



October 6, 2020

## When Things Become Clear

By the Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

Isn't it funny, as we look back over our lifetimes, how there are often a few moments that come to mind when we just seemed to see things in a clearer light? To use an Internet image, maybe we had more bandwidth in those moments, fewer distractions, and more ability to focus.

I remember one of those times from my childhood. In so many ways, it was an ordinary day with nothing terribly special about it. I was in elementary school, playing on the playground on a beautiful fall day with a deep blue sky, and just about the ideal temperature. The high school band was practicing on the football field and our teacher was watching over us.

And I suddenly felt, I knew, that I was loved, and that I belonged. I thought of my parents who were at work. I felt blessed to be part of my school, to have my friends, to be learning, to know that I was cared for, to be fed and clothed. The band kept playing, and I kept swinging higher and higher on the swing set.

I don't know that I, at that time, felt that God was present. But I do now, looking back.

The ancient Celts often spoke of there being “thin places” in the world – places where God’s love and power and clarity just seem to be closer and more obvious. Throughout my ministry, I have come to believe there are “thin *moments*,” when the noise and the chatter seem to fade, when what is really important becomes manifestly obvious. I have seen it in moments of birth and death, at weddings and baptisms, and even at graduations.

Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk, successful writer, and theologian had one of these powerful, life-changing “thin” moments while walking down the street in Louisville, Kentucky.

Merton describes the experience in his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world...

“This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. ... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

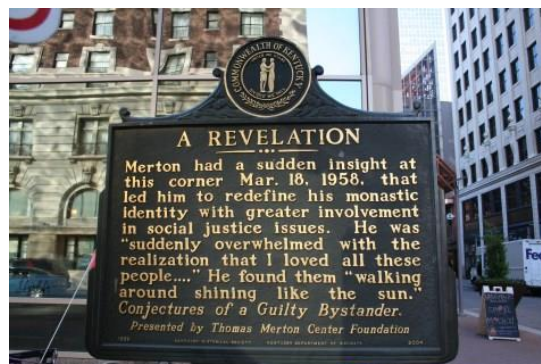


Photo by Lori Erickson

It must have been like the curtain was being pulled back! I can only imagine how, after all of that time in serious prayer and work in the monastery, what it must have felt like to have this spiritual breakthrough on a busy city street, of all places!

I believe many of us are having some breakthroughs, some moments of clarity during this pandemic. Maybe a bit of the usual chatter has been turned down, and there has been more time to face ourselves, and those we love, and our God.

Maybe there has been time to remember that we are loved; that we are bound for eternity (which should surely relativize what we are currently experiencing); and that God is with us.

Merton went on to say, “Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

Indeed. If only. God give us glimpses of how we appear in God’s eyes. God help us to feel even intimations of how God sees us and loves us, and how God loves all humanity.

St. Paul puts it this way in his first letter to the Church in Corinth: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Sometimes music helps us to glimpse the reality of things, reminding us who we really are, Whose we are, and what gets in the way of our dwelling more frequently at that deeper level of consciousness.

I offer you a classic hymn from our tradition, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” sung at Westminster Abbey. I believe the text’s author, John Greenleaf Whittier, an American Quaker poet, had grasped some sense of the same truth Merton had, St. Paul had, and even I, as a boy on the playground, had.

I would love to hear about moments of clarity, the “thin” moments, that YOU have had.

Dear lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways!  
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence, praise, in deeper reverence, praise.

Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives  
confess  
the beauty of thy peace, the beauty of thy peace.

[“Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” recording](#)