguishing the passion for the poor that burned at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. In this sense, Marx was right: we use religion to justify ourselves, and the religion of many middle-class Americans is designed to allow them to live complacently in the midst of glaring economic injustice.

But if we return to the source and read the New Testament with a clear eye, we see that economic justice and salvation are inextricably 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 centrality in Jesus’ view of things.

A third convergence between Marxism and Christianity is in the idea of the classless society. A passage in Acts describes the church of Pentecost as a community in which each gave according to ability and took according to need: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45). In early Christian understanding, the church is intended as a harbinger of things to come, of a world in which all will care for all. So there is a profound parallel between Marxist and Christian *hope*, one pinned on the classless society, the other on an earthly kingdom of God. The eradication of economic injustice is not the only mark of God’s kingdom, but it is an essential one.

A fourth convergence between Marxism and Christianity undergirds the other three: both assert that we are enslaved by a “false consciousness,” a false understanding of our origins and destiny. And both aim at shattering that false consciousness so that we may know the truth, and the truth can set us free. Marx decried our bondage to economic powers and proclaimed revolutionary class struggle as the road to liberation. Jesus decried our bondage to sin—not least its economic form—and proclaimed that liberation would come as we submitted to God’s justice, mercy, and love. There are substantial differences between these diagnoses, of course, but in the midst of contradiction, there is a common theme: Marxism and Christianity alike want to shatter

our illusions, reveal our true condition, and empower us to act in ways that will win our liberation.

By allowing Christianity and Marxism to create their own dialectic, Merton was able to develop a critical perspective on monastic life—a perspective premised on principles within the Christian tradition that Marxism helped Merton reclaim. Such is the power of 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 to all of us on spiritual paths, whether we are monks or not.

The challenge Merton drew from Marxism and put to the monks can be summed up in two words: “Justify yourself!”—words that are themselves paradoxical if you believe, as Merton did, that we are justified by grace alone. 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.⁶ 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 our 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). The challenge to make our spiritual journeys fruitful seems especially important today when so much that passes for spirituality is narcissistic, self-obsessed, and self-indulgent. What are the fruits of your spiritual life—and mine?

Merton’s response to this question reveals his capacity to transcend thesis and antithesis. If he were to justify monastic life in a Marxist mode, Merton would have to exhort the monks to produce useful material goods. But Merton, who often carped at the monastery’s moneymaking enterprises (“More cheeses for Jesus!” was one of his favorite jabs), does not go that route. Instead he argues that the monastery must repay its debt to the world’s labor by “producing people,” an obligation that surely applies to every form of spiritual pursuit.

And what does it mean to “produce people”? For Merton, the answer is simple: it means developing the capacity to love, which in turn means doing the hard work of reclaiming and deepening that capacity. 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.⁷

Here Merton reveals, implicitly, 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, just an hour or two 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.⁸

What does it mean to be robbed of our hearts? For one thing, it means that our ability to feel connected with others and 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 Karl Marx's failings may have been, he 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 callused many hearts. We seem unable to have our hearts broken by the fact that millions of children are starving and millions of parents are powerless to provide. Our individualized way of life makes us feel alone and unrelated, and our competitive way of life justifies our gains coming at other people's expense.

Merton is right: we don't have possession of our hearts. They have been taken from us by the drive to self-preservation and self-enhancement and by the power of institutions that serve these ends. If we are to give our hearts, we must get them back, and that 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 on behalf of the Beloved Community. And here is where Merton and the Christian tradition diverge again from Marx, who relied on violence to overthrow the powers that be. Marx believed that the contradictions of history led inevitably to violence and that the classless society would only be hastened when the oppressed declared war against the oppressors.

There is another theory of social change that faces the contradictions of history as squarely as Marx did but proposes a very different course of action. The theory of nonviolence

is premised on the notion that beyond every conflict lies a resolution, a synthesis, a common good that will be lost through violence but can be brought into being by patience, dialogue, and prayer. Since the contending parties are usually in no mood for prayer, it is the work of the nonviolent mediator to stand between the antagonists and, by attitudes and actions, serve as a living guide to life-giving change. The mediator quite literally “lives the contradiction.”

Thomas Merton was committed to nonviolence, and I want to explore one of its major sources in his life. Doing so will reveal yet another of the multiple and overlapping paradoxes that shaped Merton’s thought. From “heartless” Marxism, which was one of the major theories of social action in Merton’s time, Merton drew lessons not about action but about the affairs of the heart. For an understanding of right action, Merton drew on Taoism, one of the ancient religions of China, which is widely (and wrongly) understood to advocate retreat from the world and passive acceptance of what is given. In Merton’s thought, paradox knows no end!

The Way of Chuang Tzu

Wu wei is the Chinese word for “nonaction,” and it occurs often in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a Taoist classic that Merton loved and helped translate into English. It is not a word with

which the Western mind would launch an exploration of social action, but there it is, a paradox in all its glory! A poem from Chuang Tzu—a Taoist master who lived four centuries before the common era—gives some sense of how *wu wei* is used in that tradition:

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 non-action (*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.”⁹

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 personal happiness. It sounds like narcissism and seems to contradict the Marxist impulse toward social engagement. If we are to see how this contradiction becomes a 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 Beloved Community:

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.¹⁰

Note that Merton is troubled not solely by the cost of activism to the activist. He is also concerned about the cost society pays for a type of social action that turns out to be violence in disguise. In his essay “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.¹¹

Those “Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions” are the core of the problem, and Taoism aims at rooting them out. Social action requires power, but whenever we humans come close to power, trouble 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-enhancement. Not only do these tendencies deflect our action from its original aims, but they also often lead to acts that are simply counterproductive. Taoism serves to criticize and clarify our action, showing up our conception of power

for the delusion it is and guiding us toward a right relation with true power. Only by moving with Tao—the Way, the nonviolent 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.¹²

The poem does not counsel against winning—it is a paradoxical counsel on how to win! It says that the only way to

achieve victory is to forget about victory. When Taoism tells us not to care, it does not mean that we should be indifferent to the many needs around us but rather 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 our action and even lead to fraud, causing us to settle for the *appearance* of victory rather than persisting for deep and lasting change. When we are trapped in the dualism of winning and losing, we are possessed by false powers.

The paradox that we can win only by forgetting about winning is Christianity 101, I think. It anticipates (by four centuries) Jesus' counsel that if we seek life, we will lose it, but if we lose life in God, we will find it. Taoism pushes us even further by insisting that our actions must transcend not only the polarity of winning and losing but the polarity of good and evil as well.

Here Western sensibilities tend to be 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.¹³

But religion is not the same as ethics. In fact, it can be argued that ethics arise as religion declines.

Taoism reminds us that true religion is a mode of connectedness with the hidden wholeness of life. When we are connected, our actions are most likely to be responsive to the needs of the whole. Only when we lose our connection with one another do we need a code of conduct to tell us what we ought to do. When life becomes fragmented, our organic responsiveness to one another is replaced by “oughts.” Eventually these oughts become a system of abstract thought far removed from human need, a creed to be defended rather than a relationship to be lived.

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, a source of right action and true power. John Middleton Murry 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.”¹⁴

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 thoughts 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.”¹⁵

For me, this poem has endlessly rich implications for action. 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.”¹⁶ In our age, an age 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 codes of conduct. Ultimately, an artist follows not rules but 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 relationships: it is based on a deep mutuality between the actor and the other, not on an operating manual.

Second, the mutuality that right action requires does not, paradoxically, “come naturally” to us. It can be achieved only through discipline. It is no accident 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.”¹⁷ Only by such means can we transcend those anxieties about self and success that distort work in the world. Only by such means can we discern the intrinsic nature of the problem, the thing, or the person to which our action relates.

Third, action woodcarver-style requires a belief that all things and all people have a “nature,” which is to say limits and potentials. This belief is alien to us in the modern

Western world. Our culture insists that all things from trees to people are infinitely malleable and can be changed into whatever shape we want them to take. Today, a bell stand would be made from whatever tree is most cost-effective and mass-produced by machine. And if we want to change our human shape, physical or psychological or spiritual, there are technologies that promise to do so. Most contemporary social action is based on this assumption, I think: that people can be transformed into whatever shape fits the activist's conception of how things "ought" to be. Witness the activism that led to our ill-begotten war in Vietnam.

The woodcarver's message is clearly different. Here true action, action that is full of grace and beauty and authentic results, is 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 become channels for real power.

Oh, we can make bell stands any way we wish. We can hack and hew our way through forests with no regard for the nature of the wood. We can produce a stand that will hold a bell without bothering about the 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 that does not respect the nature of the other, action that depends exclusively on human power and is

perverted by human pride. Through Taoism, Merton learned another image of action. It is one we need to know in our own strained, frenzied, and violent times.

Although Taoism stands on premises quite different from Merton's Christianity and seems to contradict Christian tradition at key points (as in its devaluation of ethics), the more deeply we pursue the contradictions, the clearer the paradox becomes. For the Taoist image of action has much in common with images in the New Testament. The idea that success is achieved by not worrying about success coheres with 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 the counsel "do not be anxious about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). And the notion that we must empty ourselves to serve as channels for the Tao is echoed in the life of one who renounced all worldly power—who "emptied himself" and "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7, 8)—so that God's power could be shown through him.

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.¹⁸

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

The Way of the Cross

The cross is, first of all, a historical fact. As such, 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 truth and goodness appear among us in human form, we are sometimes so threatened that we kill the one who fulfills our wish.

The cross is also a symbol of contradictions whose very structure suggests the oppositions of life. As its crossbar reaches left and right, the cross represents the way we are pulled between conflicting demands and obligations on life's "horizontal" plane. As its vertical member reaches up and down, the cross represents the way we are stretched in that dimension of life, pulled between heaven and earth. To walk the way of

the cross is to be torn by opposition and contradiction, tension and conflict.

And yet the way of the cross is also a path toward peace, symbolized by that central place where the arms of the cross converge. For Christians, 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 hope of resurrection, in the sign of Jonah. For Christians, the crossing point is a place of transformation.

The insights Merton gained from the ways of Marx and Chuang Tzu were, it seems to me, transformed by the way of the cross. From his encounters with Marxism, Merton drew the paradoxical reminder that Christians must regain their alienated hearts in order to give them. For all its materialism and atheism, Marxism begins in profound empathy for the wretched of the earth, a sensibility that has largely been lost in affluent Christian circles. We are afraid to recover our hearts, afraid that we will feel too much and be overwhelmed with pain. We may talk a good line about Jesus, but we fear his example, 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 pain into a life-giving force. Instead, Marxism allows pain to pursue its natural course toward anger, violence, and more pain. Suffering, unmediated and unalloyed, has only one outcome: more suffering. It may multiply within the person who suffers, or that person

may pass it on to others in a futile attempt to find relief. The natural economy of suffering requires a continual inflation of the currency.

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 we know that the pain will only persist. We have no reason to believe that change by violence and dictatorship foreshadows anything other than violence and dictatorship. At best, the Marxist revolution might cause oppressor and oppressed to switch roles, and there would be grim justice in that. But Marxism offers no way to transform pain into peace.

In contrast, the cross says, "The pain stops here." The way of the cross is a way of absorbing pain, not passing it on, a way that transforms pain from destructive impulse into creative power. When Jesus accepted the cross, his death opened up 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—broken open to become channels for a love greater than our own. Only as pain is transformed by love will the real revolution come, a revolution that promises to take us toward the "peaceable kingdom."

The way of the cross is often misunderstood as masochistic, especially in an age so desperately in search of pleasure. But the suffering of which Jesus spoke is not the suffering that unwell people create for themselves. Instead, it is the suffering

already present in the world, which we can either identify with or ignore. 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 millions of hungry, homeless, and hopeless people—it is pathological to live as if pain did not exist. The way of the cross means allowing that pain to carve one's life into a channel through which the healing stream of the spirit can flow to a world in need.

The image of a stream recalls Taoism, “the watercourse way,” whose aim is the same as Christianity: to bring our words, actions, and beings into the flow of a power that is beyond all names. But Taoism seems to say that once we enter that stream, we float along in ease, while Christianity insists that the stream is full of obstacles and whitewater and danger, that the flow of the spirit will bring us to the cross.

But Christians also believe that the stream of spirit will take us beyond the cross, that the way of the cross is ultimately a way 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). What we lose on the cross is not our lives but our burden of falsehood and illusion; what lives beyond the cross is the uplifting power of love. The paradox of the crucifixion is the death of the illusion that death is supreme; the paradox of our own crossing points is that pain kills illusion so 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 the idols on which we depend. Beyond illusion lies a fuller truth that can be glimpsed only as our falsehoods die. As we have the faith to live fully in the midst of these painful contradictions, we will experience resurrection and the transformation of our lives.

Thomas Merton spoke often of two illusions that must die on the cross if we are to become channels of the Spirit. The first is the “false self,” a self that separates us from God and from each other. This is the self full of pride and pretense, the self that tries to control life for its own benefit. This is the self that wants to resolve all contradictions by ignoring or denying them, the self that hopes to live without ambiguity or pain. This is the idolatrous self, the self that 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 for a long time the only self we know, we struggle to keep it alive and lose it only when we are overwhelmed by pain.

Here, as everywhere, there is a paradox! 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. 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 that 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 because he saw the monasteries attracting men motivated by world rejection. He fought hard against this temptation to see the world as evil and the spiritual life as pure, insisting instead that we live into 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.¹⁹ 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. 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 *internal* that world really is, we are loath to give up our excuse. It is more comforting to believe that the world is an external power that compels us than to

accept the fact that we have the freedom to respond fully to God's will.

After all is said and done, freedom is what the cross is all about. After the tension, after the suffering, after the death, after the resurrection comes freedom. As Merton once observed, "The cross is . . . the only liberation from . . . servitude to the illusions which are packaged and sold as 'the world.'"²⁰ 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 the truth 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."²¹ 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, and with that freedom comes responsibility, "the ability to respond" to the claims of justice.

The liberation of the cross goes further still. Not only are we freed from illusion and freed to respond, but 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 sacred work and given the gift of hope.

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