

Seeking the True Self: Thomas Merton and Barack Obama

By Larry Culliford

In 2009, when I was looking for a high-profile figure to illustrate certain transitional phases of spiritual development for my book, *The Psychology of Spirituality*,¹ I came across *Dreams from My Father*,² an autobiography written by future American President Barack Obama. In the holistic (or “psycho-spiritual”) model I was using, there are six stages. The third, “conformist” stage satisfies a powerful human urge to belong in a group. The fourth, “individual” stage follows a different drive: to think, speak, act and take responsibility for oneself, to be independent. These are obviously in conflict. Moving from one to the other can be challenging, and many people fail fully to make the advance. Fewer still go on to the higher stages, the next of which, the fifth, “integration” stage, involves thinking, speaking and acting for yourself *and* for everybody else. This altruistic type of motivation emerges only after the spiritual insight dawns that human beings are united as kin and all belong to each other. Change can occur gradually, but one or several epiphanies, moments of awakening, are usually involved to bring about a wholesale shift in attitude towards God and Creation, also towards the people and creatures with whom we share our world.

In searching for an example of someone in transition between the individual and the integration stages, I discovered how pertinent Barack Obama’s experiences were to this developmental process, and excerpts from his story feature in the relevant section of my book (Culliford 162-71). At the same time, I realized that Obama’s story bore striking resemblances to that of another influential American figure, Thomas Merton. Each wrote an autobiography about deeply personal searches for meaning. Each lost a parent and experienced diverse international cultures during childhood. Both had striking epiphanies as young adults. This article considers their separate but comparable paths towards spiritual maturity, noting that President Obama’s journey continues.

Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*³ and Obama’s *Dreams of My Father* were both published when their authors were relatively young: Merton was 33, Obama 43. Ruth Merton had died when her son Tom (b. 1915) was six. Obama (b. 1961) lost his opposite parent even earlier, when his father returned to Kenya, and later by his death. In their teen years, Merton’s father died and Obama was separated from his mother. Both spent time with their maternal grandparents. Both early lives were disrupted by travel and relocation: Merton in England, France and the United States; Obama in Hawaii, Indonesia and mainland United States. Both men were educated and highly intelligent. Neither, when young, followed a conventional religious path. Both, however, discovered powerful spiritual motivation at pivotal moments.

Both also had powerful encounters with their dead fathers. In Rome one night, at age 18, Merton was in his room. “Suddenly it seemed to me



Larry Culliford

Larry Culliford is former Chair of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. A British psychiatrist and author, he writes a regular blog for the *Psychology Today* magazine website (see: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/spiritual-wisdom-secular-times>). This article is based on a presentation at the ITMS Twelfth General Meeting in June 2011 at Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois.

that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there. . . . [I]n that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul . . . and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known before.” Merton adds, “There were a lot of tears connected with this, and they did me good” (*SSM* 111). Obama’s father had also been dead about a year when the son experienced one of the key dreams that provoked his book’s title. “Barack, I always wanted to tell you how much I love you,” the dream father says as Obama awakes (Obama 129). Like Merton, he finds himself weeping. Merton’s vision of his father Owen prompted soul-searching and initiated a spiritual quest, though not immediately. In October that year, at Clare College, Cambridge, Merton entered what Jim Forest has called the “bleakest year of his life.”²⁴ Merton later commented, “God in His mercy was permitting me to fly as far as I could from His love but at the same time preparing to confront me, at the end of it all. . . . For in my greatest misery He would shed, into my soul, enough light to see how miserable I was, and to admit that it was my own fault and my own work” (*SSM* 123). His search for his true self had begun. Barack junior’s dream came when, as we shall see, he had already begun to mature, in 1983, about two years before the move to Chicago that would set the direction for the rest of his life.

Facts about Barack Obama are on public record. His mother, Ann Dunham, was a white American of European descent. Barack Obama senior met her when he came to Hawaii on a foreign student scholarship in 1960. The two were soon married, and Barack junior was born on August 4, 1961. His parents separated when he was two, and were soon divorced. Barack senior returned to Kenya and saw his son only once more, for about a month on a return visit nine years later. Barack’s mother later married an Indonesian student, who was also attending college in Hawaii. After a military coup back home in 1967, like all Indonesian students he was recalled. From age six, Barack junior attended local schools in Jakarta, and received additional tuition daily from his mother. A younger half-sister was born. In 1971, at age ten, Obama returned to Hawaii alone. Living with his white maternal grandparents, he attended high school until graduation in 1979.

At eighteen, he began college in Los Angeles, transferring to Columbia University in New York City, Merton’s own Alma Mater, in 1981, and graduated in 1983. He initially worked as a researcher at the Business International Corporation and at the New York Public Interest Research Group. In June 1985, he moved to Chicago, where he became a director of the Developing Communities Project on the city’s far South Side. He worked as a community organizer until May 1988, then entered Harvard Law School. After graduating, Obama worked as a civil rights lawyer from 1991 until entering politics in 1997. He was elected to the US Senate in 2004, becoming the forty-fourth American President in January 2009.

Merton’s book *The Seven Storey Mountain* is readily identified as a spiritual autobiography, wherein the name of God is mentioned twice in the first paragraph, the story unfolds of inner struggle and conversion to Roman Catholicism, and comes to a climax with Merton joining the Cistercians. What of Obama’s book? In his introduction, Obama wrote that *Dreams from My Father* was “a record of a personal, interior journey – a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American” (Obama xvi). He thus announces and defines this too as a spiritual mission. He records his search, both deep within himself and externally into his origins, for an authentic and complete sense of identity – his true self – and for an understanding

of the relationship of that self to other people. The account begins when an aunt calls from Nairobi in 1982, informing him of his father's death in a car accident. Obama starts to reflect that he grew up with more of a myth than a man as a father. He had barely before registered that his father was "black as pitch," while his mother was "white as milk." His own black skin, though, had become the focus of many doubts and questions about his personal identity, his future and mission in life. In Hawaii, he had invented grand tales for white classmates about his father being a tribal prince. Defending against shame and insecurity, he created a false protective persona. Yet he admits that part of him knew that what he told them was a lie. His father "remained something unknown, something volatile and vaguely threatening" (Obama 63), like his own dark Jungian shadow. He knew he had five paternal half-brothers and a second half-sister living in Africa. At age eleven, he had also heard his father's stories of African tribes that still required a boy to prove himself by killing a lion. As a schoolboy, he had already known intuitively that he must explore this part of himself; but like most adolescents, he first experimented with other, partial identities.

Obama made a conscious decision to become part of the world of basketball, practicing for hours to make the high-school team. He liked the idea that "Respect came from what you did and not who your daddy was" (Obama 79). Later, though, he admitted that he had been exploring a misrepresentation of black male adolescence, "itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood." Comparing himself with surfers, football players and rock guitarists, he describes the development of a mask to wear in public: "Each of us chose a costume, armor against uncertainty." At least on the basketball court he could find "a community of sorts, with an inner life all its own" (Obama 79). Joining this group was a typical response to his unhappy predicament, but he was never fully committed to it, recognizing that he and his peers were confused and angry, and that this was how they dealt with their emotional pain. He was not just black-skinned. He was, after all, living with white relatives, people he loved; so he understood that his situation was complicated – more complicated, although probably no more anguished, than Merton's at a similar age – and without a simple solution. One day, Obama had an important and powerful revelation: "I knew for the first time that I was utterly alone" (Obama 91). He had failed to find a group with which to identify and conform. He was obliged henceforward to think, speak and act for himself.

At college in Los Angeles, although he spent time with other black students, Obama remained self-contained. Then, something remarkable happened. At nineteen, he was at a rally supporting the African National Congress of South Africa, a country still in the grip of apartheid before Nelson Mandela's release. Asked to make a brief speech, he found himself unexpectedly inspired. Mounting the stage, unprepared, reaching the microphone, he said the following:

"There is a struggle going on. It's happening an ocean away. But it's a struggle that touches each and every one of us. . . . Whether we know it or not. . . . Whether we want it or not. . . . A struggle that demands we choose sides. . . . Not between black and white. Not between rich and poor. No – it's a harder choice than that. It's a choice between dignity and servitude. . . . Between fairness and injustice. . . . Between commitment and indifference. . . . A choice between right and wrong." (Obama 106)

With these words, he showed an intuitive and prophetic grasp of humanity's seamless interconnectedness, the principle of universality. He also accurately depicted his own crisis, and the choices he had still to make. However, with friends the same day, not yet ready to be a leader, he disowned the speech and remained assailed by, as he described it, "Constant, crippling fear that I didn't belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn't, I would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world – black and white – always standing in judgement" (Obama 111).

Obama wanted to deny what seemed clear to others, that he had spoken from the heart with his true voice, that he cared, and that he believed in a shared and universal reality. Inner struggle would follow, but this was irreversible. His soul, his true self, had awakened within him, had spoken, and would continue to assert itself. Despite this breakthrough, Obama remained confused as he moved to New York. He studied hard, reflecting meanwhile on his life. Like Merton, he started keeping a journal of daily reflections and poetry. Unlike Merton, however, he avoided going out drinking. His new-found discipline was deliberate and consciously protective, for he was surrounded by temptation. "The beauty, the filth, the noise, and the excess, all of it dazzled my senses," he wrote. "There seemed no constraints on originality of lifestyles or the manufacture of desire – a more expensive restaurant, a finer suit of clothes, a more beautiful woman, a more potent high. Uncertain of my ability to steer a course of moderation, fearful of falling into old habits, I took on the temperament if not the convictions of a street corner preacher, prepared to see temptation everywhere" (Obama 120).

Thomas Merton had little trouble finding a social group to which to belong while studying at Columbia, but this was a small group of like-minded and intelligent idealists who, for the most part, became lifelong friends and mentors. At the age of twenty, he was briefly involved with a political organization, attending some Communist meetings. He even joined a demonstration, pitched outside the *Casa Italiana*, "wearing two placards, front and back, accusing Italy of injustice in the invasion of Ethiopia" (SSM 142). At a later meeting (in contrast to Obama's experience at the ANC rally) he gave an apparently uninspired speech on "a topic about which I knew absolutely nothing" (SSM 147). In the end, he found the Communists dull, and stopped attending meetings after about three months. There had been no epiphany here, except that he needed to go looking for truth elsewhere. It was three years later, on November 16, 1938, at age 23, that Merton was baptized in Corpus Christi Church and joined the Roman Catholic communion. The following year, on a visit to Cuba, at Sunday Mass in Havana, as the children cried out the first line of the Creed, there formed in Merton's mind "an awareness, an understanding, a realization of what had just taken place on the altar, at the Consecration: a realization of God made present . . . in a way that made Him belong to me" (SSM 284). This awareness, Merton added, "was so intangible, and yet it struck me like a thunderclap. It was a light that was so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience" (SSM 284). The passage is worth reading in full for its vivid description of a nearly ineffable experience, "as if a sudden and immediate contact had been established between my intellect and the Truth" (SSM 285). The transformative effect on Merton's relationship to God and Creation was profound and permanent. As he described it, "God began to fill my soul with grace in those days, grace that sprung from deep within me, I could not know how or where" (SSM 302).

Like Merton, Obama became a new man in New York, but more in relation to others, and to society at large, than to God. The breadth of his insight is breathtaking: “Beneath the hum, the motion, I was seeing the steady fracturing of the world taking place. I had seen worse poverty in Indonesia and glimpsed the violent mood of inner-city kids in L.A.; I had grown accustomed everywhere to suspicion between the races. . . . It was only now that I began to grasp the almost mathematical precision with which America’s race and class problems joined: the depth, the ferocity, of resulting tribal wars. . . . It was as if the middle ground had collapsed, utterly” (Obama 120-21). Obama realized that he had to choose either personal comfort or responsible engagement with social realities. Wisely, he took his time: “Unwilling to make that choice, I spent a year walking from one end of Manhattan to the other,” he wrote. “Like a tourist, I watched the range of human possibility on display, trying to trace out my future in the lives of the people I saw, looking for some opening through which I could re-enter” (Obama 122). The dream about his father came then, and marked another major psycho-spiritual shift. Tearful on waking, he is no longer afraid. He is sad.

Becoming a community organizer in 1985, at age 24, was both impulsive and intuitive; but Obama later also understood that it formed “part of that larger narrative, starting with my father and his father before him, my mother and her parents, my memories of Indonesia with its beggars and farmers . . . my move to New York; my father’s death.” Demonstrating an almost spiritual degree of awareness, he comments, “I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone” (Obama 133-34). With a broader personal identity allowing him to feel kinship with many people, without distinction on account of race, skin color, place of origin or any other categorizing feature, he no longer feels so isolated. His ideals included “Being right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community’s suffering and take part in its healing” (Obama 278). Heartfelt reminiscences were shared at neighborhood meetings he attended, where people remembered with nostalgia how people used to help each other, saying how this morality now seemed missing. “The whole of what they recalled sounded vivid and true, the sound of shared loss,” Obama wrote. “A feeling of witness, of frustration and hope, moved about the room.” This complexity of feelings also seems to have lodged within his soul. “Then we all joined hands,” he wrote, “and together we asked for the courage to turn things around.” He does not yet seem sure to whom they are praying, but he does recognize that these stories, “full of terror and wonder,” are “sacred” (Obama 178).

Thomas Merton seems fulfilled in his search, and in his relationship to God, by the time he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani at age 26. Later, however, he began gradually to feel cut off from ordinary people, and this provoked a crisis that was famously resolved on March 18, 1958. In his journal on the following day, he wrote, “Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th. and Walnut, suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to me.”⁵ About the same incident, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he writes, “It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race.”⁶ Merton thus acknowledges that this deep experience of his oneness with others connects him not only with the people he encountered on that corner, but with all people. His period of social activism, through his writings and correspondence, seems to have been triggered by this new moment of epiphany.

For Merton, finding God led in time to kinship with others. For Barack Obama, finding a fairly secular kind of kinship with others seems to have come first; but we can see how it was mediated through God and through the religion of Christ. His account of becoming an effective

community organizer reveals a man of evident honesty and integrity. He is not boastful; and he is often again inspired to speak up and persuade others when necessary. He learns and grows through both failures and successes; and, before he leaves Chicago, there is one further breakthrough. As the Communities Project was mainly church-based, Obama necessarily worked alongside several Christian ministers. When asked what church he belonged to, his answer was evasive. Someone said he should join one. But which? “It really doesn’t matter where,” someone said. Obama realized the faith he had in himself was important, but that it could never be sufficient to sustain his ambitions. Then, at Trinity United Church of Christ, he met elderly engineers, doctors, accountants and corporate managers who taught him something about trying to live without religion. “They all told me,” he wrote, “of having reached a spiritual dead end; a feeling . . . that they’d been cut off from themselves. Intermittently, then more regularly, they had returned to the church. . . . Many of their deepest spiritual needs were being met, in a way they had not been met while working in the big institutions” (Obama 285). He remained “a reluctant skeptic,” doubtful of his own motives, wary of expedient conversion, having too many quarrels with God to accept a salvation too easily won. But this was not his final position. Shortly before leaving Chicago for a trip to Europe and Africa, going on then to Harvard Law School in 1988, Obama returned for a service at Trinity Church. Moved by the choir’s singing, he was also deeply affected by the pastor’s sermon, a meditation on a fallen world, based on the Old Testament story of Hannah (1 Samuel 1). Listening to this, and reflecting on similar Bible tales, he wrote, “Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, became my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying our story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. . . . Our trials and triumphs became at once unique *and* universal” (Obama 294).

There is no reason to assume that he excluded anyone – black or white, Latino or Asian, or anyone – from this conclusion. A small boy leaned over and gave him a pocket tissue. Only then did Obama feel the tears streaming down his face. This cathartic epiphany, this sorrowful cleansing, brought him further relief, healing and growth. Something shadowy, long held back and buried, had finally been released. Obama went happily then to Kenya to meet his extended family and explore his African roots, collecting the last pieces of a jig-saw of the soul, becoming whole and completing this vital part of the odyssey in search of his true self.

Religion may not have the central role in Barack Obama’s life that it did for Thomas Merton, but these men are kin. Both reached an appreciable degree of spiritual maturity comparatively early in life. Both became influential leaders and “universalists.” In the face of indifference and opposition, both men began looking for peace and harmony wherever differences, discord and injustice were found. Christianity is essentially about love between a father and a son. Like Christ, both Merton and Obama have had vital, transformative, transcendental and loving relationships with their fathers. Now, long past the point where his book ends, Obama’s worldly and spiritual journey continues. Has he had an experience like Merton’s in the Havana church? Is he yet reconciled to God as deeply? Who knows? But this can still happen. As President of the United States, Obama undoubtedly lives with new opportunities, but also a new set of temptations – those concerned with wielding enormous temporal and earthly powers; and he faces the most intense criticism and opposition. Can he be true to the spiritual values he espoused when first going to Chicago? Only his

Maker can tell. Wherever we live on the planet, Obama's continuing spiritual journey so obviously concerns everybody. Should we not all, therefore, remember him frequently in our prayers?

1. Larry Culliford, *The Psychology of Spirituality* (London & New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2011); subsequent references will be cited as "Culliford" parenthetically in the text.
2. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Crown, 2004); subsequent references will be cited as "Obama" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
4. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 32.
5. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82.
6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.