

Merton Retreat 2002: Time to Work Differently Together?

There is something very wrong with the way we work together. Think of the major news stories and headlines you have seen over the past year. In example after example, organizations, institutions, and individuals make news by demonstrating how tough it is for us to work and get along together.

Stating that simple fact seems so obvious as to appear foolish. That hidden beneath the sound bites, expert opinions, and carefully crafted PR statements is the bald truth that we don't know how to work together well. Cynics say it's human nature and not likely to change. Certainly, you wouldn't lose money betting against changing it in the short-term. However, might we be selling ourselves short in thinking we're powerless to improve the situation?

Beginning on Monday of this week and running through Friday the International Thomas Merton Retreat 2002 is taking place at Gesthsemani Abbey outside Bardstown, KY. This event is bringing together 17 leaders from across the world to explore the theme of "Spirituality and the Environment." The group includes an oil company executive, environmental scientists, writers, a monk, and grassroots activists from five continents.

They are coming without prepared speeches or position papers, but instead with a goal of talking deeply together about the common issues we face in sharing one planet with 6 billion people. They will represent very different viewpoints and interest groups. Despite the word "spirituality" in the theme, those attending are not universally religious and will bring a range of beliefs.

Group members were in part selected to reflect the diverse interest groups dealing with local and global environmental concerns. Using an approach called Contemplative Dialogue, the goal of the event is to create an atmosphere in which diverse participants can talk together with depth and real understanding. An expectation is that a profound common ground of mutual concern will emerge.

Originally envisioned by the late monk Thomas Merton, this event assumes that a constant focus on problem solving can actually sustain the difficulties we hope to overcome. That perhaps it's only by approaching our concerns with a shared focus and new awareness that fresh possibilities may be allowed to emerge.

This belief is certainly supported by the work being done on learning organizations and dialogue in the corporate and other sectors. It's an instance in which current research and practice confirms the wisdom of the contemplative spiritual traditions when they teach that our thinking and awareness may blind us to what is most real.

The very ways in which our minds work may actually be a major source of our inability to work effectively together. Recognizing this possibility and discovering skillful ways in which to overcome it holds tremendous potential for effectively

engaging complex and long-standing problems that require our cooperation to resolve. From the environment to race relations, community merger, organizational effectiveness, and even parenting, are but a few of our many shared challenges that stand to profit from this understanding.

The experience of the last Merton Retreat in 2000, confirms that once we overcome differences in language, beliefs, and perceptions, what we find is a profound sense of our being one common human family. What emerges is a truly sacred sense that we share a common human spirit that connects us more strongly than our conflicts and differences divide us.

M.L. King, Jr. spoke of this connection. He wrote "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

And Merton was speaking of the same connection when he said, "Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."

The Merton Retreat 2002 and its process of Contemplative Dialogue will draw on this 'original unity' as they explore the question of the Environment with the group's participants. The group will continue this conversation with others by way of the public closing and its live broadcast over the Internet beginning on Friday evening. It will certainly be interesting to hear what new awarenesses may emerge.

The closing session of the Merton Retreat 2002 is open to the public and takes place this Friday, June 14th at 7 p.m. at the Brown Theatre, 311 W. Broadway. It will be audiocast live on the Internet (and available for later listening). Links may be found at www.mertonfoundation.org and www.newdimensions.org. The Merton Retreat 2002 is put on by the Thomas Merton Foundation, and funded with a major grant from the Fetzer Institute.

Steven Wirth is lead facilitator of the International Thomas Merton Retreat 2002 and served in the same role for the 2000 event. He is a senior partner with The Yardley Group, a firm that helps individuals and communities work more effectively together. For more information, see www.theyardleygroup.com