

Two Modern Christian Mystics: Simone Weil and Thomas Merton.

**How their experiences of growth through
suffering can inform the practice of Spiritual
Direction today.**

by

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Introduction

I write this project in a desire to combine an interest in both of these Christian mystics/writers (whose writings and experiences of growth through suffering have had a profound effect on my life) with the discovery of how to accompany directees authentically through times of difficulty.

I hope to show, using the writings of Simone Weil and Thomas Merton, that the practice of spiritual direction today can be informed and enhanced as our understanding (as spiritual directors) of the common experience of suffering is deepened.

Some of the words in my chosen title have a large scope of meaning. Here is an explanation of one or two so that they can be understood in the context of this project.

Modern Christian Mystics: There have been mystics in all faiths (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and more) through the ages. My focus here is on two mystics born in the 20th Century and on mysticism within the Christian tradition.

A helpfully succinct definition of mysticism in general and Christian mysticism in particular by Ursula King.

“All mysticism is characterised by a passion for unity. To the mystic, true Being and Ultimate Reality are One...Christian mystics aspire to an intimate union of love with God, seeking God’s presence as the very ground of the soul. The human being is endowed with a spiritual sense that opens us inwardly, just as our physical senses open us outwardly.”¹

The word “mystic” as applied to Thomas Merton is less common perhaps than other words used to describe him (author, poet, monk, peace activist). As applied to Simone Weil, the term has arguably been less common still, since it is well known that she was reluctant to accept any “label” whatsoever and that her writings about God were known to only very few people until after her death. However, both Weil and Merton have come more and more to be considered as mystical in their expressions of life and faith.

¹ King, Ursula, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies through the Ages*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988 p.15.

Suffering: I will be using this word to describe the emotional, physical, spiritual and mental difficulties and pain common to humanity. I acknowledge that while suffering is common to humanity, the suffering of each human being is unique.

It is worth noting that the writings of both Weil and Merton cover wide subject areas. Weil wrote from a philosophical, political and social point of view and Merton's skills as a writer of poetry, theology, contemplation, prayer are well known. While most of their writing does not come under the particular *heading* of suffering, as a strong underlying feature of their writing it cannot be missed.

A. Simone Weil and Thomas Merton: brief biographies and growth through suffering

Simone Weil

Simone Weil was born into a middle class, agnostic Jewish family in Paris in 1909. She studied at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure (University) in Paris. Her intellect was widely considered to be at "genius" level. She was a contemporary of Simone de Beauvoir and the two studied together becoming good friends after competing for the top place in the University entrance exam. Weil came top of the list and de Beauvoir, second. Weil became a teacher of philosophy and a political activist. She was radical in her political and social thought whilst also being deeply drawn to the Catholic Church even though she never formally converted. Over the course of her life Weil joined herself to several political and social causes. At the age of 5, she refused to eat sugar since the soldiers at the Front (First World War) did not have sugar. This dilemma of feeling that she could not enjoy the things which other people were denied featured large in her short life and in fact was one of the reasons why she did not later convert to Catholicism because in some way it would separate her from others. "*I remain with those who cannot enter the Church.*"² Throughout her life she aligned herself to causes where the sufferings of others was evident; to the plight of factory workers, taking jobs in factories where she was also teaching; to the Republican army during the Spanish Civil war and, whilst living in England, to the French people

² Weil, Simone, *An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles, London: Penguin Books, 2005, p41.

suffering under German occupation (Second World War). Each time she felt compelled in some way to enter directly into the sufferings of others.

In the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes near Le Mans in France in 1938, as she listened to the monks chanting, she had a profound mystical experience in that she felt that Christ had entered her whole being and she realised “*the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction*”³. She had another such experience on reading the poem called “Love” by the English poet George Herbert. The poem is worth quoting in full because of its significance to Weil who memorised it and recited it as a prayer in her most intense moments of physical suffering:

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.*

*“A guest”, I answered, “worthy to be here”
Love said, “You shall be he”,
“I the unkind, Ungrateful? Ah my dear
I cannot look on thee.”
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”*

*“Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.”
“And know you not”, says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear then I will serve.”
“You must sit down”, says Love, “and taste my meat.”
So I did sit and eat.”⁴*

For Weil, who all her life struggled to eat while she was aware of others going without food, and was continually restless, the imagery of the last two lines alone must have been profound. The Lord’s Prayer and the Eucharist became increasingly important to her and she said that during these times “*Christ himself descended and took me*”⁵. Of her first mystical experience she said “*God in his mercy prevented me*

³ Weil, Simone, *Waiting for God*, Perennial Classics, New York, 2001 p.xxiv

⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p.xxiii

⁵ Weil, *An Anthology*, p. 35

*from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact.”*⁶

Weil’s friend Gustav Thibon said of her,

*“Such mysticism [as Weil experienced] had nothing in common with those religious speculations divorced from any personal commitment which are all too frequently the only testimony of intellectuals who apply the things of God. She actually experienced in its heart-breaking reality the distance between ‘knowing’ and ‘knowing with all one’s soul’, and one of the objects of her life was to abolish that distance.”*⁷

Alongside her political writing and teaching of philosophy she wrote essays concerning affliction and the love of God, though this writing came to light only after her death in 1943. In her writings, Simone Weil makes a distinction between suffering and affliction. She uses the word “malheur” in French, which is not completely nuanced in our English word “affliction”. She considers suffering as mainly touching the physical realm of pain (without the sense of anguish that affliction carries) and affliction as being something more profound both in duration and in intensity - “an up-rooting of life”.⁸ However, having made the distinction, she then brings the two ideas together.

*“An attack of pain that is only physical leaves no trace on the soul...it is another matter if the physical suffering is very prolonged or frequent; this would be an affliction.”*⁹

*“There is no real affliction unless the event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological and physical.”*¹⁰

*“Affliction is inseparable from physical suffering and yet quite distinct...affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.”*¹¹

Simone Weil experienced suffering *and* affliction. She suffered from the time of her adolescence until the end of her life from migraine headaches of unbearable intensity. At 14 she was pushed to the verge of suicide by an acute sense of her own

⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 27

⁷ Weil, *An Anthology*, p. 40

⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 68

⁹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 68

¹⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 68

¹¹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 68

unworthiness, though as we have seen she was academically brilliant. Living in England in 1942/3, eating only her ration, she pushed her body physically to breaking point, some would say to death, with her desire to identify with others in affliction. She died in England on 24 August 1943.

Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France in 1915. His parents were artists. His mother was a native of USA and his father a New Zealander. He moved from place to place around the world with his father throughout his childhood and youth – from France, to USA, to England, to Bermuda; back to USA and then England several times over – each time an acute disruption. By the time he was 16 both his parents were dead. At the age of 19, Merton was a rebellious student at Cambridge University in England. By 1935 Merton had left Cambridge after one turbulent year (by order of his guardian Dr Tom Bennett under whose care Merton had been placed upon his father's death), returning to USA to attend Columbia University to study English Literature. Here his spiritual search intensified, mainly through his reading of Gilson, John Henry Newman, the lives of the Saints, and much more. In 1938 Merton was baptised into the Roman Catholic Church and began to be drawn to Monastic life. During 1940 and 1941 he taught Literature at St Bonaventure's University in New York State. From his journals of this time there is a strong, palpable feeling of Merton's relief, gratitude and joy as he makes discoveries of what it is to be in a relationship with God. He was longing for peace and a sense of belonging, and these he found. It is clear he felt keenly the emptiness and restlessness of the previous years. In writing about this some years later Merton says

“If my nature had been more stubborn in clinging to the pleasures that disgusted me: if I had refused to admit that I was beaten by this futile search for satisfaction where it could not be found, and if my moral and nervous constitution had not caved in under the weight of my own emptiness, who can tell what would have eventually happened to me?”¹²

It is clear also that he becomes quickly aware of the requests God might make of him. He entered the Cistercian (Trappist) monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, near

¹² Merton Thomas, *Seven Storey Mountain, An Autobiography of Faith*, Orlando: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1999, p. 182

Bardstown, Kentucky, USA on 10 December 1941 at the age of 26, and died in Thailand on 10 December 1968 while on a trip away from the monastery. During his years at Gethsemani Merton wrote about fifty books, hundreds of articles, poems, about four thousand letters and what amounted to seven volumes of personal journals.

Much has been written about Merton's spiritual journey and growth, not least by Merton himself. He was such a prolific and self-revealing writer it is not difficult to gain insight into the dilemmas and joys of his life. It can be said that Merton grew through a particular suffering that may be described as a kind of "homelessness" (displacement) or emptiness, which he experienced from his earliest days. Robert J Gunn writes

*"Insofar as one of the experiences of emptiness is loneliness and its remedy lies only in a closely intimate relationship with someone, the experience of Thomas Merton in his childhood until his arrival in Columbia University must be recognised as emotional drought created by chronic dislocation"*¹³

Gunn contends that Merton's experience of his father's death (Merton was 16 years old and alone at school in England when he received news) pulled the ground from under him and Merton's own words bear this out.

*"I sat there in the dark, unhappy room, unable to move, with all the innumerable elements of my isolation crowding in upon me from every side: without a home, without a family, without a country, without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light or understanding of my own – without God, too, without God, without heaven, without grace, without anything."*¹⁴

Although Merton found great consolation in the life of stability, manual work, writing, contemplation and prayer through the years in the monastery in Kentucky, his struggle with emptiness, loneliness and self-doubt continued in many ways. It was these experiences, however, that aided him on his journey of discovery concerning his true self (identity) in God and led, as the years passed, to a deep sense of union with God. The gift of God to Merton to express these things so profoundly in writing, and to many others who have since read his writings, is of inestimable value.

¹³ Gunn, Robert J., *Journeys into Emptiness: Dogen, Merton and Jung and the Quest for Transformation*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000 p. 105.

¹⁴ Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 79 .

The following prayers from Merton convey this longing, aloneness, suffering, growth in knowing self and God, and ultimately, a closing of the perceived gap between himself and God, a communion and oneness.

“Tribulation detaches us from the things of nothingness in which we spend ourselves and die. Therefore, tribulation gives us life and we love it, not out love for death, but out of love for life.”¹⁵

“The months have gone by and You have given me peace....I no longer desire to see anything that implies a distance between You and me. If I stand back and consider myself and You, as if something had passed between us, I will inevitably see the gap between us...This is the reason I desire solitude – to be lost to all created things for they remind me of my distance from You... Now my sorrow is over and my joy is about to begin: the joy that rejoices in the deepest sorrows.”¹⁶

*“You who sleep in my breast are not met with words
but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom within wisdom.
With you there is no longer any dialogue, any contest, any opposition.
You are found in communion!
Thou in me and I in Thee, Thou in them and they in me:
dispossession within dispossession,
dispassion within dispassion,
emptiness within emptiness,
freedom within freedom.
I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are One.”¹⁷*

A surprising link between Merton and Weil

Simone Weil and Thomas Merton were born in France 6 years apart - 1909 and 1915 respectively. Weil died shortly after Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. It is unclear whether Weil knew of Merton, but Merton records being asked to review a biography of Weil (Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love, Jacques Chabaud, 1964) and was challenged and inspired by her writing. *“Her non-conformism and mysticism are essential elements in our time and without her contribution we remain not human.”¹⁸*

¹⁵ Merton, Thomas, *Dialogues with Silence*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, New York: Harper Collins, 2001, p.9.

¹⁶ Merton, *Dialogues with Silence*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Merton, *Dialogues with Silence*, p.95.

¹⁸ Merton Thomas, Journals, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, Volume Five (1963-1965), New York: Harper Collins, 1997, p.213.

He then quotes Weil directly,

*“Blessed are they who suffer in the flesh the suffering of the world itself in their epoch. They have the possibility and function of knowing its truth, contemplating its reality...”*¹⁹

He also records a surprising discovery of a link between the two of them.

*“Curious thing on finishing Chabaud’s book on Simone Weil; I find it was Tom Bennett, my godfather and guardian, who tried to treat her in Middlesex Hospital and had her transferred to Ashford (Kent) because she refused to eat! Funny that she and I have this in common: we were both problems to this good man.”*²⁰

B. How Merton and Weil’s experiences of growth through suffering can inform the practice of spiritual direction today.

Cries of the heart

From both Weil and Merton, we hear a cry of the heart. It would appear to come from a deep suffering or trauma experienced in childhood and/or adolescence. In Merton the cry is heard as loneliness, displacement and grief.

In Weil the cry is heard as a collective cry of humankind as she (even intentionally) wanted to experience the particular sufferings of others. It is also heard as a cry of physical pain since it appears that there was hardly a day in her experience when she did not suffer in this way.

Cries echoed in every human heart.

Living the Questions

It is clear that both Merton and Weil had a God-given ability (which they also worked hard at!) to live the questions. *Living the questions* is a mysterious, therefore mystical, experience. Christian mystics throughout the centuries have expressed this thought, perhaps not in those exact words, possibly in no words at all, but it is everywhere implied in their writings.

¹⁹ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.214.

²⁰ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.214

Merton liked to ask questions but was reluctant to seek answers. After a page of questions in his journal (on 4 July 1952) he writes,

*“While I am asking questions that You do not answer, You ask me a question that is so simple I cannot answer it. I do not even understand the question!...but there is a greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question.”*²¹

Weil’s and Merton’s prayer practices of silence, contemplation and meditation allowed them to “be with” their suffering...to look into it with God and to be safe with it in God. This is not at all the same as saying that things were made easier for them. Neither is this to romanticise their sufferings, which would be a grave error. Both Merton and Weil found comfort in God, but to say they found *answers* is to say much more than they ever said themselves.

Contemplation could be described as gazing at God in quietness. It is communion with God. It is a being with God in the moment. It is being vulnerable. It is a place of growth. It is a place of healing. Franciscan writer Richard Rohr says that there are two main ways in which we transition from what he calls the “first half of life to the second half.” That is to say, from the outward journey of self, out towards life.... to the inward journey of self into God: these two things being *prayer* and *experiences of suffering*. These halves of life are not dictated by age or time, but by our growth in God through times of trial and seeking God through prayer.²²

Contemplation does not in itself give answers, but it *is* a place or a space where God can touch us profoundly, so that somehow our understanding is opened up beyond the conscious mind. It is a mystical experience. It contains mystery but offers safety. This is the “safe in God” vulnerability which can allow us to face up to our own fears which in turn allows us to offer a safer place for directees to express how they are experiencing God in their anxieties and trials.

That there are *no* answers to the fact of suffering is highly significant in the work of spiritual direction. Jesus, the Son of God, suffered the greatest suffering there is in being separated from the Father on the Cross, something we will never understand

²¹ Merton, Thomas, *Journals, Entering the Silence*, Volume Two (1941-1952), ed. Jonathan Montaldo, New York: Harper Collins. 1996.

²² Rohr, Richard, Workshop presented at Houchen House, Hamilton, New Zealand, 2006.

this side of heaven. He was “*a man of sorrows familiar with suffering*”.²³ Job, whose suffering is legendary, responded in the end by saying “*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you*”²⁴

Privilege and Responsibility

As spiritual directors we have the tremendous privilege of listening to many kinds of experiences, including experiences of suffering. This privilege, like all others, brings with it responsibility. Alongside a “quality of listening” and a “holding” of the questions of the directee (which is our *privilege*), I believe we have a *responsibility* to confront our own vulnerability, face up to our own suffering, or the fear of having to suffer. This is one of the hardest things we are called to do as spiritual directors. We do this, not on our own, but in knowing ourselves to be held in God’s safe hands. Only then is there even the *possibility* that we make fewer assumptions, fewer judgements, are less frustrated; less tempted to offer a framework in which we, as directors, imagine the directee may be able to “understand” their suffering. This cannot be....since it is theirs alone.

We do harm when we attempt to understand the sufferings of others in the light of our own, and even more harm when we project our views about suffering on to them. Janet Ruffing is speaking about the responsibility of spiritual directors when she writes

*“Whenever an emotionally vulnerable person entrusts him-or herself to an identified ministerial person, the latter is ethically responsible for maintaining appropriate boundaries and for preventing harm to the more vulnerable person.”*²⁵

Assumptions on the part of the director are easily made but particularly unhelpful. One can make the assumption that a directee’s particular experience is difficult or negative when it is *not* (or vice versa) simply by interpreting the experience (even before speaking) through our own “eyes”.

²³ NIV, Isaiah 53:3

²⁴ NIV, Job 42:5

²⁵ Ruffing, Janet, *Spiritual Direction – Beyond the Beginnings*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, p164.

Suffering is *unique* to the person experiencing it. Even a cursory glance at the lives/writings of Merton and Weil shows us that suffering is not always (or often) what it seems. Of course we will not always be able to avoid assumptions (being human!), but by remembering the simple yet profound tenets of spiritual direction: being present to the directee; acknowledging every experience of directee as unique; reflecting and clarifying *their* words and feelings; affirming *their* experiences; relying on Holy Spirit to discern/hear/ask “God” questions; always giving the directee the space to hear and reflect on God’s invitation – we will make fewer of them.

Thus, with a prayerful commitment to face up to our own experiences of difficulty and suffering, or fear of them, and by making fewer assumptions, we are able to offer the directee the truest and most profound gifts of spiritual direction: the respectful, non-judgemental and *safe* presence of another human being with whom they can explore the experiences of their walk with God.

Safety, vulnerability and becoming real

Offering a *safe* place for directees is one of the greatest gifts in the practice of spiritual direction. Safety is fundamental to the significance of the spiritual direction relationship, the ground of trust.

Through prayer, reading and experience, I have been more and more drawn to the thought that the level to which we are able to be healthily vulnerable before God in our own pain is *linked* somehow (mysteriously) to the safety we offer directees in spiritual direction...the safety of honesty and congruency...which is unspoken. It is *at all times* a space for the *directee* to explore, to grow and become their real and true selves in God. The safe space *belongs* to the directee, but in a mysterious way, it is God’s gift to directee and director alike.

The kind of vulnerability I mean here is not an unhealthy, inappropriate, emphasis on our weaknesses and suffering in presence of a directee. As we have seen, we have an ethical and spiritual responsibility not to do this. I mean an honest, realistic “being with” God in our difficulties, bringing them to God in our own times of prayer,

worship and spiritual direction. Times and places where we can be transformed by allowing our sufferings to be embraced with Christ in God.

Thomas Reynolds makes the point of embraced vulnerabilities clear in his excellent book. He writes,

“To exist as a finite creature is to be contingent and vulnerable. This means that we are beings that face limitations and are capable of suffering a range of impairments. There is a profound theological implication here. It is precisely such vulnerability that God embraces in Christ, entering fully into the frailty of the human condition, even unto a tragic death. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Sharing the divine self in this way sends a distinct message: God is in solidarity with humanity at its most fundamental level, in weakness and brokenness. This is not to romanticise weakness. Rather, here God reveals the divine nature as compassion not only by undergoing or suffering with human vulnerability, but also by raising it up to God’s own being.”²⁶

It is this safety, this embracing of vulnerability that, among other things, allows the directee to be honest and real. To sense God’s safe presence, love and compassion so that they become more themselves, more real. This gift of realness is God’s gift of Love. It brings to mind a story that I have read to my daughters over the years. The Velveteen Rabbit is having a conversation with the Skin Horse in the nursery:-

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, ... “does it mean having things that buzz inside you or a stick out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse, “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once.” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been rubbed off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you become Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”²⁷

²⁶ Reynolds, Thomas E., *Vulnerable Communion, A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008, pp18, 19.

²⁷ Williams, Margery, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, London: The Bodley Head Children’s Books, 1996, p. 5.

Conclusion

Simone Weil and Thomas Merton suffered, as all human beings, in incalculable ways. I have expressed here Merton's suffering as displacement, aloneness and grief and Weil's as a profound sensitivity to the collective cry of humankind, affliction (uprooting) and physical pain.

We have seen how their sufferings led them to grow in their relationship with God, being drawn to God in a profound way through prayer, devotion, contemplation and service. We are blessed that they were able to express this growth in their writings so eloquently. Merton and Weil found comfort and consolation in God, as we have seen. However they did not necessarily find answers or even look for them.

It is our privilege to hear the unique experiences of those who trust us in the spiritual direction relationship. Our responsibility is to respect these experiences without making assumptions, or interpreting them. We do not attempt to offer a framework in which they can understand their experiences *per se*. This work is God's alone. We can share in the process of this work by being committed to living our own questions, doing good work as spiritual directors and offering a safe space. This safety is of immeasurable importance. It is the source of trust in the relationship. This space can become safer if we as directors face up to our own vulnerabilities in a healthy way by bringing them to God.

The safety of the spiritual direction relationship is like the safety of the nursery in the Velveteen Rabbit story. In the process of becoming *all experiences of growth through suffering are held in God*. It is our immense privilege to be with those who want to become Real. God alone brings about this *becoming*. It hurts, it can take a long time, but if we are Real ourselves, if we are prepared to have our sharp edges smoothed and not to "carefully keep" ourselves, we offer a safer place for this to happen.

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