"A life free from care" – The hermit and the analyst[1]

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In August 1965 Thomas Merton (1970) went to live full-time in his hermitage. On the eve of his move he gave a talk to the novices of Gethsemani. He described his aspirations for the hermit life. His aim he said was "to put away all care, to live without care, to not have to care." He opposed this to the life of the world which "is a life of care… a life of useless care… self-defeating care… a life which cannot confront the inevitable fact of death." (p. 220) It seems to me that this vocation to carelessness bears striking resonances with the vocation of the psychoanalyst. What I want to explore in this paper are some of the ways in which hermits and analysts get up to the same kind of mischief. I'll look at parallels between some of Merton's writings and writings of psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion.

Hermitages and consulting rooms share the quality of being removed from the everyday world of family, business, politics and entertainment. In Merton's (2014) words, "[The hermit] is outside all our projects, plans, assemblies, movements." (p. 80) These spaces are set apart. They are at a distance from normal life. In the case of the hermit this distance is normally ensured by physical separation. In the case of the analyst the distance is created by the cloister-like functions of the time boundaries and confidentiality. The consulting room is quiet and protected from intrusions. While we imagine hermits living in the woods or in the mountains, there are hermits in the city.

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According to a Chinese saying: “The small hermit lives on a mountain. The great hermit lives in a town.” (Porter, 1993, p. 220)

Regardless of where they live, this separateness has cultural consequences. Hermits and analysts are marginal characters. This liminality contributes to their cultural power. John Howe (1983) in his aptly titled paper, ‘The Awesome Hermit: The Symbolic Significance of the Hermit as a Possible Research Perspective,’ asks, “Why were Romuald and his fellow hermits so popular?” (p. 107) He argues that the hermit is a religious symbol and therefore an ultimately indefinable link to the sacred. Andre Droogers (1980) in his discussion of religious and secular innovators states, “Ironically it is the marginality of the leader which often has made him popular, despite his deviating way of life.” (p. 106)

For George Ferzoco (2010) the hermit’s relation with the world is paradoxical:

> Although we tend to consider hermits as those who live in isolation from their contemporaries, striking evidence shows them in contact with others… in late medieval Italy an especially firm symbiosis existed between solitaries and those who lived near or with them… In Max Weber’s formulation, men and women in the presence of hermits experienced a release from ‘ordinary worldly attachements and duties of occupational and family life’ while giving themselves, if only briefly, to the spiritual power of the holy man. (p. 163)
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> As Max Weber saw it, such charisma relied on a personality that ‘breaks the traditional and rational norms’ expected in the routine life. (Ferzoco, 2010, p. 176)

The analyst also breaks the expected routines of social intercourse. The directness of the analyst's questions and observations can be disconcerting. An analyst will not normally engage in chit-chat at the beginning of a session. It is left to the patient to start speaking. Sometimes the patient is lying on a couch while the analyst is sitting out of sight. The analyst is listening for unconscious communication. He or she is listening for resonances and echoes in the speech of the patient. The confidentiality of the analytic process acts as a form of silence with invites the free associations of the patient. The analyst remains silent, veiled, at the service of another voice – much as the silence of the hermits opens the possibility of another sort of desire. In the traditional formulation the analyst is a blank screen. In the face of the analyst's reserve the patient's and society's transferences are activated. In Merton's (2014) words, "The monk has all the more of a part to play in our world, because has no proper place in it." (p. 81) Lacan said that patients approach the analyst as "the subject supposed to know." They attribute some special knowledge to the analyst. Jung observed that the patient can project the god-image on to the analyst. And according to Merton (2009), "The real thing about being a hermit is of course that *hermit* is outside all categories whatever." (p. 54)

What is it that hermits and psychoanalysts actually do? Guigo the Carthusian (1977) observed that, "Such a life is continually idle yet never lazy." (p. 1) Sometimes it feels that Merton tells us precious little about what he was up to in his hermitage. He does an awful lot of reading. Reading his journals can be like reading an extended annotated bibliography. The point about reading is interesting. I have a hypothesis that the only cultures that have hermits are literate cultures – in other words cultures

with books. As a reader and a writer the mental space afforded by his hermitage was no doubt welcome to Merton. Psychoanalytic culture is also deeply informed by reading and writing. The texts of Freud, Jung and Lacan are studied with an intensity approaching that of a monk doing *lectio divina*. As a gross over-exaggeration you might say that analytic consulting rooms have books while humanistic consulting rooms have cushions. If the desert fathers gave their hands to weaving mats and baskets in their solitude, Merton gave his hands to the typewriter. Whether this freed his mind in the same way as basket weaving might have done is an open question. William Nicolson puts into the mouth of C. S. Lewis, in his play *Shadowlands*, the observation that, "We read to know that we are not alone." Hermits and analysts read in order to feed their minds and spirits, and to humanise their solitude.

Within their enclosures hermits and analysts devote themselves to a life of attention. They listen and watch. Freud (1958) advised the psychoanalyst to listen with free-floating attention. He said the analyst should "turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone." (pp. 115-6) The analyst Wilfred Bion recommended that each session be approached "without memory or desire." Memory and desire, for Bion (1967b), are characteristics of the sensuous world, the world of cause and effect. In his view the concern of the psychoanalyst is in what he calls psychic reality:

> Psychoanalytic 'observation' is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen, but with what is happening. Furthermore, it is not concerned with sense impressions or objects of sense. Any psychoanalyst

> knows depression, anxiety, fear and other aspects of psychic reality, whether those aspects have been or can be successfully named or not. These are the psychoanalyst's real world. Of its reality he has not doubt. Yet anxiety, to take one example, has no shape, no smell, no taste; awareness of the sensuous accompaniments of emotional experience are a hindrance to the psychoanalyst's intuition of the reality with which he must be at one. Every session attended by the psychoanalyst must have no history and no future. (p. 279)

The heart of this listening is not a trance state, but a foreswearing of knowledge – a suspension of epistemological action. This learned ignorance of the hermit and the analyst is an affront to sophisticated ironic posturing as well as the project of achieving pre-determined outcomes in psychotherapy. Merton (1966) points to something similar in 'Rain and the Rhinoceros':

> The rain I am in is not like the rain of cities. It fills the woods with an immense and confused sound. It covers the flat roof of the cabin and its porch with insistent and controlled rhythms. And I listen, because it reminds me again and again that the whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize, rhythms that are not those of the engineer…. Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen. (p. 9-10)

Jung's (1964) thoughts about dreams echo Merton's thoughts in the rain:

> The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night that was psyche long before there was any ego-conscious and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-conscious extends. (p.144-5)

The hermit and the analyst share this interest in paying attention to what has not been engineered. As long as the psyche wants to speak, the analyst will listen.

The hermit and the analyst recognise that there are obstacles to listening. The hermit might think of these as attachments, passions or pride. In psychoanalysis these obstacles include, resistance, defenses, projection, denial, negative projective identification, disavowal, acting out, negative therapeutic reaction, envy, greed, attacks on linking, among others. Bion wrote about lies. A neurosis could be thought of as believing a lie we tell ourselves unconsciously.

According to Merton, (1998a) "The real desert is this: to face the real limitations of one's own existence and knowledge and not try to manipulate them or disguise them." (p. 309) Jung describes the first stage of psychotherapy as confession. Any analysis is largely taken up with analysing defenses and resistances and with what Freud called remembering, repeating and working through. This is one of the deflating (head shrinking) aspects of the process. As Bion (1967a) says, "Progress in psychoanalysis is inseparable from a need to tolerate the painful concomitants of mental growth of which the immediate revelation of further problems requiring solution is not the least. (p. 177)

This question of paying attention to what has not been engineered is taken up by the British analyst, Donald Winnicott, in an interesting way. He enjoins the analyst to be alert for the patient's spontaneous gestures. The true self communicates through the spontaneous gesture. It is an important part of the analyst's job to recognise these communications. In opposition Winnicott posits the false self, which is based on compliance. We all have some aspects of false self structure as described by Winniott, but he also writes about false self personalities where the whole personality is structured to avoid the threat of impingement and breakdown. This has a strong resonance with Merton's view of life in the world as "a life of care… a life of useless care… self-defeating care… a life which cannot confront the inevitable fact of death." A person with a false self personality is consumed with ceaseless care to shore up their defenses against a psychic death that they experienced in infancy. Spontaneous gestures of the true self are stifled before they can reach awareness.

Recognising how much we have lost as the result of the actions or neglect of others is painful, but the real meat of analysis is coming to terms with how much we injure and deprive others and ourselves – and how we cannot avoid this fate – the fate of Oedipus.

Peter Homans (1989), in his history of psychoanalysis, *The Ability to Mourn*, argues that the development of psychoanalysis was an attempt by the early analysts to mourn personal losses, as well as being a form of cultural mourning for the losses experienced by European societies at the beginning of the 20th century. The hidden repentance of the hermit mirrors the hidden act of reparation by the analyst. Merton (1998a) observes, "Maybe hermit life is another kind of defeat. I certainly feel that

here I am relatively more honest and more true than anywhere else." (p. 199) Jung's (1963) words resonate, "The experience of the self is always a defeat for the ego." (p. 546)

An essential feature of hermit life and the work of the analyst is getting lost, disappearing. Merton (1997) expressed it this way:

> I have never before really seen what it means to live in a new creation and in the Kingdom. Impossible to explain it. If I tried I would be unfaithful to the grace of it – for I would be setting limits to it. It is *limitless*, without determination, without definition. It is what you make of it each day, in response to the Holy Spirit. (p. 276)

To Aelred Squire he wrote, "One does have to cut loose and float away without ties, in one way or another, and those who try to get away from that aspect of it today are deceiving themselves." (Merton, 2009, p. 54) Bion (1965) held that the central activity of the analyst, or rather non-activity, was to become O. He says, "Something occurred during the session—the absolute facts of the session. What the absolute facts are cannot ever be known, and these I denote by the sign O." (p. 17) It may be stretching things too far to think of O as the suchness of the session. Again Bion (1970):

> I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the ultimate reality represented by terms such as absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself. O does not fall into the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can

> "become," but it cannot be "known." It is darkness and formless but it can enter the domain K [Knowledge] when it has evolved to a point where it can be known. (p. 26)

Jung (1958) describes the situation when an analysand has grappled with many of the dilemmas that brought him or her to therapy, but there is something still that has not been reached:

> [This] sometimes drives him into complete isolation… It is, moreover, only in the state of complete abandonment and loneliness that we experience the helpful powers of our own natures… And though this desire opens the door to the most dangerous possibilities, we cannot help seeing it as a courageous enterprise and giving it some measure of sympathy. It is no reckless adventure, but an effort inspired by deep spiritual distress to bring meaning once more into life on the basis of fresh and unprejudiced experience. Caution has its place, no doubt, but we cannot refuse our support to a serious venture, which challenges the whole of the personality. If we oppose it, we are trying to suppress what is best in man – his daring and his aspirations. And should we succeed, we should only have stood in the way of that invaluable experience which might have given a meaning to life. (pp. 342-3)

Merton (1985) says that his idea of being a hermit:

> … is being nothing but man, that is to say as a non-monk even, a non-layman, a non-categoized man, a plain simple man: not as an ideal status or a condition

> of 'striving for spiritual perfection,' but a reduction to the bare condition of man as a starting point where everything has to begin: incomplete and insufficient in the sense of being outside social cadres… What would seem to others to be the final step into total alienation seems to me to be the beginning of the resolution of all alienation and the preparation for a real return without masks and without defenses into the wood, as mere man. (pp. 505-7)

While the existence of the hermitage and the analytic setting act as a critique of many features of contemporary society, at heart the unleashing of the human spirit that is possible within these spaces is an end in itself. In "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" Merton (2014) writes:

> It is something else, a kind of unknowing of his own self, a kind of doubt that questions the very roots of his own existence, a doubt which reduces him finally to silence, and in the silence which ceases to ask questions, he receives the only certitude he knows: The presence of God in the midst of uncertainty and nothingness, as the only reality which cannot be "placed" or identified. (p. 82)

Again Jung (1967) echoes this call to unknowing:

> The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, letting go of oneself as taught by Meister Eckhart, became for me the key that opens the door to the way. We must be able to let things happen in the psyche. (p. 16)

These affirmations of unknowing and uselessness are at odds with Merton's apologetics. His emphasis on the idea that his solitude was a form of social protest fits into a peculiarly American pattern. Coby Dowdell (2011) describes this as "*the hermit's tale*, a previously unrecognized American literary genre." (p. 122) Dowdell compares American hermits to Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. According to Dowdell:

> … if the similarities between Defoe's British castaway and the American hermit suggest that all American citizens are in the beginning American Crusoes, then the American hermit must find a more efficacious way to render isolation socially useful than that provided by Crusoe's island existence. (p. 145)

In his correspondence and his journals Merton was at pains to explain to himself and to his readers that his solitude was a social good.

Psychoanalysts have often been accused of operating without regard for scientific rigour, social utility or moral propriety. In psychoanalysis there has always been a tension between the authority of the analytic setting and any ethical, academic or political expectations entering the space from the outside world. In the UK the main analytic institutes have remained independent of universities in order to defend what Freud called the "pure gold of analysis." Over the past 35 years there has be a bitter struggle over the role of the state in the regulation of psychotherapy and the notion that the outcomes of psychotherapy should be quantifiable.

In the end I found this a difficult paper to write for several reasons. First of all reconnecting with Merton and the Cistercian after a good number of years stirred up a host of memories going back to the 1960s when I first became aware of Merton, who became my mentor during the 1970s, and of my time as a Cistercian novice at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia between 1979 and 1981. The ghosts have been leading me on a merry old dance! It is confusing, exhilarating and disappointing to meet up with an old flame.

Secondly, I set out to compare Merton's texts on the hermit life with some psychoanalytic texts. But in the end I did not feel Merton really had much to say. I mean he did not live as a hermit long enough to write deeply out of that experience, in a way for example that Bion or Winnicott or Jung could write out of many decades of experience of being analysts. So I was not comparing like with like. In March 1968 Merton (1998b) writes about an afternoon in the woods:

> I found a good rocky point with a strange view of the knobs and sat there in the sun, said Vespers, read a little Eckhart. It was great, and I am amazed I have not been doing more of it. What else, really, is there?... And really I am ready to let the writing go to the dogs if necessary, and to prefer this: which is what I really want and what I am here for. (p. 63)

Really?! "Let the writing go"? When I read this I thought, "You must be joking!" Merton was a monk, a priest, a writer, an intellectual, an artist, a contemplative. But was he a hermit? Without doubt he had a very complex vocation – no doubt

complicated further by being a Third Culture Kid in a culturally rigid setting. He said himself that he was not a good hermit. Perhaps he was not a hermit at all or perhaps just a novice hermit or perhaps he was the hermit he was. I don't know. He spent years flirting with the possibility of becoming a hermit. Perhaps this is one reason for Merton's enduring interest. We are also tantalised by solitude.

This brings me to the third, and most important, reason for my difficulty. This is that hermits and analysts are invisible. There is a barrier, which it is not possible to breach. I feel that I was not able to grasp something essential. Perhaps this failure, this impossibility, this emptiness is the real challenge and comfort that we derive from hermits and analysts. Gregory of Nyssa observes that God is incomprehensible and that human beings are incomprehensible to themselves. He links these incomprehensibilities by identifying the fact that we are incomprehensible to ourselves as the *imago dei*. Incomprehensibility *is* the God image. For Jean-Luc Marion (2005) this incomprehensibility constitutes what he calls the privilege of unknowing. It guarantees the dignity of the human being, which always exceeds understanding. Hermits and analysts mirror back to us our own incomprehensible subjectivity. By being beyond our reach, they echo the beyond within each of us.

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