

THOMAS MERTON AND LEONARD COHEN: SOUL-BROTHERS AND SPIRITUAL GUIDES

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O Canada

In 2009, it fell to me to give the presidential address to the International Thomas Merton Society's general meeting in Rochester, NY (Grayston 2009). As the first Canadian president of the ITMS, I wanted to strike a Canadian note, if I could. That decided, the next question was how. I got my first clue when I read a review by Pico Iyer of Leonard Cohen's then-recent book of poetry, *Book of Longing* (Iyer, 2008). In that review he makes a brief reference to Thomas Merton as the poet Cohen most resembles. So far so good, then: Leonard Cohen, a Canadian poet, visual artist and singer-songwriter, with a resemblance to Thomas Merton.¹

Then the next challenge: how to frame that resemblance. Happily, I ran across an earlier article in our national paper of record, *The Globe and Mail*, by Sarah Hampson, containing the inside-page heading, "No longer a

monk, but monastic in his way” (Hampson, May 2007). And if *Cohen* was monastic in his own way, *who else* was monastic in his own way if not Thomas Merton? Will there ever again be a monk like him? We can’t know that for certain, of course; but the chances, in my view, are unlikely in the extreme, not only because of Merton’s gifts and temperament, but because of the particular historical moment in which he exercised his gifts. So in my address I told a story about a Christian and a Jew—a Jew from Montréal with a strong affinity for Catholicism (Ryan 2009), and a Christian in rural Kentucky who once commented to Abraham Joshua Heschel that he often felt that he wanted to be “a true Jew under [his] Catholic skin” (Merton 1985, 434–35).

Points of connection

And that is what got me started on my interest in looking at Merton and Cohen together, as soul-brothers, as transcultural and transreligious spiritual teachers, and as spiritual guides to millions, each in his own way (Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and perhaps Richard Rohr also belong to this very select cohort). As I continued to read about them, I found a number of fascinating points of connection between them.

Both were born in French-speaking cultures (France and Québec)

Both retain/ed a strongly European sensibility

Both are poets: both loved Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca

Both lost their fathers (and TM his mother) at an early age

Both had a long-unresolved sense of their own sexuality

Both had some difficulty at particular times with alcohol

Both are trickster/coyote figures

Both went to Columbia University, to Cuba and to India

Both were interested in Zen

Both spent time in monasteries

Both had monastic names – Jikan (“the silent one”) and Father Louis

Both were “monastic in their own way”

Both celebrated Our Lady of Solitude (Cohen in a song, Merton in a journal entry)

Both were anchored in their own religious tradition *and* deeply interested in other traditions

Both are seen by many as prophets/truth-tellers

Both grew from serious immaturity into great maturity

Both became transcultural and transreligious spiritual teachers

Merton's journey, Cohen's journey

In this article, I will first sketch out their spiritual journeys, then explore the question of what we might learn from these two brothers of the soul in regard to spiritual formation, and end with what we might learn from them that might be useful to us in our own spiritual practice and in our practice of direction. Merton, I am taking it as given, is already well-known to many if not most of the readers of *Presence*. So I will say more in this article about Cohen than I will about Merton, before I consider how they may stretch our image of spiritual formation or contribute to our practice of spiritual direction. But let us remember at least these points about Merton (born in 1915, died in 1968). A monk, yes, to his dying day, but a most unusual one. He was a monk with 2100 correspondents, with (in his later years) two secretaries and a chauffeur (he had crashed the abbey vehicle three times), with a strong commitment to silence *and* a profound yearning for communication; and a monk whose abbot once called him the most obedient monk in the monastery, yet one who bent if not broke almost all the rules.

Leonard Cohen, next. He was born in Montréal in 1934, grandson and great-grandson of rabbis. As an English-speaking Jew, he was a member of an ethnic-religious minority within the anglophone minority in Québec,

which as a chiefly francophone culture is a minority within Canada, which is a cultural minority within North America (Gnarowski 1976, 73), factors which, I conjecture, have contributed to his sense of himself as an outsider, an identity which in a way he shared with Merton. He studied, if that is the right word, at McGill University in Montréal, during which time he began to write poetry and to set some of his poems to music. He then studied law for a brief time at Columbia, but quickly moved on to the life of a fulltime artist. In addition to his poems and songs, he has written novels, produced paintings and, interestingly in terms of spiritual practice, undertaken a daily early-morning practice of drawing his own face—something which could be seen as narcissistic, but which I interpret as a kind of daily examen of consciousness. Sarah Hampson calls it “a form of meditation, a daily practice ... that helps ground him and prepare him for his day” (Hampson, November 2007).

Much of the first half of his life was devoted—and “devoted” is indeed *le mot juste*—to wine, women, and of course song. Then, as so frequently happens during the mid-life passage, came a moment of truth. He had been studying Zen off and on for many years (as had Merton). This led to his spending the years 1994–99 at Mount Baldy, a Rinzai Zen monastery in California. As one of his biographers comments, “When asked what ...

Rinzai Zen contributed to his work and life, Cohen unequivocally answered, “Survival” (Nadel 1996, 272).² What Cohen meant by that was that before going to the monastery, he had been drinking too much and that his life was in disorder. It was during his time there that he accompanied his abbot on a visit to Gethsemani, both to experience something of the life of a Christian monastery and to pay his respects to Merton’s memory (Nadel 1996, 232–32).

The time at Mount Baldy was pivotal and healing for Cohen, and from there he returned to the life of a performing artist with new maturity and energy, and without losing his monastic sensibility. He makes no claim to enlightenment, however. With irony both delicious and characteristic, he addresses himself on this point in a post–Mount Baldy poem called “A Life of Errands,” every word of it capitalized:

In Spite Of The Ache / In Your Heart / ... / And The Fact That /
After Years Of / Spiritual Rigour / You Did Not Manage /
To Enlighten Yourself / A Certain Cheerfulness /
Will Begin To / Arise Out Of Your Crushed /
Hopes And Intentions (Cohen 2006, 66).

What he does claim is that he has emerged from his years in the monastery with a “unified” heart. This is an important term for him: he calls the team

which travels with him on tour the Unified Heart Touring Company; and he has established, as any poet is of course free to do at any time, an order of spiritual chivalry which he calls the Order of the Unified Heart (Hampson, May 2007). He retains his human imperfections, of course. In one sense he is the same man he has always been (“Before Zen, chop wood, carry water; after Zen, chop wood, carry water”), *and* in another he is simultaneously the new man, grounded and unified of heart.

It was a great shock to him around this time to learn that his manager had absconded with almost all his money, and that at an age when many retire he would have to make a financial fresh start. But he set to work with a will, and undertook a series of world tours which stretched over many years. The reviews of his concerts have been uniformly laudatory, even venerational. The first time I heard and saw him was at his concert in Seattle on April 23, 2009; and I would say from that experience that the reviews are in no way overstated. If you want to see and hear for yourself what he is doing in these concerts, I recommend his DVD: “Leonard Cohen Live in London.”

It was clear to me that the concert in Seattle was a spiritual occasion. Cohen, then 74, and “born with the gift of a golden voice”—a self-deprecating line from “The Tower of Song” which generated appreciative

laughter from the crowd—was singing both to the crowd *and* to himself. As he sang and interacted with the crowd, he evinced in his singing and stage presence what I would characterize as *delight*, evidence that he has, in Merton’s phrase, recovered Paradise—that he is speaking to us from Eden regained (Eden meaning “delight” in Hebrew). He has become a transcultural and transreligious spiritual teacher, a global rabbi (his surname does mean “priest” in Hebrew), something signified most clearly at the concert when he thanked us for what we had shared, then sent us home with his blessing, somewhat as follows: “So I say God bless you, first of all those of you who will go home to family and friends; then to those of you who live alone, who live in solitude, who live a different kind of life, to you also I say God bless you.” As Pico Iyer says in his program notes, “Is this cabaret or prayer-hall, you may wonder as the show goes on?” (Iyer, n.d.). Larry Rohter, writing in *The New York Times*, cites Iyer, and also makes the Merton–Cohen connection, saying that Cohen

appears to see performance and prayer as aspects of the same larger divine enterprise. That may not be surprising, coming from an artist whose best-known songs mingle sacred concerns with the secular and the sexual and sound like “collaborations between Jacques Brel and Thomas Merton,” as the novelist Pico Iyer put it (Rohter 2009).

More counterpoints

Back then to the ways in which they counterpoint each other's lives. Merton was in his twenties, and on the edge of breakdown, when he was seized by the reality of God, made intellectually possible for him by his reading of Etienne Gilson (Merton 1948, 171). Here then, in his turn, is Cohen on God.

I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for me to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. ... But it doesn't have ... evil associations ... for me. It's easier for me to say God than "some unnameable mysterious power that motivates all living things." The word God for me is very simple and usable. So that I can say "to become close to Him is to feel His grace" because I have felt it" (Gnarowski 1976, 53).³

As believers in God, Merton and Cohen, both also practitioners of Zen, a program of spiritual discipline rather than a religion, which is probably where the confusion comes from, remained and remain committed to their own traditions. Cohen has had to insist to his interviewers that he remains a Jew, as did Merton that he remained a Christian.⁴ Both were and are rooted and grounded in their own traditions, in Cohen's case a fact of birth, in Merton's the fruit of adult choice.

Then there is the question of wine, women and song. Cohen has given us a full if sometimes oblique account of his intimate life in his songs. His journey towards sexual resolution seems still to be a work in progress; but I venture to say that there has indeed *been* progress. Merton's time at Columbia was also marked, as we know, with substantial attention to these matters, which were left behind on the material level when he entered Gethsemani. Of women, however, something more serious must be said in regard to Merton. In 1966, he had a romantic relationship with Margie Smith, a nurse in the Louisville hospital to which he had gone for a back operation (Merton 1997, *passim*). His early relations with women before he met Margie, he largely characterized as matters for regret. However, a passage of an undeniably erotic character in his magnificent essay "Day of a Stranger," written in May 1965, has always seemed to me unmistakable evidence of what was stirring in him then, and in retrospect, a foreshadowing of what would happen between Margie and himself a few months later.

All monks, as is well known, are unmarried, and hermits more unmarried than the rest of them. Not that I have anything against women. I see no reason why a man can't love God and a woman at the same time. If God was going to regard women with a jealous eye,

why did he go and make them in the first place? There is a lot of talk about a married clergy. Interesting. So far there has not been a great deal said about married hermits. ... One might say I had decided to marry the silence of the forest. The sweet dark warmth of the whole world will have to be my wife (Merton 1992, 219).

Their story is told, in diary form, and only from Merton's side, in his late journal, *Learning to Love*. On the meaning of this tumultuous time for Merton, I give to Merton's biographer Michael Mott the last word here: that after his time with Margie, "Merton never again talked of his inability to love, or to be loved" (Mott 1984, 438). In a larger frame of reference, then, both Merton and Cohen point us to the necessity of the integration of eros, understood as including but not limited to sexuality, into our spirituality, communally as well as individually.⁵ Merton lived most of his life in a different time than Cohen; but it seems likely to me that had he lived longer, Merton would have paid substantial attention to the healing of the wound of theological dualism which has for so many centuries afflicted Christianity by separating body and soul, eros and agapé, a healing the need for which is held out to us time and time again in Cohen's songs. Merton's great poem, "Hagia Sophia," at least points the way forward in this regard (Merton 1992, 257-64).

Merton and Cohen, then: they are both poets and visual artists, both outsiders or “strangers,” both “guilty bystanders” who have taken their stands on the cultural margins, both practitioners of Zen, both trickster figures: Pico Iyer calls Cohen a “courtly coyote”; Belden Lane calls Merton a “Zen clown” (Iyer, n.d., Lane 1989). They are both spiritual teachers who have burst the bonds of cultural constraint which for the most part confine poetry to a limited audience and monasticism to its institutional base.

Implications and possibilities

From these sketches of the lives of Merton and Cohen, what dynamics emerge which might shape our thinking about spiritual formation? Let me first nuance the shared monastic dimension. Few of us are going to live in monasteries, but all of us can learn from monastic values. I find it notable that Cohen, having left Mount Baldy, retains a monastic sensibility, that he is still, as Sarah Hampson says, “monastic in his way,” in his *own* way. The ancient values of monasticism—silence, solitude, contemplation, broken-heartedness, marginality, hospitality—offer many resources for our growth in the spirit. And many books, Merton’s included, urge their readers to live contemplative lives into which they can integrate these values without quitting their day jobs. Insofar as these spiritual emphases find a place in

your life or mine, then, we too are monastic—in our own way. Christine Valters Paintner, for example, has done excellent work in this regard with her “global monastery,” the Abbey of the Arts (abbeyofthearts.com). Their journeys also present us with important issues which need to be addressed in any holistic practice of spiritual formation and direction. In Merton’s life and writings, we encounter three major emphases: war, peace and nonviolence; interfaith encounter in transforming depth; and the daily living of the contemplative life in a society both frantic and hyper-rational. We also encounter the spirituality of imperfection and vulnerability which he reveals in his journals, and through which so many people have come close to him. In both of them, Cohen especially, we encounter the challenge of the integration of sexuality and spirituality—not that they are ultimately two separable realities, given that in our “one wild and precious life” (Mary Oliver) we are all creatures both sexual and spiritual. Again in Cohen we encounter the interfaith emphasis, and we are also encouraged by the courage of his decades-long and finally successful struggle with depression (Simmons 2012, 425–26), and with his willingness to make himself vulnerable in his songs and interviews. Both Merton and Cohen hold up to us the goal of living with a “unified heart,” of “recovering Paradise,” of moving beyond any dividedness between so-called sacred and secular—just

living one precious human life. As Larry Rohter suggests, we need to see “performance [or its equivalent] and prayer as aspects of the same larger divine enterprise.” Spiritual directors can employ these emphases and perspectives as they meet with spiritual directees and work with them towards a life of integration and union with self, world and the Divine. And *bien sur*, those of us who are spiritual directors owe it to ourselves and those who come to us for spiritual direction to undertake a thorough self-examination of our own worldview and practice in terms of these dynamics and emphases.

Direction direct and indirect

When we think of spiritual direction, we typically think of two people meeting in a sacred container of silence and conversation. Merton was vitally engaged in this kind of direction as master of scholastics (students for the priesthood) and novices at his abbey—2000 novices came through Gethsemani in the ten years that he was novice master there.⁶ He also acted as a spiritual guide to hundreds if not thousands in his enormous correspondence. Beyond this, he functioned and continues to function as a spiritual guide to many more—myself included—through his writings, particularly his journals and letters. Two collections of his letters offer a

number of examples. The first of these is *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (Merton 1990). The word “religious” in the title refers to the fact that the letters are directed to members of religious communities, many of which were in turmoil in the aftermath of the changes for Roman Catholics inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. As editor Patrick Hart says, when he began to gather letters for the book, he found “that the subjects of renewal and spiritual direction were often intertwined. Merton [himself] was sometimes seeking counsel But more often he was simply responding to another person’s written request for a word of advice and direction during a difficult period” (ix). So, for example, he writes to a Benedictine nun in Spain who had asked him about “mental prayer”: “Our interior prayer is simply the most intimate and personal way in which we seek the Face of God. Two things follow ... the basis of all interior prayer is faith [and] we must see [God] and not ourselves” (Jan 30, 1966, Merton 1990, 297). Or to a young American priest who is finding it difficult to adjust to parish life: “I don’t see that you have to stop being a priest just because the routine machinery of parish organization is bugging you. ... After all, you are always going to have to relate to people. See your priesthood not as a role or an office, but as just part of your own life” (Mar 14, 1968, Merton 1990, 371). The second of

these books is *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (Merton 1989). A particular feature of this book is its large number of letters to young people. As Daggy comments, “Merton conscientiously answered the majority of letters which young people wrote to him. Merton felt a special closeness to young people and these letters show the empathy which he and they both felt” (Merton 1989, xii). One very long letter to a draft board was written on behalf of James A. Kennedy, a young Catholic who had asked for Merton’s support in regard to his application to be considered a conscientious objector (May 21, 1962, Merton 1989, 322-23). To Jim Frost, a high-school sophomore from Iowa, who had been given a “write to an author” assignment, he wrote: “ ... life is good and a wonderful gift, and the more you put into it the better it is ... Don’t live on illusions. You don’t have to, reality is right there in front of you, and it is better than any illusion” (Jan 7, 1964, Merton 1989, 330). To Jeanette Yakel, of Green Island, NY, who had written asking why God permits cruelty to animals, he replied: “Any question about unjust and useless suffering is difficult to answer Who is to say that [God] does not in some way suffer in the animals what they suffer?” (Mar 21, 1967, Merton 1989, 347). And writing to Jon Allen, 23, an American soldier in Vietnam, not a Roman Catholic, who had written to Merton asking him to pray for him, he responded: “ ...

your destiny is something that demands great acts of courage and decision, not in killing others but in finding the truth of your own existence and being faithful to it” (July 10, 1967, Merton 1989, 355-56). I end with this comment because it so clearly states the purpose (in any tradition) of spiritual direction: to assist others to find the truth of their own existence and to encourage them to be faithful to it. None of these were in the context of an ongoing spiritual-direction relationship, in which directors typically shrink from giving advice. They were more analogous to the one-shot experience of direction which many people receive in retreats, occasions on which often advice may be sought and given. Partly for this reason, I suggest, Merton’s counsel in these letters is directive rather than dialogical: Carl Rogers he isn’t! I place beside the definition of spiritual direction which I have extrapolated from Merton’s letter to soldier Jon Allen a question and answer from longtime Cohen fan Pico Iyer, who in *The Art of Stillness* (Iyer 2014), a book in which Merton and Cohen are the guiding spirits, says this.

... why were so many hastening to concerts delivered by a monk in his late seventies [he is referring to Cohen’s recent Grand Tour]? Perhaps they longed to be taken back to a place of trust ... where they could speak and listen with something deeper than their social selves and be returned to a penetrating intimacy” (65).

Again, a beautiful description of spiritual direction: a process of being taken to a place of trust in which they could speak and listen at a deep level.

Cohen, Iyer also says, acknowledges that “his greatest journeys were inner ones” (22), and William H. Shannon offers a parallel to this from Merton: “Merton was always moving in the real journey of life that is interior and that is ‘a matter of growth, deepening and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts’” (Shannon, 288).

In our contemporary oral and iconic culture, a culture very different from Merton’s time with its dominant print culture, Cohen’s work as a spiritual guide is chiefly manifested in his concerts, recordings and interviews.⁷ His fans—again, myself included—experience ourselves through those media as belonging to a global community of spiritual journeyers whom he helps to accept themselves in their vulnerability and imperfection, and to bring together eros and agapé in their daily lives. (Iyer is an interesting exception here: he has met Cohen a number of times, and in his book gives testimony to the one-to-one wisdom he has received on these occasions.)

Cohen would demur, of course, at any suggestion that he is a spiritual director, and Merton is no longer with us on this plane. Their work as

spiritual guides, then, begins in a way that is indirect and cultural rather than up close and personal, but nonetheless real for all that. One thinks of the great line from “Hamlet”: “By indirections find directions out” (II.i.66). But what can begin culturally can become personal; and when the student is ready, as we are so often told, the teacher will appear—not the transcultural teacher, but the flesh-and-blood spiritual director. For those of us committed to the incarnational value of face-to-face communication, and in no way minimizing the profound spiritual influence which Merton and Cohen exercise culturally, I want to affirm the ultimately unavoidable necessity for someone whose soul has been awakened by experience to find a soulfriend, formal or informal, with whom to share their whole-life interior journey.

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Merton and Cohen never met in the flesh; but I find it very easy to picture them at some future time and on some other plane, sitting down together over a beer—as Merton says, “I love beer, and by that very fact, the world” (Merton 1973, 160), admiring each other’s poems, shaking their heads at the mystery and complexity of the human journey, and rejoicing together as brothers of the soul.

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NOTES

- ¹ Another commentator, T. F. Rigelhof, in his review of Marina Endicott's *Good to a Fault*, speaks of her writing as marked with "the flashes of hard-won wisdom that are like Leonard Cohen's when he's at his most self-deprecating. Or Thomas Merton's" (2008, D1).
- ² Sarah Hampson quotes Cohen as referring to his time at Mount Baldy as "rehab," and as having gone there to cure himself/be cured of his "excesses" (2007, R7).
- ³ Gnarowski is citing an interview with Cohen published in *Saturday Night* in June 1969.
- ⁴ From Cohen: "in the tradition of Zen that I've practiced, there is ... theologically ... no challenge to any Jewish belief" (cited in Rohter 2009). Cf. Merton's saying mass in Bangkok on December 8, 1968, two days before he died: Merton, *Asian Journal*, 1973, 254.
- ⁵ For a theological take on eros, see Whitehead and Whitehead 2009.
- ⁶ Merton did publish a little book on spiritual direction: *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960), which I am unable to encourage readers of *Presence* to read. What he has to say there about spiritual direction is stiff and dated. He himself rated the book as "less good" (a rating between "good" and "poor") on the graph he drew in 1967 to record his own assessment of his books (Merton 1991, 150–51).
- ⁷ For a wide selection of "interviews and encounters," see Burger 2014.

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