

Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton

Wednesday March 1st

Hard Grace

Psalm 91 (*The Psalms, A New Translation, arranged by Joseph Gelineau*)

You are my hiding place, O Lord;
You save me from distress,
You surround me with cries of deliverance.

Merton's Voice from *Contemplation in a World of Action*

If one 'trains' and disciplines one's faculties and whole being, it is in order to deepen and expand one's capacity for experience, for awareness, for understanding, for a higher kind of life, a deeper and more authentic life 'in Christ' and 'in the Spirit'. The purpose of discipline is not only moral perfection (development of virtue for its own sake) but self-transcendence, transformation in Christ 'from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord'. The death and crucifixion of the old self, the routine person of self-seeking and conventional social life, leads to the resurrection in Christ of a totally 'new man' who is 'one Spirit' with Christ. This new person is not just the old person in possession of a legal certificate entitling him to a reward. He is no longer the same, and his reward is precisely this transformation that makes him no longer the isolated subject of a limited reward but 'one with Christ' and in Christ, with all (p117).

The purpose of discipline is ... to make us critically aware of the limitations of the very language of the spiritual life and of ideas about that life. If, on an elementary level, discipline makes us critical of sham values in social life (for example, it makes us realise experientially that happiness is not to be found in the usual rituals of consumption in an affluent society), on a higher level it reveals to us the limitations of formalistic and crude spiritual ideas. Discipline develops our critical insight and shows us the inadequacy of what we had previously accepted as valid in our religious and spiritual lives. It enables us to abandon and to discard as irrelevant certain kinds of experience which, in the past, meant a great deal to us. It makes us see that what previously served as a real 'inspiration' has now become a worn-out routine and that we must go on to something else. It gives us the courage to face the risk and anguish of the break with our previous level of experience (pp 128-129).

Reflect and Dialogue

What words or sentences in these readings most resonate with your life's experiences?

In what ways do you discipline yourself in your life? Why do you discipline yourself?

For whom are you willing to make sacrifices that are apparently at the expense of your personal satisfaction?

Are there areas in your own behaviour that need 'liberation'?