Committee 5
Healing Through the Pathways of Wisdom

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EASTERN WISDOM TRADITIONS AND WESTERN PILGRIMS

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> They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seekinga homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.
>
> The Letter to the Hebrews 11: 13-16

The Bible abounds in references to "journey," stories of men and women on their "way." Most accounts of biblical journeys describe what people thought, felt, and did as they went from one place to another destination. The Exodus of the children of God from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land is the most dramatic instance in Hebrew Scripture. Other travel narratives are worth mentioning. The Book of Genesis tells how Abram and Sarai, acting on faith in middle age, left behind their comfortable lifestyle. They opted for a semi-nomadic existence in response to a promise that God would "make of [them] a great nation." The sons of Jacob went west to find their brother Joseph. The Books of Joshua and Judges detail migrations after the Exodus by the tribe of Dan and by the Levites. The Books of Samuel and Kings chronicle journeys undertaken by the prophet Elijah and by David. Ezra and Maccabees recount postexilic travels by the people of Israel. In the New Testament all of the Gospel writers ground their narratives by tracing Jesus's ministry of preaching and

healing as he moved from town to town. The Way of the Cross begins with a triumphal entry into Jerusalem; that path to Truth comes to a dramatic crossroads at an empty tomb. The Book of Acts maps out the range of the apostles' early missionary endeavors. Paul's ministry can be reconstructed through the letters he wrote to various congregations that constituted branches of the Jesus movement.

Sometimes books of the Bible invoke the "journey" motif to describe the ways people tried to deepen their relationship to God. The course of spiritual development, like physical movement, unfolds incrementally step by step. Perhaps two examples will suffice. First, from the Apocrypha, a Palestinian Jew has God reply to a seer's prayer as follows: "I will rejoice over the creation of the righteous, over their pilgrimage also, and their salvation and their receiving their reward. As I have spoken, therefore, so it shall be" (2 Esdras 8: 39-40). "Pilgrimage" here refers to the path a righteous people blazed to find their way back home to God. Second, in the fourth Gospel's account of the Last Supper, John reports that Jesus told Thomas that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Through His teachings of love, death on the cross, and resurrection Jesus worked to prepare a place where humankind could enjoy permanent fellowship with God.

In its allusions and message the Scriptural passage at the beginning of this chapter conjoins both physical and spiritual senses of the word "journey." Paul, contend biblical

commentators, begins by using phrases certain to remind his readers of the way that Father Abraham had characterized himself: "I am a stranger and sojourner with you" (Gen. 23:4). Such language, many in the Apostle's audience surely knew, recurs in Hebrew scripture. Besides the Psalms (39:12), words attributed to David in I Chron. 29:15 affirm that "we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as all our fathers were: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is no abiding."

Paul details how God commanded Abraham, Jacob and David (among others) to leave their comfortable environs. Presumably these men were receptive to making a change in their spiritual direction. Otherwise, they would have resisted the call. It is worth noting that in Paul's interpretation God did not ask them to repudiate their pasts; instead, Abraham, Jacob, and David were called to look toward an unknown future from the vantage point of an unsettling present. The trio got no assurances of happiness: Neither the Pauline letters nor other scriptural texts promised immediate rewards for being faithful to God. Indeed, Paul's listeners realized that these men did not receive on earth all the benefits they might have expected. It apparently did not matter. Abraham and his heirs were pursuing higher stakes: they were laying claim to their place in a heavenly country. Spiritual growth, according to the ancient biblical texts that the Apostle evokes, presaged a fuller manifestation of one's gifts, greater love for others, and, above all, a closer bond with God. No mortal could fully comprehend God's ways, but there

was a pattern to be discerned: spiritual pilgrims had to let go of habitual routes to success. They had to embark upon a path marked out by an Ultimate Reality who promised a richer set of experiences than had been available in past times or in their present circumstances.

In order to corroborate the parallels between Hebrew Scripture and the new promises sealed through faith in Christ, Paul goes on to remind his audience of the faith of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. Had he more time, the Apostle asserts, he would have chronicled the accomplishments of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jepththah, Samuel and the Prophets "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:32) Paul chose not to elaborate on this history. The mere mention of the _personae dramatis_ sufficed to set the stage for enunciating the greater glories to come.

Like the children of Israel in ancient times who traversed the desert to find their true home, the Evangelist declares, so too those who follow Jesus would discover their "heavenly Jerusalem, before myriads of angels, the full concourse and assembly of the first-born citizens of heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of good men made perfect, and Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood has better things to tell than the blood of Abel" (Heb. 12:22-24). At the

center of his Letter to the Hebrews, Paul reaffirmed the Good News of the Gospel of John-- Jesus is the Way. Through Christ, the evangelist proclaimed, human perfection was possible. Yet Christians' journey through faith was not without risks. "For the message about the cross is foolishness," Paul wrote elsewhere, but "God's foolishness is more than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor. 1: 18, 25). The divine promise of redemption was through the way of the Cross--a promise freely given to everyone, once and for all. Believers would be accepted into full heavenly citizenship, where boundaries were not limited through time and space. Hence Paul urged his brothers and sisters in Christ to transcend familiar aspects of their religious and spiritual exercises in order to attain a fuller sense of the human possibilities that flourished on a broader, mystical plane (Davies, 1967).

I have offered an extended analysis of how Paul envisioned that members of the early Jesus movement would reach "the heavenly country" because I believe that the Apostle anticipates the ways that 20th-century gerontologists characterize aspects of spiritual development in later years. Like Paul, researchers on aging are better at enunciating goals than specifying the steps along the way. The Evangelist could count on his readers understanding his allusions to familiar passages from Hebrew scripture. In marking critical junctures in the Way beyond the Cross, however, Paul tended to be elusive in his poetics: it is hard to put in words mystical descriptions of the Ineffable. So,

too, gerontologists thus far have focussed on what is measurable: they investigate the aged's responses to organized religion and how institutions address growing numbers of the elderly in their midst (Thomas and Eisenhandler, 1994). Less attention has been paid to probing the idiosyncratic ways that older adults struggle with meaning in their lives, especially as it may (or may not) relate in their view to some transcendent purpose.

Compared to infancy, childhood, youth, and early adulthood, the latter span of existence has fewer benchmarks that signify changes in status, attitudes or responsibilities. Neither retirement nor widow(er)hood, nor institutionalization, moreover, necessarily coincides with a shift in psychological or religious states. We know a great deal about inner growth at early stages of life, but we understand little about developments in maturity. With increases in life expectancy, however, there is a pressing need to probe continuities and changes in the aged's psychic maturation. The years that men and women have gained in the twentieth century have mostly been "added" to the latter half of the life course (Pifer and Bronte, 1986).

Much of the terrain for understanding how older people adapt and respond to opportunities for spiritual growth in adult longevity remains uncharted. "There is no road ahead," a 1976 Women's Seminary Quarterly bulletin put it, "We make the road as we go" (Morton, 1985). Uncertain twists in future pathways, however, do not discount the value of longstanding points of reference that might still serve our present purposes. We may

lack maps, but we nonetheless possess compasses (Achenbaum, 1995). We can start by identifying situations in which aging individuals are encouraged--or forced--to contemplate the mysteries of the human condition.

Mainstream churches and synagogues, gerontologists report, can and do provide a suitable milieu for investigating spiritual growth among aged congregants. Empirical data support continuity theories of aging, which postulate that older people have relatively robust senses of themselves; they can accommodate considerable changes in lifestyle, such as those associated with retirement. According to Robert Atchley (1995a), continuity theory also helps to explain how people adapt to different self-images in relation to finitude and their relationship with God by shifting and re-interpreting their spiritual direction. In times of illness many older men and women cope with adversity by relying on the efficacy of prayers learned decades earlier in their lives (Koenig, 1994).

Sometimes older people must let go of their traditional habits to move forward. If they are to engage in a spiritual quest, they need a different perspective on themselves and their relation to others and to God. In the process, they often acquire new cognitive skills (Shulik, 1988; Sinott, 1994). Sickness and disappointments or, conversely, new friendships and tranquillity may undermine familiar ways of thinking about one's connections with others and the Ultimate Reality. Occasionally the faith of one's youth and middle age no longer seems adequate

in dealing with new challenges or fresh opportunities. Under these circumstances some older people become receptive to expanding their worldview. They seek new metaphors for interpreting their lives, new ways of expressing their beliefs. Theologian Alan Jones calls this process soul-nourishing--finding the "true self in an ever-widening circle, first in the whole and then in God" (1985: 186; see also, Vogel, 1995).

Setting one's heart toward a path of growth, in biblical and postmodern times, may lead to wholeness. Nonetheless, as Hebrew scripture and the New Testament indicate, there are no promises of happiness or success on earth. That said, a greater reverence for the holiness of life itself can take surprising turns. Gerontologists have explored two such pathways in later years.

Taking cues from Jung and Erikson, several psycho-gerontologists and students of the humanities have been studying the process of growing wiser in old age. Most reject notions that movie characters such as Forrest Gump were wise--they claim that he was amazingly lucky. Nor do they accept the premise that humans can learn from the "wisdom" of animals or rocks. Scholars who have worked in this area describe the search for wisdom as an integrative, iterative process. It entails a conscious effort to meld thoughts, feelings and actions in a distinctive mould. Paradoxically, the ingredients of wisdom are at once introspective and transpersonal, immanent and transcendental in scope (Achenbaum and Orwoll, 1991; McFadden and Gerl, 1990). Wisdom is not the exclusive gift of maturity: the image of a puer

senex (a child wise beyond his or her years), after all, dates back to classical times. Nonetheless older people are more likely to search for wisdom in an intentional way because they no longer need to achieve the pressing goals ascribed to youth and mid-life. Instead, they want to make sense, in simple as well as profound ways, of fragility and finitude in explicating what it means to be human.

If the path to Wisdom affords greater appreciation for everyday experiences, following the way of the mystics heightens possibilities for attaining moments of transcendence. Those who grow increasingly observant in their faith traditions generally discover that most religions, including their own, have experiential strains. Others discover, occasionally by chance, the joys of exploring appreciating mystical traditions that, at first glance, seem quite alien to their own particular social setting. H. R. Moody (1995) hypothesizes that the aged may be in a better position than younger people to embrace mystical spirituality. Older people, no longer expected to be as "productive" in the labor force or as "engaged" in impersonal interactions as they once had been, have the time and patience to hear the silent language of mysticism. Atchley (1995b) agrees: "A nonpersonal state of consciousness is gradually uncovered by conditions common in later life--a quiet mind, a simplified daily life, and a let-be attitude toward the world. The deepening spirituality of later life is often subtle and nonconscious; it occurs naturally and spontaneously as a result of the physical,

mental and social processes of aging."

Along the course of spiritual development, particularly during the second half of life, the quest for wholeness sooner or later can become authenticating. Seasoned travelers integrate a lifetime of experiences at the completion of being. Letting go of fixed habits and prescribed roles--iron cages as likely to be self-imposed as culturally conditioned--enables them to be free to be, to demonstrate integrity. But there is nothing inevitable in any of this. Not everyone who ventures forth with good intentions ultimately finds their desiderata. Like ancient mariners, older people need guides, if they are to adopt alternative ways of knowing. It helps to reflect on how others sought a fresh basis for understanding on their own terms what they came to deem essential.

What follows are three bio-sketches of deeply spiritual men who looked beyond Christian traditions and mastered Eastern wisdom traditions. Alan Watts (1915-73) wrote twenty books on the philosophy and psychology of religion, on Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen. At the height of his fame in the 1960s, Watts probably was the foremost interpreter of Eastern disciplines for the contemporary west. Thomas Merton (1915-68) was certainly the most influential U.S. monk in the twentieth century. Best known for works such as Seeds of Contemplation and Confessions of a Guilty Bystander in addition to his meditations on prayer and his journals, Merton also wrote several books on his contact with eastern spiritual traditions, such as Mystics and Zen Masters and

Zen and the Birds of Appetite. The youngest of the trio, Andrew Harvey (1952--) actually turned from east to west at midlife. Raised in British traditions, he early on embraced Hinduism. For more than a decade became a major publicist for a young guru who lived in Germany. After a falling out with his mentor, Harvey discovered the significance of Mary, "the hidden force and secret of Christianity." Despite differences in background and motivation, Watts, Merton, and Harvey share in common their unorthodox pilgrimages. They have been willing to take unconventional risks in the pursuit of spiritual growth. By borrowing from various traditions without ignoring their particularities, each developed a distinctive sense of himself in relation to others and in his bond to God.

Alan Watts

"My life has been an attempt to reconcile what are supposed to be opposites," Alan Watts wrote in his autobiography, In My Own Way. "My existence is, and has been, a paradox, or better a coincidence of opposites. On the one hand I am a shameless egotist. I like to talk, entertain, and hold the center of the stage, and can congratulate myself that I have done this to a considerable extent--by writing widely read books, by appearing on radio and television, and by speaking before enormous audiences. On the other hand I realize quite clearly that the ego named Alan Watts is an illusion, a social institution, a fabrication of words and symbols without the slightest

substantial reality" (Watts, 1972: 47). Watts liked the phrase, "coincidence of opposites;" it was the title he proposed for his autobiography. He preferred it to a term such as "paradox," a literary construct popular among those who delighted in words and ideas in the 1950s and 1960s. Given the way he lived his life, "coincidence" is quite appropriate: it suggests a certain playful, highly individuated, way of coming to terms with diverse aspects of one's identity without quite taking full responsibility for how contradictions came together, tensions were reconciled, or critical choices were made.

Watts's spiritual journey was a distinctive admixture of religion, philosophy, and psychology: "Taking the premises of Christian dogmatics, Hindu mythology, Buddhist psychology, Zen practice, psychoanalysis, behaviorism, or logical positivism, I have tried to show that all are aiming, however, disputatiously, at one center" (Watts, 1972: 4). The only son of a tee-totalist shopkeeper and mother whose own zealous religious codes were strictly prescribed, Watts was prepared for an Oxford education at Canterbury, one of Britain's venerable public schools. At fifteen he declared that he went "to the Buddha for refuge." His family tolerated his "conversion" as an ephemeral adolescent posture. His teachers challenged Watts to read more deeply about the wisdom of the East, while selecting him to represent the school at the enthronement of one archbishop of Canterbury and sending him to York to engage in debate with William Temple, one of the brightest Anglican prelates in modern times.

In 1937, having already published The Spirit of Zen, Watts completed The Legacy of Asia and Western Man, an ambitious attempt to show the relevance of Buddhism, Taoism, and Vedanta to Christianity and psychology. Watts hoped that the book would illustrate "the view of life suggested through Eastern thought to one brought up in Western traditions" (1938: xiii) Watts took a position that he considered to be middle ground: "For those [western] traditions he has deep respect, and though his respect for the traditions of Asia is equally deep, he is in no way tempted to 'change his skin' and try to become Oriental...He does not wish to become a woman, but through union with her he creates a child. Therefore this book is concerned with the possible child of Eastern and Western wisdom" (ibid.). The Middle Way (which referred to a phrase coined by Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher in the second century of this milennium, not Anglicanism's preferred modus vivendi) became for Watts a method for pairing opposites, harmonizing the conscious and the unconscious, law and liberty, West and East. Familiarity with Buddhist practices helped Christians experience their relationship with God directly, he claimed. Zen's simple directness pierced layers of theological rationalisms and liturgies that obfuscated the Real Presence. Through eastern meditative techniques that were free from symbolic and philosophical associations, Watts declared, he found "the secret which we looked for afar lying right at our feet...[that] we are alive" (1938: 113, 159). Borrowing from Jung and Zen, he

suggested that Christian faith could be revitalized by accentuating its "natural" core oftimes hidden in the artifice.

Watts married a Chicago debutante the same year he published The Legacy of Asia and Western Man. Needing a job, he decided to make a career out of his interest in religion. With help from the bishop of Chicago and some seminary deans, he prepared to become an Episcopal priest. "I did not consider myself as being converted to Christianity in the sense that I was abandoning Buddhism and Taoism....the Gospels never appealed to me so deeply as the Tao Te Ching or the Chuang-tzu book," Watts acknowledged. "It was simply that the Anglican Communion seemed to be the most appropriate context for doing what was in me to do, in Western society" (1972: 163).

Watts for several years served as chaplain at Northwestern University. During his tenure he encouraged students and faculty to engage in mysticism as a way of speaking to God. He also wrote Behold the Spirit, which supported among other things the Hindu doctrine that the Avatars and Buddhist Bodhisattvas were, like Jesus, incarnations of the "only begotten son." Reactions to both his liturgical experiments and theological ruminations were mixed. The priesthood, Watts observed, felt to him like "an ill-fitting suit of clothes, not only for a shaman but also for a bohemian--that is, one who loves color and exuberance, keeps irregular hours, would rather be free than rich, dislikes working for a boss, and has his own code of sexual morals" (1972: 186). His ministry ended as abruptly as it had begun, when Watts

divorced his wife and headed for an ashram. He moved a little later to San Francisco to become a teacher at the American Academy of Asian Studies.

Watts thereafter became a major figure in the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. A charismatic speaker who considered himself a "philosophical entertainer," Watts influenced millions with his ideas about connections between psychology and religion, mind and spirit, work and play, meditation and activism. "My own work, though it may seem at times to be a system of ideas, is basically an attempt to describe mystical experience--not of formal visions and supernatural beings, but of reality as seen and felt directly in a silence of words and mindings," Watts declared in the autobiography. "In this I set myself the same impossible task as the poet: to say what cannot be said" (1972: 5). Throughout the last decade of his life Watts remained a coincidence of opposites, never fully forsaking the Puritanical ways his parents instilled yet pursuing unembarrassedly a path filled with self-destructive indulgences.

Others were puzzled by the way Watts chose to live. In the words of Monica Furlong, who entitled her biography of Watts Genuine Fake: "The combination of spiritual insight and naughtiness, of wisdom and childishness, of joyous high spirits and loneliness, seemed incongruous. Wasn't 'knowledge', in the Buddhist sense of overcoming avidya or ignorance, supposed gradually to lead you into some sort of release from craving, and yet there is Watts drinking and fornicating all over California?

On the other hand Jesus said that those who lived in 'the Way' would have 'life,' and have it 'more abundantly' than others, and everything I knew about Watts gave me to think that he had abundant life of a kind that moade most of 'the good' seem moribund. He brought others to it, too" (Furlong, 1986: 2-3).

For Watts, some of the polarities that shaped his life were creative. He brilliantly communicated the essence of Zen to westerners who needed a release from some of the deadening cultural imperatives of work and family in the west. Yet, it is not clear how well Watts comprehended the meaning of the Middle Way. "The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth," observed the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna. "Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved." Watts could not free himself from the harm he increasingly inflicted upon himself by excessive drinking, philandering and impulsiveness. As a result, such coincidences of opposites were not liberating: unwilling to discipline himself in adherence to conventional wisdom, Watts may have precluded his chance to flourish in the spiritual unity he so desired and inspired others to pursue.

Thomas Merton

Like Alan Watts, Thomas Merton's life-career was shaped by

antipodes. His range of contrarieties was narrower than Watts's (as befits a man who spent most of his adulthood in a monastery), but no less intense. Merton's literary career began roughly the same time he became committed to religious affairs. Early in his monastic life Merton tended to repudiate artistic impulses for the sake of his spiritual devotions. Later on, emphases shifted, and with them, came changes in the focus of his writing. While he continued to be a guide to people who wished to explore the mysteries of meditation, by the 1960s Merton became more vocal in his criticism of flaws in American culture. He also evinced greater interest in developments around the world (Cooper, 1989).

None of these contradictions reduced the monk to a one-sided figure lurching from one extreme to another. The transitions, suggest Merton scholars, were subtle amalgamations of various strands of insight. Hence, in New Seeds of Contemplation, Merton waxed poetic about how humans perceive God the Father and Mother-Wisdom in their creation: "Faith is what opens to us this higher realm of unity, of strength, of light, of sophianic love where there is no longer the limited and fragmentary light provided by rational principles, but where the Truth is One and Undivided and takes all to itself in the wholeness of Sapientia, or Sophia....The darkness of faith bears fruit in the light of wisdom (Merton, 1961: 141). In this passage Merton clearly transcended the ratio studiorum set forth by Thomas Aquinas, a regimen observed by generations of Cistercian monks.

Merton had, in effect, rediscovered the mystical vein of

imagery spoken by the Desert Fathers sixteen centuries ago. Unlike Watts, who considered current Christianity too dessicated to revive, Merton celebrated a vital spirituality, dating back to the Church's foundations, that still entranced modern mystics. "No system of meditations, of interior discipline, of self-emptying, of recollection and absorption can bring a man to union with God, without a free gift on the part of God Himself" (quoted in Bailey, 1987: 116). Hence the paradox of spiritual development in Merton's view: humans cannot expect to communicate fully with God even if their use of inner resources and control over their environment were disciplined; they must respond to cues from an Ultmate Reality as presented in many places and times. For this reason Merton became receptive to Wisdom that flourished in settings far removed from his own hermitage.

Merton was only a bit older than Watts when he first looked eastward for inspiration. His initial recorded comments about Buddhism, during his undergraduate years at Cambridge and Columbia, sound condescending. Merton's early interpretations of Zen are riddled with inaccuracies and hyperbole. In his later writings, however, he proved a more sympathetic listener. "The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism," Merton wrote in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1968: 285). "The reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in

which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it." Merton's exposure to eastern wisdom appears to have facilitated his efforts to recover lively spiritual and mystical elements of Christianity lost in theological disputations and a series of fights over liturgy. He came to appreciate, despite prior reservations, the mysticism of Meister Eckehart after his work with Dr. D. T. Suzuki on Zen meditation (McCormick, 1972).

There was usually a element of drama, as we have seen, that attracted praise and horror from outsiders whenever Watts changed direction in his spiritual journey. In contrast, Merton realized that most of his development occurred within his soul. As he explained in a letter written in September 1968, which was widely circulated after his untimely death three months later, Merton believed that "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" (Burton, 1975: 296). Merton's inward journeys stretched across many domains from the time he entered Gethsemani monastery in 1941. By the mid-1960s, in the prime of life, Merton wanted to experience even more: "The journey is only begun. Some of the places I really wanted to see from the beginning have not yet been touched" (Burton, 1975: 238).

In the last year of his life, Merton travelled greater distances than he had during all his other years in Kentucky. Embracing the spirit of Vatican II, he viewed his trips with "a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after

years of waiting and wondering and fooling around" (1988: ix). In September 1968, he went to Alaska, where he was considering relocating, so that he could find "ideal solitude" hardly available to him any longer in Gethsemani, given his celebrity status (ibid.: xi). A few weeks later he was off to a Spiritual Summit Conference sponsored by the Temple of Understanding and a series of talks with the Dalai Lama. He joined monastic leaders from all over Asia in mid-December in Bangkok. While in Thailand he died in a freak accident.

Merton went east as a true pilgrim. Throughout the Orient he presented himself as a "Western monk who is pre-eminently concerned with his own monastic calling and dedication." In the speech he gave the day he was electrocuted, Merton declared that "by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions...The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia, and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals" (Burton, 1975: xxiv). Merton felt that practicing medieval rites was the way to discipline himself to become closer to God. Those monastic commitments, however, did not preclude his taking advantage of 20th-century opportunities. Thanks to advances in communication and transportation Merton could engage in conversation with monks who were not Roman Catholics. In that

way he learned more about different religions and attained greater enlightenment in his quiet meditations.

Indicative of Merton's openness to new experiences, ones that tapped his artistic sensibilities, was his reaction to seeing the Reclining Buddha in Sri Lanka: "The queer evidence of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda...The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no 'mystery.' All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination." Merton felt whole. His aesthetic sensibilities complemented his spiritual depth. His mind's eye required no formulae: Merton could plainly perceive the unity of Love in a piece of rock. The "essence" of the message of that Reclining Buddha, carved long ago in the subcontinent, could not easily be translated into western canons. Nonetheless, its truth was accessible to a diligent pilgrim. Note how Merton used a term not found in his Missal: dharmakaya epitomized the quest of a western monk who did not forsake his vows as he matured into a radical humanist.

Merton's death cut short his spiritual journey, but contemporaries claimed that he had found peace along the way. "His openness to man's spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith; and inner security led him to explore, experience, and

interpret the affinities and differences between religions in light of his own religion," declared Amiya Chakravarty. "Thomas Merton never quite accepted a fixed medieval line beween the sacred and the profane. In this he was a modern Christian thinker and believer who had to redefine, or leave undefined, the subtle balance of the religious life" (Burton, 1975: vii-viii). Merton had the strength and ability to hew to what was fundamental in his monastic calling and, at the same time, to suspend disbelief long enough to discern what to take from very different perspectives. In his last year, he grew more deeply inward as he traversed the earth in farflung travels.

Andrew Harvey

Andrew Harvey, whose father was part Indian and part Scottish and mother was of British descent, spent his first years of life in India. At six he was sent to boarding school a thousand miles away; three years later, he went to live with his grandparents in England. While a scholarship student at Oxford, Harvey began to study Buddhism, reading everything he could. "I found in Buddhist philosophy a way of thought that enthralled me by its calm and radical analysis of desire, its rejection of all the self-dramatising intensities by which I lived, and its promise of a possible, strong, and unsentimental serenity" (Harvey, 1983: 4). Academic recognition came early: at age twenty one, in 1973, Harvey was named one of the youngest fellows at All Souls College. By his account, the next years of Harvey's

life were spiritually starved, as he came to terms with his sexual identity, suffered from insomnia, began drinking heavily, and harbored suicidal thoughts. "At twenty-five this sadness became so pervasive that I realized I was in real danger if I remained at Oxford: I had to get out, not only of England but of the West altogether, whatever the cost to my academic or poetic career," Harvey recalled (1991: 12). "I decided to return to India for a year, to return to the world of my childhood. I was not consciously on a spiritual quest; I was still too enthralled by my own pain to imagine transcending it, and years of narrow grief had made me cynical. I wanted simply to return to India, to run as far as I could from a world in which I had made many mistakes and by which I felt sickened."

Harvey's flight to India, recounted in A Journey in Ladakh, was more than an escapist venture. In the most remote region of India, he found people self-effacing, down-to-earth, and practical. There, Harvey could visualize some features about himself--his need to be entertained and stimulated, his desire to be clever and ironic--that made him sad. From spiritual guides and ordinary sherpas, he discovered the happiness that comes from giving naturally, without expectations. For all of his fascination and enthusiasm for these experiences, Harvey realized the wisdom of his friends' advice who urged him to return to the West to write and to teach: "You must find a way of making what you have lived through believable to others. You must not refuse that challenge...Make retreats often...Make pilgrimages to holy

places. But re-enter the world. Re-enter the world and test again and again what you have learnt" (Harvey, 1983: 226-7). Returning was difficult. "I could tell no one what had happened without sounding ridiculous. The atmosphere of Oxford does not foster the sharing of mystical discoveries" (Harvey, 1991: 29).

Over the next several years, Harvey taught in the United States and Britain. He completed a novel, published collections poetry and translated Sufi and Buddhist verse. "The truth was that I was more anxious to talk about spiritual love than to live it, more able to exploit the split in my personality between the worldly and the spiritual than to do the work of healing it, hungry for recognition as 'a spiritual person' without being brave enough to realize that recognition is meaningless" (Harvey, 1991: 84). During this period his sense of himself as a rational atheist gave way, though not without a struggle, after he met, evaded, and knelt again before Meera, an 18-year-old Indian woman whom followers believed was the embodiment of the Divine Mother.

One might have supposed that if Oxford luminaries were to turn east, they would come under the spell of a bearded guru, not an adolescent beauty. Harvey thought so himself, but he was wise enough to risk pursuing this path to understanding. He exposed his vulnerabilities. As he fell into love with this improbable spiritual guide, Harvey could not resist noting that "Meera" in Spanish would be spelled mira--the command "to gaze." Indeed, "seeing" is a central image in Harvey's account of this phase of his spiritual pilgrimage, Hidden Journey: A Spiritual Awakening:

"All around her, as she stood there gazing at us with a passion I had never seen before on her face, was a blaze of Light--white diamond Light--all the brighter for being in the darkness of the doorway." Harvey saw Meer as the Light on the day Christians observe Epiphany; his images recall John's gospel, with its contrasts of light and dark, that describes the Incarnate One waiting at the threshold for those in liminal moments of growth.

Unlike Merton or Watts, Harvey's mysticism is neither mildly syncretic nor a happy coincidence of opposite sexes. Harvey invites readers to share the intensity of the relationship he has with Meera. His love is mystical but not otherworldly; his intimacy is not easily sublimated. Yet the palpable tension does not have an obvious resolution. The story unfolds step by step, with discrete starts and finishes. In a conversation with which he concludes Hidden Journey, Harvey acknowledges that "it is the end of this journey. There will be many more journeys. But the one begun nine years ago in time is over. The ones in eternity are just beginning" (1991:250). As he entered middle age, Harvey recognized a turning point in the direction of change in his spiritual journey: he sees himself following a roadmap that extends after death, in which his human concerns are enveloped in the Divine.

A crisis with Meera unexpectedly altered the course of Harvey's earthly sojourn, but it did not fundamentally affect the direction in which he had been heading. Although his guru had tacitly acknowledged his sexual orientation at the beginning of

their relationship, Meera apparently did not want her chief spokesperson to be a homosexual who had achieved a measure of fame on his own right. In December 1993 she asked Harvey to break with Eryk Hanut and write a book recounting how her force transformed into a heterosexual. Instead, Harvey left his guru and committed himself to Hanut in April 1994. Harvey felt betrayed: "I was no longer alone, melancholy, fixated on her, and always manipulable. To keep me where she needed me, she had to try to destroy any life not centered on her" (1995: 462).

Significantly, when Hanut and Harvey departed Germany, they searched for the Sacred Feminine. "A vision of the Divine Mother has appeared in all of the religious traditions in various ways, but who the Divine Mother _is_ goes far beyond all concepts and dogmas. In our growing, expanding imagination of who the Divine Mother might be, we come to understand more and more what the feminine force could do, and how we can work with it to save our planet" (Harvey, 1995: 32). Having been let down by a woman he had trusted deeply, Harvey was no longer inclined to project divine powers onto any human being. Instead, he began to come to terms in different ways with what he called the "feminine force," a power that Harvey already understood was a necessary complement to male images of God. He sought to embrace the male and female features of the Divine on a plane that transcended time and space yet was firmly rooted in a distinctive faith tradition.

Given his prior antipathy to things western, it is surprising that Harvey came to adore the liberating, consoling,

creating power of the Virgin Mary. The connection seems serendipitous: his first inklings of Mary's powers came in India, not at some European shrine or cathedral. In 1993, Hanut had given him a statue of the Virgin carved out of mango wood by a local craftsman. After leaving Meera, Harvey immediately immersed himself in the writings of the Marian mystics; he pondered feminine representations of the Wisdom of God in Jewish scripture and Russian Orthodox texts. In the process of discovering the centrality of Mary, he perceived the mystical and radical images of Jesus: "To receive Christ through Mary is to receive the Christ of the mystics, the Christ who, while rooted in the Father, in transcendence, loved this world with the humble passion of his mother, _the_ Mother, and in his own person, teaching, and life-journey lived not only the Father-path of transcendence but also embraced the whole of existence and struggled to redeem all of it with the intensity of the Mother" (Harvey, 1995: 383).

Harvey's sojourn to spiritual wholeness is unfinished. Thus far he has bravely exposed his intense intellectual and emotional highs and lows, borne of keen insight and genuine suffering. His commitment to Christianity probably will prove less transitory than Watts's ministry. It is doubtful that he will seek Love, human or divine, in a cloister. Harvey's fascination with the androgynous imagery of the Divine, with its emphasis on the feminine, attests to his ability to meld ancient and postmodern texts from western and eastern traditions. It remains to be seen

whether he will, like Watts, be able to communicate to others the ways that he integrates eastern and western traditions, and whether he will, like Merton, begin to apply his hard-won spiritual insights in efforts to make human relationships more harmonious in a fragile, global environment.

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Postmodernity has brought together an extraordinary array of divergent cults and religious traditions. They now share common space, though most originated in isolation, in small communities around the world. As members of the baby-boom generation become more aware of Eastern spiritual customs, they have been more inclined than their parents to incorporate them into western religious practices (Cox, 1988). I recently attended a major Hindu festival in Ann Arbor: the number of people who were raised in Jewish families far exceeded the number of Indians in the congregation; unfamiliar with the chants most were singing, for ninety minutes I recited a Greek orthodox prayer I had learned on Mount Athos in the 1960s. Similarly, "traditional" ceremonies have become more innovative: several of my former students have designed wedding ceremonies that intersperse Buddhist and Sufi sayings with paraphrases of the paean to love in I Corinthians; no one seems to notice or much care.

The spiritual journeys of Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and Andrew Harvey do not replicate Orientalisms that occurred earlier in western civilzation. None tried to launch missionary

ventures, as had the Jesuits and Protestants, which produced centers of Christianity in the East. Nor did they shed prior experiences and to try to assimilate themselves fully into an alien culture. Instead, turning east made Watts, Merton, and Harvey more discerning about their own inward Self, and how they related to others and to God. Like some other contemporary western students of religion, they let go of some of their own religious habits and adapted a few Eastern practices, while remaining respectful of the singularity of each (Cox, 1977).

Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and Andrew Harvey were western pilgrims who struggled to understand universal Truths in the context of the highly particularistic vision that each world religion provides. Striking the right balance was difficult: with varying degrees of success, each had to overcome deeply engrained, impulsive, narcissistic behavioral patterns as they searched for wholeness. They achieved their goal gradually as they embraced new, often subversive, insights. Interestingly, their eastward sojourn was not a one-time quest. Each turned again and again to the East at critical watersheds in their own spiritual development. Adolescent enthusiasms gave way to more subtle attempts to insinuate universal truths and various meditative techniques into their own maturing practices. They reached "down to the irreducible life stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary hold on what the individual senses to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life and death" (Turner and Turner, 1978: 248; see also,

Perdue, 1991; Borg, 1994). By dint of insights gained from afar each nurtured thoughts and feelings that drew them intimately into Love.

Out of a desire for intimacy with God their spiritual sojourns began. Mystics moving toward Wisdom, each sought to find their own inner sanctuary. Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and Andrew Harvey realized that this inward journey was not straightforward: once on the road, they could not ignore God's unexpected signs; nor could they control where their hearts led. With discipline, with honesty, and a willingness to let go, they struggled to become what they knew they were meant to be (Streng, 1967: 98). They endeavored to become whole, so that they could truly love with all their hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Their pilgrimage fulfills, in modern ways, the thoughts of Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-394)in his Commentary on the Canticles: "The lesson for us here is that we ought not to despise any teaching of piety, but, as we fly over the meadow of inspired doctrine, we ought to gather from each one something for our store of wisdom."

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