

ENGAGED SIMPLICITY

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Living a life of voluntary simplicity and contemplation

Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. - Thomas Merton

In a world of ever-increasing activity where we are expected to work hard, compete, strive and achieve, I deliberately take refuge in an alternative existence — a life of engaged simplicity. I deliberately turn my back on the values of our fierce marketplace culture in order to find solace and comfort in an uncomplicated, relaxed but committed life. I long ago reached the point where I thought, "enough is enough;" I have never regretted this. Too many though continue on the economic treadmill, reaching out for material rewards without questioning the motivation and values that carry them off into so much unnecessary doing. Life is a precious gift that we must all hold sacred. The underlying obligation we face in accepting this offering is to live it well. We can't afford to waste our time pursuing the wrong goals and objectives that'll diminish our existence. We must prioritize our lives and take them forward into a journey of discovery to find out who we are and our rightful place within this infinitely inspiring world of ours. Anything short of this is to waste life, to throw it away and miss the opportunity to reach out for an authentic, personal fulfillment and completion.

Thomas Merton: A Spiritual Journey

If anyone knew about leading an authentic life in pursuit of simplicity and truth, Trappist monk Thomas Merton did. In over fifty books, he poured out his heart and mind, sharing his thoughts and reflections on life. His tragic death in 1968, at the age of 53, never diminished his influence. He is still widely read and respected as an individual of outstanding spiritual insight. His core thoughts on simplicity have deeply affected me and made me think much more deeply about how I should live my life.

There is a perverse form of contemporary violence [that is] activism and overwork… The rush and pressure of modern life are a form of 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. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our inner capacity for peace. — Thomas Merton

Merton left a frantically busy work ethic in New York to find a peace, stillness and awakening in monastic life. His rejection of consumerist America and his newfound Christian faith slowly led him to this commitment. But soon after settling in at Gethsemani Abbey he came to the realization that an unnecessary busyness was even present there. When a guest speaker attended the Abbey and spoke about monastic life, one of the monks raised the question of what was the most “dangerous” aspect of this existence? The reply: "A spirit of pragmatism." Merton later commented, "Bull's eye!"

Merton's quest was to find awakening—insight into the nature of reality— and to accomplish this he needed to live in simplicity and silence, allowing the voice of God to speak to him. Merton acknowledged that this surrender of the will to a greater source is not exclusively Christian. In all religious traditions there's an emphasis on a need to find truth through an inner realization. Each may take a different path in their quest, but they're all after the same fundamental aspect. Merton's recognition and respect for this led him to engage in many interfaith dialogues with leading spiritual thinkers of his day. He also ventured beyond this domain to thinkers who were not bound by any form of religiosity, but were trying nevertheless to reach out to touch profound truths both individually and universally in nature.

Waiting: Being made ready

Last year was a particularly difficult and challenging time for me. My mum died, I received my divorce papers, I lost my job, I was attacked by a street gang, I faced a housing crisis and then I became ill. In this violent storm of circumstances, a maelstrom of adversity, I made a committed resolve to remain strong and trust in the universe to guide me through it all. I had arranged to spend some time in Thailand on a pilgrimage to visit some of the outstanding Buddhist sites in that country, but because of what had happened to me I decided to pull back and cancel. When asked by a friend what I would do by staying back in London, I clearly remember saying, instantaneously and without any apparent thought, "Wait." He then asked what I was waiting for and all I could say was: "If I knew what I was waiting for, I wouldn't be waiting." A few days later I visited St Paul's Church in Covent Garden. While walking around in this sacred space I noticed a wall plaque written by Euripedes that read, "What else is wisdom? To stand from fear set free. To breathe and wait." These few words, written over two thousand years ago, magically confirmed my decision to wait, to wait patiently and attentively, to wait quietly, listening and observing until I received from my inner depths, a call to move forward. Too often in the past I've gone charging off into misplaced activity, wasting energy in areas of life that now seem so unimportant. This time, after such a testing year, I decided to stay comfortable within the certain knowledge of not knowing.

Constantly involving our lives in perpetual activism could be considered a subtle form of slavery that restricts our spiritual growth and understanding. Perhaps we should abandon all notions of laziness and idleness—terms often used to discredit a meditative, contemplative non—activity—and instead embrace the implicit potential for self-renewal and liberation within the simple presence of just being. The words of John Milton still resonate with me after many years of feeling their weight: "They also serve who stand and wait."

Spiritual awakening: Our journey toward wholeness

We all have a deep, instinctive need to find peace, harmony, insight and meaning in a world that constantly distracts us with a very loud cacophony of activity and materialism. In former times there was much more of a spiritual way of being, with strongly shared family connections, with simple, nourishing, organic work to meet our needs and a leisurely approach to living that embraced, in an unashamed way, quiet, rest and reflection. Evelyn Underhill once said, "Only the mystic can be called a whole man, since in others half the powers of the self always sleep." I believe in former times there were many mystics, everyday mystics, who lived out their lives engaged in spiritual simplicity. Unfortunately now, despite our technological advances, many of us are falling asleep; we're allowing the gift of a cherished life to pass us by unnoticed.

The quest to find out who we are and our place within the overall scheme of things can never be found in the distracting noise of the marketplace. It can only be found in the depth of reflection and contemplation that comes from stillness. To live our lives as somebody else, to become something of a stranger who just happens to inhabit our body would be a tragic situation that—d devalue and undermine our innate potential and authenticity. We must always ensure that there's time and space within our lives to simply be and avoid the trap of constant busyness that will carry us off to only half a life.

Thomas Merton: A full life lived

We would like to be quiet, but our restlessness will not allow it. Hence we believe that for us there can be no peace except in a life filled up with movement and activity, with speech, news, communication, recreation, and distraction. We seek the meaning of our life in activity for its own sake. — Thomas Merton

Merton's journey was one of paying attention to the rewards that simplicity and contemplation could bring. He constantly refined his spiritual practice in a reductionist manner. In the last few years of his life he was allowed, after repeated requests, to eventually lead a solitary life in a hermitage to further this end. Merton's acceptance of an innate, unbounded potential within the soul of everyone never, ever faded. He persistently opened up and shared with his readers this core

issue of prospective renewal—a renewal that needed full engagement if it was to take us to truth and liberation.

Monica Furlong's biography of Merton concludes with his words that he'd seen "through the shadow and disguise." This clarity of insight didn't come easy. Merton dedicated his entire life to following a spiritual path—a life of "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk." He lived in a solitary stillness in order to find a depth of awakening that few of us can attain. But we still, nevertheless, contain these full seeds of liberation; it is our duty to nurture them as much as we can. Otherwise we could end up living a reduced life.

There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force that really changes our lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, and most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves. — Thomas Merton

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