

## Foreword

BY ROWAN WILLIAMS

Becoming a child again: the first reaction may be a feeling that this would be wonderful—no responsibility, no battling with expectations, no long memories of failure and ambiguity. But when Jesus of Nazareth tells us to become like children, and when spiritual masters urge us to connect with the “child mind,” they are not being nostalgic or sentimental. They are drawing our attention to something we all instinctively recognise. There is something that our habitual adult consciousness has lost or buried, and it must be found, not as a comforting reinstatement of half-forgotten happiness but as a breakthrough to a new mind. When we were children we did not know we possessed it; now we must drop everything in order to find it.

Talking about this is full of paradoxes. Often when I think about “re-discovering” the child’s condition, what I’m really longing for is for me, the present adult me, to have some agreeable experiences of the kind I vaguely remember from my early years. Many people use a wide variety of techniques to attain this goal. But it is not the same, because it is a self-conscious quest for another satisfying experience. The true mind of the child is found in an emptying out of the self that collects nice experiences. The child mind is simply the mind that inhabits where and who and what it is, that lives in the world without the shadows of craving and fear and self-objectifying.

In this humanly accessible and often moving book, we see how one of the great spiritual guides of our age gradually clarifies his understanding of this journey towards the present moment of inhabiting the place where life is happening. Merton does this through his contemplative discipline, but also through his imaginative writing, especially his poems, and in his courageous exploration of other religious frameworks such as Buddhism.

Fiona Gardner shows how he delineates the process of coming to recognise the call to inhabit the moment and the place, and in so doing gently guides us to begin the same journey—without sentimentality or backward-looking yearning for a golden age. Merton is presented to us in this book as a fierce critic of all the cultural falsehoods that keep the gulf between my treasured ego and my true “place” so deep and apparently impassable. He repeatedly invites us to see the “adult” judgements we make—about politics and society, about religion and psychology—as both childish and hostile to real childlikeness. He invites us to that home which (as St Augustine famously says) does not fall down when we are away, the home that is the simple present actuality where God lives and acts. And Fiona Gardner opens up the demands and promises of this journey with sensitivity, warmth and candour, challenging us to believe that we can after all learn to be where we are and “know the place for the first time.”

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