

“The Climate of Humor and Freedom”: An Interview about Thomas Merton with Ron Seitz

*Conducted by George Kilcourse
Edited by Matthew McEver*

George Kilcourse: Your book *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* has gained a wide readership in the past year. Brother Patrick Hart complimented it with praise, saying “at last, here is the Merton I knew.” What has it been like to see your interpretation of Merton in print?

Ron Seitz: The reason it took so long to get in print was that I was hesitant. I was encouraged by Brother Pat, the monks, and Sally (my wife). After publication I was, to be honest, a little embarrassed, quite self-conscious about the reception that poets such as Bob Lax or J. Laughlin would give it. And it might be inadequate or poor work. I wouldn’t want to embarrass the monastery as well because, after all, I really don’t have the direct experience of monasticism, the life of a monk. I suppose I’m a tourist. I say things that, many times, may be superficial. Also, I took a risk, I think, in the form that I chose in writing this book as a “memory vision.” It is anecdotal, conversational, and I present much of it as a dramatic narrative, almost a fictional approach. But I had to put all of those doubts behind me and just go with who I was.

Really, the book is about a relationship between the two of us; it’s not a biography of Merton. Anyone can tell that. It’s a memoir; it’s my response to and my portrait of Thomas Merton. In that light, it’s not a question of viewing the work as “objectively accurate” or not. It has been received very positively by critics and the reading public

in general. In all of my years of writing (and publishing), it's the first time I've ever had people call me long distance and say enthusiastically that they have just read the last part that very minute. And there are the letters; quite a few of them, very personal letters. The book seems to be touching people in a very strange way, possibly because it is somewhat confessional. Many readers say that at times it's almost intimate to the point of blush-embarrassment that I'm saying these things. I hope the writing is not an expression of false humility.

I am appreciative that the book is being well received, as well as about what Brother Pat Hart says in the introduction. And the reviews, many more than I anticipated, have been intelligent and perceptive, that is, "positive."

Kilcourse: You talk in the book about the title of Merton's poem "Song for Nobody." Could you say more?

Seitz: The "Song for Nobody" appeals to me. It's an apophatic poem. The "Song" is a spiritual soliloquy. I see it as having no particular audience. Merton's not trying to give a person's life-identity here. The poem's "say" is not for approval, fame, or acclaim. If anything, the song is addressed to God. Or better still, you could say a spiritual soliloquy is always addressed to "nobody"—literally.

Merton had several other poems, such as "Night-Flowering Cactus," very much in that particular vein. They're minimal, concrete. And it's the anonymity that I appreciate in such writing as this—not only in the song, but in the saying.

Kilcourse: I know you have a new book out now. Tell us about the new Merton work.

Seitz: The one that will be published shortly is *Being Center: The Merton Poems*. It's a very large collection of poetry—over one hundred pages. It includes many of the poems that are in *The Gethsemani Poems* (the earlier limited edition, which is out of print) and many pieces written after that. I'm very excited about my poetry books, far more than the prose (although they're not received by as large an audience).

I'm also working on another book, not quite what you would call a sequel or follow-up to *Song for Nobody*; the tentative title is *The Road to Cold Mountain*. I don't know if you are acquainted with Han Shan's collection of Cold Mountain poems about an eccentric Chinese hermit and Zen master with his minimal, pithy sayings. They're very

appealing and analogous to Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (at least at the beginning). Merton will be my "companion" along the way in my Cold Mountain book—very much like the Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. I want to flesh out some of the allusions, incidents, and conversations from *Song for Nobody*. The work will definitely be in the Eastern vein: Tao, Zen, and Vedanta—things of that sort. As I said, it will include Merton, but not so much as the first book.

Kilcourse: From other things that you've written, it is apparent that you yourself flirted with a monastic vocation as a young man. Is that accurate?

Seitz: I like your choice of words. "Flirted." That word is especially appropriate. It probably was sort of a romantic infatuation with monasticism that I picked up, possibly from reading *The Sign of Jonas*, far more than *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Many people think I came to Thomas Merton through *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but that's not the case at all. I read that later. I think there was an attraction to the asceticism, the silence and solitude. It was something that I wanted, something other than what I was at the time, the culture I was involved in.

But soon, I found out that I'm not a community person. Once you have the experience of staying in the monastery, you find that there is an element of loneliness within solitude; I didn't think I could quite handle that. I went as a spectator and a tourist and that's probably the way I approached the vocation. They didn't dismiss me outrightly, but they said I wasn't quite ready three or four times. So, yes, I did "flirt."

Kilcourse: They said that you were "not ready." Did you actually make an overture to them?

Seitz: Yes, I went down to the monastery for counseling. The monk (Father "H") I approached there and talked to several times could see my interests. Some of them were artistic or aesthetic; in my writing, for instance. In being honest and frank with him, I realized I was attracted to women and I would've had a real problem with that. And ultimately, I did marry.

I also think I would have had problems with some of the disciplines there. An obvious one was obedience. Father "H" probably saw a very arrogant young man. He probably saw my instability; I had

wandered all over the country, going here and there. He may have seen that I would've been very impatient and would've been one who runs out of there very quickly. I think he had an accurate reading of who I was.

Kilcourse: When did you first visit Gethsemani? Could you describe some of your first impressions of Cistercian monastic life?

Seitz: I first visited Gethsemani when I entered Bellarmine College in 1956. I didn't hear much about Gethsemani and Merton when I was in high school at Saint Xavier, here in Louisville. I had been in the army for two years, and when I came back to Bellarmine there was talk of Gethsemani, Merton, and *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I was a sophomore in college, twenty years old, and my first impressions of Cistercian monastic life were "guest-house focused" in vision. Actually, the present guest house is quite different from the old one. That experience included narrow cells, shared bathrooms, being cold, and getting up for the (then) 2 A.M. Vigils service. There was a mystique about all of that and a sense of mystery. I had a sense of awe about the ritual, the monastic climate of silence and solitude—the, to me, almost otherworldly chanting of the monks. There was imagery all over the place. I was just overwhelmed by my first imagist impressions. As a writer, most often I'm making a collage and painting in my mind of all that.

Kilcourse: When did you first meet Merton?

Seitz: It took place in October of 1958 and I was a junior at Bellarmine College. Merton had requested (from someone?) a meeting with some of the promising young artists in Louisville. Why I was included with four painters is still a mystery to me. Anyway, the five of us waited in the front courtyard near the old monastery and we met him there. He was very accessible, earthy, laughing, and relaxed. He wasn't that Gandhian, thin, ascetic-looking, starving monk that we stereotypically imagine. He didn't look like that at all. That jarred me somewhat (not that it shattered any pious icon image, as it did for some of the others) but made me very relaxed as well. We struck up a rapport because he found out I was a writer. As I said, the other artists were painters. He himself painted and sketched some ink drawings. But we had this special connection—poetry. After that first meeting we started corresponding.

Kilcourse: One of your teachers and mentors was Dan Walsh, who also taught Merton at Columbia University. When did you first meet Dan? How was it that he came to introduce you to Merton?

Seitz: I started teaching at Bellarmine in 1962 and I knew of Dan from the description in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In 1962 or 1963 Father John Loftus, the dean then, said, "Guess who's coming here? It's Dan Walsh . . . and we're having a reception tonight. Would you come and meet him?"

Dan had come down from retirement at Manhattanville College to be close to Merton, but his primary reason was to teach the monks at Gethsemani. While he was here, Father John and Father Alfred Horrigan, Bellarmine's president, requested him to teach a course or two at the college. He consented, and I began to take all of his classes at every opportunity during the time he was there. I felt as if I had almost a Sorbonne Ph.D. in philosophy because we went from the pre-Socratics all the way up to the Modernists.

I was also a chauffeur to Dan, driving him to his home downtown, but also back and forth to Gethsemani. He would take my mail and my writing (poems and letters) and hand deliver them to Merton. Tom would give him some things to bring back for me to read. Much of it was his own writing, and sometimes it was other writers. There was a large group of international poets who exchanged their works in manuscript copies. Tom would hand me some René Char, Raissa Maritain, Nicanor Parra, or Margaret Randall from Mexico, and many others. I was in this "underground network" of what he was reading, what people were sending him, and I got involved in exchanging my writing with all of these people.

Kilcourse: What was Dan like around Bellarmine College when he was teaching during the 1960s?

Seitz: Although I was a professor there, I immediately began taking his courses. He said that was an inspiration to my students—that one of the teachers would go to another teacher to learn something, that we never stop learning. I was there because honestly, to this day, I consider him the only true "classroom" teacher I ever had. He became what he taught.

Everyday I'd go to Dan's class and he would totally convince me of a certain philosopher's point of view and I would uncondition-

ally embrace it, walking out of that room euphoric! The next day he would dismantle that and replace it. I was a convert daily. I was impressionable—almost hysterically so. I was seduced by philosophy and totally in love with it. It was an intellectual experience in the truest sense.

There was always a spirit of inquiry going on in Dan. As he taught, he was creative. He wasn't mouthing someone else's finished thoughts; he was *thinking* as he taught. He was philosophizing and coming to conclusions right there before your eyes because he didn't work from a prepared text. He had a few three by five cards in the palm of his hand and would say, "I want to cover this." And then he would close his eyes (a habit I picked up) and you could see that he became this person he was teaching. A smile would break across his face because (creatively) he'd realize something for the first time in his own life, something that he had never come to before. That is what I consider real teaching, when you have that enthusiasm and joy while searching yourself, and the students can witness that. It was a community of learning. It was a rarity in education and we'd never had anything like that before, or since.

Dan's my intellectual model and at that time he was even somewhat of a hero. I once told him, "What you said today was beautiful . . . my head's like a brushfire, like dry wheat." He said, "I am an instrument of truth," and laughed. I thought to myself: that was either arrogant or total humility.

Dan's life, once you got to know him, had its tragic side too. But in spite of all of that, he was being "used" by God for this special purpose. Of course, Merton had come to realize the same thing: that as a sinner, he was forgiven and blessed with the unbounded mercy of God. Both saw themselves as voice boxes of truth and beauty.

Kilcourse: Were you surprised when Dan decided to be ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Louisville?

Seitz: No, because I said to him one time, "You know you are a priest, but not officially so. You don't have the union card or acknowledgement at the Vatican." He, of course, was into the sacramental nature of the priesthood and knew it far better than I do. It was obvious in Dan's hierarchy of spiritual values and roles that the priest was the ultimate vocation. There were certain things you could do within the faith and he aspired to the highest, that of being a priest.

He thought himself possibly unworthy for years and years. I think he was graced with humility enough to go ahead with it, though. I was privileged again to be able to take him for his instructions with Archbishop Floersh. I didn't sit in on their sessions, but we had lunch together each time with informal talks.

No, I wasn't surprised. I always thought that he should have "officially" been part of the Church.

Kilcourse: What was Merton's reaction?

Seitz: We didn't discuss it that much, except that they would often call each other "dreamers." Tom would smile at the thought, but I think privately he convinced him not to be afraid. I think, with Dan, it would be a frightful responsibility. I always thought of the awesome responsibility of being a priest. I'm sure Merton encouraged Dan to go ahead.

Kilcourse: In reading Merton's letters to writers, *The Courage for Truth*, it strikes me the way he often writes about how the poet and monk are kindred spirits. You obviously intuited the same connection.

Seitz: Initially, I probably didn't know what a monk was. I had visited the monastery and seen monks in a cloistered community. Then Merton went on to redefine a monk in a broader sense as a "marginal" person. I can't imagine these two, the monk and the poet, not being one and the same because I do see the creativity of the poet as spiritual. I'd have to redefine monk and poet to even answer this question. Paul Tillich says we have the cognitive process of wanting to know truth and the aesthetic one to express truth: both are religious activities. I began to appreciate that poetry is a solitary vocation, one which I sought as romantically as a priestly one. My poetry wasn't on the plane of Augustine's *Confessions*, but it was my way of praying or talking to God or bearing witness and testimony. So, the monk and poet are both spiritual vocations. For awhile, I thought they might be in opposition. Merton struggled back and forth with being the artist and monk at the same time. I don't think he ever reconciled this until the last five years of his life. Then it freed him from thinking he was betraying one vocation for the other. I can see the two reinforcing one another. Merton redefined the monk to include the secular one out here, and contemplative poetry as a way of responding to life. You have your own sense of vows, stability, and obedience. This may be

an idealistic elevation of the role of a poet, akin to that of the mystic: the poet as priest. He announces theophany. And I do think he bears witness in a prophetic mode as would a disciple or evangelist. There was a kindred spirit between the two and, yes, I intuited that connection, as you said.

Kilcourse: How did you take the initiative in cultivating a fellow poet's exchange with Merton? Or was it his initiative? How much of a problem were the cloister and restrictions placed on Merton?

Seitz: Our initial meeting and conversation had indicated an appreciation of language. I've had that ever since I was a child. We both had written much before we met. My writing may have been of a very adolescent, romantic-like nature and needed to mature as his had. But I had been writing and, therefore, he could see the kinship and my appreciation of language. We'd speak back and forth, very cryptically and minimally sometimes; this happened very early. And also I think there was what you would call "a kinship of observation": noticing particulars in our response to our surroundings or, as they say, sharing "the poet's eye." We had a rapport of response. Often, when someone would say something, we would smile and look at each other; or we would encounter, as we took a walk, some image of nature and all at once I would experience this empathetic bond of response.

Tom was then curious to see some of my work. I had been writing quite a bit, and, of course, he would show me his work. But the meetings arranged by Dan later on, as I mentioned earlier, were short on time; so we transferred letters and phone calls. We would go to the guest house for a half hour to talk about this or that. But he was sometimes very impatient. He was on a strict schedule.

The restrictions of the monastery—well, they had these periods of time set aside for the monks' private readings, and that's when Dan and I would arrive and Tom would include me in this particular parcel of time. Sometimes it would only be fifteen to twenty minutes. Then when he would have to visit Louisville for a doctor's examination, he had the dispensation of the abbot to trust his judgment to do a few other things while he was in town. We did go to bookstores, libraries, and, of course, listen to jazz at a local club if he had to stay late that night and drive back. The cloistered restrictions, naturally, were a "problem," and he wasn't nearly as free then as when he moved to the hermitage, later.

Kilcourse: I complimented you in a review of *Song for Nobody*, saying that Merton responded to you because you knew how to be irreverent about the monk's persona; that you landed some hefty counterpunches in exchanging haiku, vaudeville, and wit with Merton. Can you tell us about his allergy to such a persona?

Seitz: It was only after I got to know him better, after a few years, with some of the other monks. You can imagine being a young student and encountering Merton's reputation and his work. I was somewhat intimidated for too long a time. I think we appreciated irony. I'm a great lover of Sophocles and Greek tragedy. We both loved Aristophanes—almost the absurd vaudevillian nature of people's eccentricities, oddities, idiosyncracies. And the culture as a whole: it was often disturbing and sometimes quite ugly and demoralizing. At the same time, there was that slapstick vaudeville element to all that and we sensed it.

The word "irreverent" is probably an accurate term because I wanted to be serious without being solemn and I think I found that in him. He was very earthy and could joke about very serious things, but I don't think he was ever scandalous or blasphemous. He could just see the underbelly of many things. He remarked in one of our long talks one time about how we had lost much of that vision in the Church. He loved Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and said it was a much healthier approach—to include the human foibles and the physicalities of our bodies. If you read *Canterbury Tales* you know what he's alluding to: the scatological humor. Still, that is not irreligious at all. Tom thought that was quite holy and sacred. Everything is blessed and we shouldn't be evasive about that.

As far as his allergy to this persona, the monk's persona is something I imposed upon him—something that many of us did. Initially, you might think you should do that too. I think he's got a poem or a letter to a severe nun where he advises us to watch ourselves and not try to be a Saint Jerome and throw ourselves in the thornbushes and flagellate with branches. Obviously, you don't have to do that. But Merton's guilty of some of that in *The Seven Storey Mountain* with the zeal of his conversion. He antagonized many people by espousing Catholicism so ardently. He was embarrassed later about being that myopic. But I think that goes with anyone's zeal of conversion. In spite of all that, the book redeems itself in so many other ways.

How Tom felt about that false persona was something I covered in *Song for Nobody*. He was uncomfortable with that pious, plastic, saintly image because he knew all the time what he truly was. He was earthly, human, and he was a sinner. Later, one of the greatest conflicts in his life was that he almost became incapable of realizing that God actually would accept Thomas Merton and love him in spite of his past, his secular life, when he saw himself totally "out of control," often excessively so. I hate to use the word "addictive" here because it's so current in the wrong sense of the term. But he did overindulge in many things. And his response to that allegation was that many people really knew all the "warts" and he didn't want to hide any of that. I think you'll find that in his private journals. Tom comes out and says he's quite ordinary, like the rest of us.

As far as our exchanging haiku, there is the economy of speech that you find in the poet, almost a cryptic, surrealist exchange—minimalist bites of language that you find in *A Catch of Anti-letters*. He and Bob Lax did it much better. They had a real rapport—an empathy—one that was much closer than I ever established with Tom. Therefore, in that kind of bond you don't have to qualify your statements. You can just hint at this and that.

Kilcourse: You regularly infiltrated the monastery boundaries (and later the hermitage) by ferrying visitors to and from the monastery. Who were some of the memorable ones?

Seitz: "Infiltrate" is a strong term. It wasn't undercover like the Navy Seals at night with a black suit, over the wall with hooks, like prison. But I did volunteer for that. I thought it was a privilege and honor to meet someone at the airport. Some of the people I should have known (they were prominent theologians, philosophers, and poets). Others I did know and one of the most enjoyable ones that I spent a couple of days with prior to taking him out to the monastery was Brother Antoninus (William Everson)—the West Coast Dominican monk and one of the first San Francisco Renaissance poets with Kenneth Rexroth before the Beats came along. He set the ground for that whole Beat movement of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the rest in literature. After fifteen years of corresponding, Antoninus and Merton finally met.

I also met John Howard Griffin and knew him longer than Merton. I knew John for fifteen years and Merton for ten. J. Laughlin

(Tom's publisher and friend) visited at least once or twice a year, as well as Naomi Burton (Tom's so-called "agent" and friend-advisor). There are others I can't recall offhand right now (possibly Lax, Parra, other poets, a Sufi or Hindu or some Zen Master). I met Dan Berrigan at the hermitage.

John Griffin came in '65 (or was it '63?) and he spoke at the Memorial Auditorium here in Louisville. At that time, John had not regained his sight totally and addressed an overflow crowd downtown. We had never met. He spoke for over three hours about his book *Black Like Me*. In fact, Dan said, "He's obsessed with this racism." Griffin told me he had exhausted the educational possibilities in the United States at the age of fourteen and went to Europe to work with the French Resistance to help the Jews escape from the Nazis during World War II. He was blinded at that time. He was also doing his doctoral studies in musicology, "Gregorian Chant." He wrote his beautiful autobiographical account of that period, entitled *The Devil Rides Outside* (now out of print).

After Griffin's speech that night, we had breakfast together with Sally. We talked long and long, and we got to know each other. Then I led him back to the hotel where he was staying. He said he wanted to see my work. We started corresponding. When John came back later to write the official biography, he stayed at the hermitage and I would visit him, take him food and his mail. I stayed with him back and forth for a month. Another time Tommie O'Callaghan's father had a place for John to work and we were together every day for about a month, but that's another story.

Kilcourse: I take it that you and Merton both critiqued one another's work.

Seitz: He mailed me copies of his work in progress and I did the very same thing. At that time I worked at a place where I secured teletype rolls. I'd rip off a section of the long roll and send him the carbon of poetry and personal letters and told him I was keeping the original, so "please just toss it in your fireplace or destroy it." I used some of that in *Song for Nobody*.

Later, Tom edited *Monks Pond* (a four-volume international literary magazine). That was during the last year of his life. It was quite interesting and only four issues were planned. It was eclectic and ecumenical. Some of my writing was put in there and now, looking back,

it is quite embarrassing. I don't know if Tom was just being kind, a friend. I sent him so much material that he said, "I can't devote the entire issue to you." I'd write poems to him and about him, and he'd say, "They're very nice, but. . . ." Quite often, when I wasn't writing to Merton, he was still my audience of one. I wanted to bounce my work off him, not so much for approval, but for his response. He was honest enough to say that it was often excessive, full blown, or narcissistic.

I liked Tom's early work—the imagery of the monastery was concrete and arresting. There were fine similes there, and he would call them "pretty poems." But they were quite beautiful and effective. Obviously he was always ahead of me in his growth and evolution. When he shifted again into the apophatic period—those minimalist, concrete, sparse poems—I was also going that way. I was writing concrete poetry before I ever realized I was doing it. I had sent some to a magazine and the editor said, "We're not publishing concrete poems." I never knew what the hell that meant and only found out later it was what Lax was writing and what Tom was beginning as well.

Next Tom turned to the antipoem, his *Cables to the Ace*. This was Nicanor Parra's influence, but Tom had written antipoems earlier. We all had. You'll find some in *My Argument with the Gestapo* (his early novel). And when I protested, telling him that I preferred the "early poems," he said, "I'm not that man anymore. I'm not that guy who wrote those poems. I'm writing these poems and that's who I am." I had to become familiar with and accept that. In our exchange of poetry, sometimes I was put off. I'd say, "You've lost it" or "this is garbage." I'd be that frank about it. Of course, he was kinder in calling mine "gibberish."

Kilcourse: Merton obviously taught you much about writing, especially about writing poetry.

Seitz: He taught me much about writing, but as regards style, no. There are other poets who influenced me extensively: Dylan Thomas, some of the Beat poets (Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso), the French surrealist poets, and even Pound, Eliot, those kind of people. To me, being a poet is a way of responding to life and a way of interacting. I think it is a way of appreciating life and bearing witness to it. I understood that Tom's vocation as a poet was just that. I began

to see poetry as prayer, the sacredness of speech. That's the kind of influence he had in my development, as my mentor. But in many of my contemporary poems, the rhythms and the energy were from the city and the culture that I was enveloped in at that time (which was quite removed from Merton's home environment). But he taught me to "trust my vision and the subject matter."

Kilcourse: How would you say Merton influenced your own spirituality?

Seitz: I had options: to be a poet, to be a monk, or to get married. I realized the problem of being a poet and a monk simultaneously. I found out that I could not be self-indulgent in my writing at the expense of my spiritual life. Writing was my spiritual life, this was my calling. Possibly it's not the highest one. Even Merton (early) said the highest vocation was to be a contemplative monk and, down the line, maybe a writer. He tried to purge himself of that prejudicial spiritual hierarchy, and I had the same sort of conflict. After all, there is a spirituality of aesthetics.

Paul Tillich expressed beauty as theophany. And that's true, even in my vocation of marriage. I'm a "cradle Catholic" and was taught the old religious hierarchy: you could be a cloistered contemplative, then you drop to the mere priest, then the brother, then the lay single person, and finally, the lowest common denominator, those who marry. Those married people still had a spiritual life, but it was almost negligible. I reconciled these things, rid myself of such notions. Tom helped me through that. (Who better a teacher, with his exposure of such?)

Kilcourse: You are a native Kentuckian and, as you stated, a "cradle Catholic." How did that factor into your relationship with Merton?

Seitz: It was a factor in my relationship with Merton because I don't think he quite appreciated, at least for me, what an emotional trauma being a very sensitive young Catholic, quite impressionable, was like. I was maybe neurotically so. I was scrupulous. I took all this ritual and liturgy quite literally, and was quite moved by it emotionally (too much so, it appears). Much of it was due to my sense of sin and the guilt, the negative, joyless aspect of it. I suffered sort of a

nervous collapse at the age of twelve because I couldn't come to grips with this idea of living up to my "perfect" expectations.

Tom, being a convert, approached the Catholic faith with much more sophistication and a different perspective, an adult one. Many of the major Catholic movers of the twentieth century were converts, and they were the most influential people. My experience of Christ and the sacraments and Mass . . . was somewhat polluted by all this emotional trauma and I couldn't come to a joyous openness to some of these things. I told him there was a difference in the way we approached that. I had to try to work it out.

Kilcourse: There is a splendid passage in *Song for Nobody* where you recollect your final conversation with Merton, the morning he left for Asia. It was obviously the climax of a long-standing conversation about faith and your own Catholic identity. Where do you now find yourself with this Merton legacy about faith?

Seitz: It didn't end there really, . . . it's ongoing. I'm still working out this East-West synthesis of spirituality that Merton was doing at the end of his life in Asia and Bangkok.

I recently spent three days with Frederick Franck, the Zen writer and painter, in a sort of "Eastern Spirituality Workshop." He worked with Albert Schweitzer, a Protestant, in Africa for six years. His other influence was D. T. Suzuki, a personal friend and mentor. And, of all things, Pope John XXIII was someone whom he loved dearly, spent time with, and of whom he did many portraits. Franck seems to be more where I am at the present. I always consider myself as embracing Tao. Taoism is very appealing to me and Zen Buddhism is not truly atheistic, as it appears to many Western thinkers.

I took books by R. H. Blythe to Merton while he was in the hospital. I like Blythe very much, especially his four-volume haiku collection, and his *Zen in Western Literature and Oriental Classics*. But Tom criticized Blythe's Zen as "too general." "Suzuki is the one to read," he told me. And I did that. At that time I used Alan Watts as an introduction to Zen to my students, but Tom said that Watts was "just a little too American" in his approach.

But, as I said, it's still going on with me. In the truest sense, I think the three basic premises of Vedanta are quite accurate. I often fill in the "religion" blank on official forms with: Native American Zen

Vedantist. Native-American religion is Christianity mixed in with their previous traditions, so I include them all as best I can.

Kilcourse: Merton once described your wife Sally as beautiful. Tell us more about her role in your friendship with Merton. Can you tell us more what Merton's friendship did for the family, how it has affected your sons?

Seitz: I was appreciative of his appreciation of her because, again, there was that kinship. We both did acknowledge and recognize and thank God eucharistically for the female. I realized that we both could love a woman. I don't know if Merton actually loved a woman prior to the monastery, but I know he sure had relationships and very much experience in that area. I considered him wise and earthy, healthy in that regard. Here was a monk to whom I could talk about my man-woman relationship with Sally (who, by the way, is quite beautiful in every sense of that word). I could talk about love. I could discuss sexual problems and I trusted that he knew what he was talking about. He wasn't abstract. To me, he was existential and concrete, having an immediate appreciation of a love relationship, and a knowledge and sense of wisdom about it all. He was a sensual man in all respects, as a true poet, a spiritual person must be.

Most women whom I've known who did meet Tom Merton were very fond and attracted to him; but more than a physical or romantic attraction, it was his openness and wide-eyed receptivity to them. And I have to say this—it's almost embarrassing—but women around Merton were sort of awestruck. I'm not referring to the guru who had his groupies, although that could easily have been the case if Tom had been so inclined. There was this "thing" that women (as well as men, I'm sure) saw—a full human being. I hate to use such words as polymorphous sexuality attributed to Merton. What I mean by that, of course, is that he was sensually open and sensitive as a poet has to be, with all the pores open, all the antennae out, eyes wide open.

As far as my family is concerned, I think Merton affected my middle son, whom I named Sean Merton. Dan Walsh was his godfather. Merton visited our home right before he left that last time. Sean was only four years old then, and he kept asking after Tom had gone to Asia and died, "When is Tom Merton going to come back and see us?" And Sean still remembers and talks about Merton, and he reads Tom's Zen books. He loves him in that regard. Dylan, a year older,

is interested as well in Eastern spirituality and Taoism. Casey was a little bit too young; he was only three. But he is very creative in his music and his art, just as Tom was.

Merton did something for the family. They still remember and appreciate the time he spent in our home with us.

Kilcourse: You spent a lot of time at the hermitage with Merton. And yet it was a place of solitude and contemplation—as well as extraordinary writing and work for Merton. How would you describe what the hermitage was for Thomas Merton in those years 1965–68?

Seitz: You say “a lot” of time. After reading *Song for Nobody* many people say, “My God, Merton’s at the hermitage and you’re always out there and you’re having picnics all the time and doing all kinds of things when he’s in town.”

Well, no, that’s not quite the case. Tom was living at the hermitage for three years, and a couple of years before that he had use of it. When you take all of those years and then compact the incidents I mention in the book, it sounds as if we spent more time together than it actually was.

But to get to more important points of your question. I sincerely think that Merton’s anticipation of the hermitage, like mine of the monastery (and I hate to accuse him of that), was a little romantic and idealistic due to his appreciation of a few “saintly models.” I remember once, after we first met, Tom reprimanding me for reading St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. He said, “You’re not ready for that. That stuff will screw you up. You’re going to go off the deep end with that.” And he was quite right. I was going off and much too fast; it takes time to get there. I also asked him questions about poetry. He said, “Why don’t you read Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*”? He must’ve said that for three, four, or five years, and when I finally did read that book, I still asked him the same questions.

As you say, I think the hermitage was a place of solitude and contemplation for Merton. He did some extraordinary writing there. He was very prolific. He had discipline. At times I considered his life as having been out of control, and that he behaved compulsively. But at the hermitage he had a strict discipline. He had an idea of “I’ve got so much time to do this and that. And I’ve only got two hours a day to write and I’ve got to get things done.” He had this schedule, and if I were even a little late for a meeting, he would be angry. He’d

lose his patience and let me know about it. His schedule didn’t allow that and he didn’t want to be interrupted. It was time for him to have the opportunity to be silent, to be in solitude, and to do his true spiritual writing. As I mention in my book, it was a joyous time of creativity and spirituality for Tom. But after such a prolonged experience of this he became lonely, which, of course, is natural for any human being. I don’t think Merton was a community person by nature, and I don’t think that he was a true hermit in the same respect. He seemed to vacillate between the two. No doubt he wanted to be that, the solitary contemplative, but I think he was too sociable, too warm and expressive. He actually was a “people person.”

Yes, Tom’s life at the hermitage was an extraordinary time and a place of solitude and contemplation, but I don’t know if he would have remained a hermit the rest of his life (at least not at a particular place, Gethsemani or otherwise). His hermitage would have been a moving “presence” wherever he went. The years 1965–68 at the hermitage were a very good time for Tom. For all of us.

Kilcourse: You intimate briefly in *Song for Nobody* that Merton confided in you about his relationship with the nurse in 1966. Last year in *The Merton Annual*, Jack Ford described it as an “infatuation.” What more can you say about that?

Seitz: When this was going on I remember that it was extreme anguish for Dan Walsh. He was very upset because he was a very orthodox, traditional Catholic. Jack Ford is a much better man than I am, but I don’t agree with him about this relationship just being an infatuation. I think that is what Jack would like to believe. I’m not accusing him of that, but so many others would prefer to judge it that way.

I think this was an experience of love for Tom (as well as the young woman). A true love. Quite analogous to a poem I wrote entitled “Girl.” He liked that poem very much and he published it in his *Monks Pond*. There was a kind of love and attraction between the two of them that I could identify and sympathize with. It’s not that I would necessarily condone all of this—after all, Tom was a cloistered monk, and this situation violated the “rules,” but I can see it happening. I wasn’t encouraging it, so to speak, but I certainly wasn’t condemning it. I think Tom had to go through this experience because in his earlier life, before the monastery, he really did not have healthy

relationships with women. They were, it appears, very "macho, patriarchal affairs." If you had listened to what he had to say about all of this, you'd agree. Tom had to confront that. He had, for too long, suppressed it. He did notice women. He looked at them and appreciated them. I'm not saying he lusted after them, but had a healthy attraction to their feminine beauty. I think he had begun to come to terms with this feeling. It's in his love poems. He wrote that he must correct the distorted way he had related to women. He had to cure that. He wasn't using this woman as an experiment. I don't think he was leading her on or exploiting their relationship at all. I think he was very sincere but, at the same time, admitted that he had not had a mature understanding of women. He did respect them. But there had been a deep sexual problem. I had it too. I still struggle with this because my relationships with women had been either romantic or physical. For many men, myself and (I think) Merton included, it's often difficult to relate to some women on intellectual, artistic, or other levels as well. It takes a breaking through a barrier for that.

Really, I don't know if Merton ever resolved this issue or not, because in *The Asian Journal* he still talks about how maybe monks do not have to be celibate: "After all, these Tibetans aren't; these Hindus or these Buddhists aren't." Much of that was stated sort of "off-hand." I don't think he felt any guilt about his recent "love experience" too much. He was torn between these things. It was an awful conflict in him—that you can't have both: be a monk and still love a woman. I think it was the summer before he left—he waited that long to burn her letters. Some people say it ended then, but I think that he might have carried that with him till his death. I'm not saying he would have married or anything, but he could not help but be more a whole person and more appreciative of the vocation of marriage. It gave him a much better perspective about human nature.

Kilcourse: You have described your perplexity with *Cables to the Ace* when typing pages of Merton's antipoems for him. Tell us something about how you saw him developing with this new genre of antipoetry in *Cables* and in *The Geography of Lograire*.

Seitz: My poems were hard, noisy, city-busy, and Merton was isolated from that urban climate. *Cables to the Ace* doesn't seem to work as well as J. Laughlin thinks. Merton was not living in the total home environment of the city. *Cables* has an "electric" rhythm to it. Its sound

is static, the language is often harsh, fragmented, and splintered.

At the time, I was taking him books out there to the monastery, some City Lights paperbacks by contemporary poets. Not to say, "This is how you should write," but to expose him to the vision of our particular generation, which I considered him part of—the Beats, with Ginsberg, Kerouac and others. In fact, I was part of it, and we were all one in that. But there was perplexity early on about Tom's aesthetics, his poetic expression of the consciousness of the American experience. I thought that what he was trying to do, *Cables*, wasn't working. In rereading the book, I do find isolated sections that are quite beautiful, quite effective, and there is a jarring fragmentation there, but far more on the page than the sound of his voice. It lacks the rhythms that you find in jazz, in a John Coltrane saxophone solo. It lacks that musicality. There is almost a John Cage cacophony of sound needed in a book like that.

The Geography of Lograire was still "in progress" when published. It wasn't a finished product. I remember taking *Religions of the Oppressed*, a book by a fellow named Lanternari, out there to the hermitage. It's excellent. It's about all the messianic cults, cargo cults, the ghost dance and all that. And I took Rasmussen, the Norwegian anthropologist, who did work with the Eskimos. In fact, in my poem "When Writing Merton," I allude to that—how the Eskimos would sit there in the cold and the dark and wait for the poems to pass through them; they were open, empty vessels.

In *Lograire*, when Tom did the opening prayer-passage—it's very Joycean. But when read aloud, it does not work as well as Joyce. For me, *Lograire* comes full circle back to Tom's macaronic method that you find in his early *Gestapo* book. I allude very briefly to that in *Song for Nobody*. Tom had passed through his "choir" poems, his "desert" poems, the apophatic period. Then he was freed up! It was like going through a black hole. His vision becomes dense, then comes out the other side full blown, like Faulknerian prose. *Lograire* has some of that. But in many of the passages, the way he puts it together, it's somewhat like Williams' *Paterson*, but it doesn't work as well. Maybe the final version of the book would have worked if Tom had lived to rewrite it and add to it. But as it stands, that's the way it should be.

These last two poetry books, *Cables* and *Lograire*, are in sharp contrast to the early monastic poems. There the imagery of the liturgy and ritual of his religious life is monastic, beautifully expressed. I don't

consider those works "inspirational" but Tom often did. He looked upon them derogatorily, as "those sickly sweet falsely pious poems." No, they're some of his best works. In the last books, Tom was experimenting with the American avant-garde (at the expense of his much better affinity with the French surrealist and Latin poets). But he was at that time in the hermitage, again a climate not conducive to that consciousness. It's true that a few times we went into town to listen to jazz, and he had a few records to listen to, but that is not enough immersion in your culture to be able to echo it and bear witness to it.

Overall, I think Merton would like to have accomplished what the Peruvian poet César Vallejo did in his work—that is, maintain his natural vision of being a lyrical surrealist while expressing his social conscience. This was Tom's challenge (and what he often reminded me in the last years): to overcome the temptation to remain in the aesthetic ivory tower of a Rilke, and to meet the obligation of voicing the social-justice concern of a Camus.

Kilcourse: You were close to Merton during the antiwar protests and his work with Jim Forest and the I.F.O.R. (International Fellowship of Reconciliation). The Cistercian censors had silenced him, yet he circulated his *Cold War Letters*. How do you remember him dealing with this ordeal?

Seitz: There was, of course, some anger. And it was often more than righteous indignation. Tom sent some of his materials to Ping Ferry at the Center for Democratic Studies in Santa Barbara to circulate them. The paradoxical, contradictory thing is that the *Cold War Letters* are dealing with peace, which is supposed to be at the root of spirituality, Christianity, Catholicism. Merton considered the rigidity and conservatism of the hierarchy and the administrative bureaucracy of the Church stultifying and suffocating. The *Letters* express a frustration and disappointment in his own Church. And he wasn't being judgmental so much; he was just impatient. Prophets always are. They don't predict the future; they see things as they are now. And it always takes any institution a while to catch up to that—what mythmakers always have to contend with. And I don't think Tom was disobedient to protest for peace in the way he did. Somehow, his was "legal" as regards the Order. Like a lawyer, he'd found a loophole in the censorship rules, and distributed these writings in a mimeograph network. It was somewhat of an ordeal, but he did get through that.

When Jim Forest visited Louisville (infrequently) he would sometimes stay at our home. Jim was, I think, very much of a youthful, idealistic, rebel, a purist-pacifist. He was very much like myself; we were "true believers," as Eric Hoffer would say. But he liked to laugh a lot, much of it self-deprecating humor. He was unlike Jim Douglas, another pacifist friend of Merton's, who visited Bellarmine one year and taught theology. Jim is somewhat more solemn about all of this (having written one of the seminal works on pacifism, *The Non-Violent Cross*). These two Jims are still deeply involved with the peace movement.

I haven't mentioned the civil-rights movement here. It's difficult to separate it from the peace movement. Tom discussed that relationship a lot too. He wrote passionately about civil rights, as well. In fact, John Griffin said Merton knew more about the problem of race than any American writing at the time. And, as I stated earlier, Griffin devoted his entire life to the race problem here in America after contributing to the Jewish liberation during World War II in France.

I went to Selma with Martin Luther King. I was privileged to do that. And I worked with Dick Gregory during the open-housing demonstrations here in Louisville. I also participated in the many peace marches at this time. Tom wanted reports of all that when we got together. About that time he had counseled a conscientious objector in Louisville and got in a little trouble for it. He told the young man to follow his conscience in this, and many people in Kentucky thought he was provoking draft-dodging (as reported in the local news) and advocating that sort of thing. There was much misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the entire issue. Tom tried to disengage himself from all this, but he was becoming quite confused about the entire peace movement's tactics. He felt an allegiance, and, at the same time, some of the extreme radical activists disturbed him. It appeared that Jim Forest and some of his fellow Catholic Workers were taking it all too far. And it's possible that Jim was then somewhat of a zealot. I don't think Jim is myopic and this is all he can think about, but that's exactly what Dan Walsh said Griffin had succumbed to regarding racism. The just cause could be grotesquely bent out of shape.

In large part, the Church did somewhat silence Merton on the peace issue, but I don't think it was an ordeal that did him in. After all, there were the *Cold War Letters*, eh?

Kilcourse: We've already talked about how Zen Buddhism has affected your own poetry. Can you comment on its influence on Merton's poetry?

Seitz: As I've said, Tom's early, apophatic period evolved into his Zen humor. He often spoke (and later wrote eloquently in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and *The Way of Chuang-Tzu*) of the sense of irony in life, and all the seemingly paradoxical and contradictory nature of most things. But rather than having a negative response to the apparent absurdity of much of our lives, Merton (as Aristophanes) could laugh at the slapstick incongruity of it all. Self-deprecating and self-effacing humor was his response to "God's koan of Creation" (as he put it). So I did see this Zen influence in his writing.

Yes, the Buddhism affected my poetry and it had an influence on Merton's poetry as well, even if indirectly. *Cables to the Ace* is not pure Zen. The work, as mentioned, was surrealist, sometimes minimalist, and might even be called expressionistic antipoetry. But there are these contradictions and incongruous images that are quite obscene. He used obscenity to mirror obscenity. He showed us that we are, our culture, obscene you know, in the sense of dehumanization. Tom, without censoring, presented (often in pain) much of secular society in all of its grotesqueness to remind us of our "collective sin." At the same time, there were interludes and small poems that were Zen counterpoints of beauty and compassion and joy. Yes, reading Zen did influence Tom's poetry. I think it made him less solemn, though still serious. It made him far more concrete, existential, and immediate—"in the flesh"—in his poetry.

Kilcourse: In what ways did you see the 1968 trip to California (in search of a more remote hermitage and anticipating the trip to Asia) affecting Merton?

Seitz: He was excited. The hermitage, as I said earlier, was not too solitary. It was still, in a sense, somewhat structured, though not quite "institutionalized." Tom had been wanting for many years to travel. He had only made that one trip to see Suzuki in New York, and that later trip out to California, and his trip over to New Mexico. He enjoyed those immensely. How it affected him? I think it was very liberating, healthy. He had been reading much, as we all do, and now he was anxious to get firsthand experience. That had been the case

with his interest in the Native Americans. Sometimes our intentions are quite serious, but we tend to romanticize. I think by visiting Asia, Tom could see what was going on in the East directly. He found out (or reaffirmed) that there was a deep mystical contemplative tradition in his own Western life and vocation. Therefore, he wouldn't have to always see the other as possibly being better. I have that tendency to see the Eastern as better than the Western because I'm so disenchanting, mostly with myself, and I project it onto the culture. I think Tom had to find out that there was this synthesis of the two and he could bring that back home. Earlier, in his studies, he discovered that many Easterners were now appreciating some of the Western contemplatives. It was good for him to see that firsthand.

Kilcourse: Where do you see Merton twenty-five years after his death, in terms of a figure in American poetry and literature?

Seitz: J. Laughlin is very disappointed at Merton's place in American letters. As mentioned earlier, he expected *Cables to the Ace* and *Lograire* to win some sort of national book award or be critically acclaimed as major works. They almost went ignored. Merton's not anthologized that much if you look in any poetry collections. He's not considered a major figure in American poetry, and sometimes not even minor. You can find some collections that don't even include him. But he was probably aware of all this. I remember him saying, "I'm going to do nothing for ten years but read and write poetry because all of this other stuff is a distraction." It's obvious that his prolific outpouring of "writing-on-demand" was diluting and polluting his poetic vision. Tom wanted to be a pure poet as T. S. Eliot was. He recognized the superiority of such work and he loved reading *The Four Quartets* aloud. And Dylan Thomas.

Sometimes it's a crooked curse and blessing to be a poet. It is difficult to socialize, to relate to other people in "normal" situations. There is a little bit of psychic dishevelment going on (a condition that sometimes expressed itself in Tom at his rare public appearances)—but, again, that's another issue altogether.

Tom wanted that total commitment to his vision, to the language, to the craft of poetry. But he spread himself so thin with all his other writing. He had a genius for literature, no doubt about that. But if he had focused, had been exposed more to the culture and the creative climate of other poets, he could have reported on it much better.

So in American poetry and literature now, a quarter century after his death, Merton is not recognized as a major figure other than by those people who read all of his work (they read his poems as well). I don't know if you agree, but many have said that Tom's genre was as a diarist, writer of journals. There are prose poems throughout that writing and there are poems throughout *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the novel *Gestapo*. I consider all honest writing, including prose, as basically poetry anyway. But in terms of Tom's place in contemporary American poetry, he's almost a ghost.

Then again, Merton's output is so prolific—sixty or seventy volumes. Down the line—I don't know how it's going to be judged. Some of his writing is quite uneven. He rushed it out, much in first draft with little editing.

Kilcourse: Writers like David Cooper have ventured some penetrating new interpretations of Merton. Cooper, in particular, has made some critical judgments about Merton's work, refusing to canonize him and everything he wrote. What is your judgment?

Seitz: *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial* is an important book and David Cooper is very insightful and intelligent as far as I'm concerned. There are decent insights into Merton's personal and psychological makeup here. But some have said that the shortcoming in Cooper and others like him is that they are blind to the monastic-contemplative vocation, they just do not have an appreciation or empathetic understanding of this at all. I think primarily you've got to look at Merton as a Catholic priest. You start there. He's a Christian contemplative. He is a monk and belongs to the Cistercian order. That reality cannot be denied, it is pervasive, a "contagion" that infiltrates everything he does in all of his writing. If you ignore that dimension, which Cooper often seems to do, then you've got just a partial view of Merton's life and work. There are big holes and gaps.

Some of Cooper's insights in his *Art of Denial*, such as Merton's problems relating to his parents, appear plausible. Tom might have entered the monastery out of guilt. As admitted, he wasn't the best community person or the ideal hermit. He failed in this and that. Well, we all fail in our aspirations to be "saints," and that's what he wanted to be (as we all do, eh?). There are many things Tom had not worked out psychologically. He was starting to read some on this matter later, near the end of his life. But there's so much of this jargon, pop hu-

manistic psychobabble out there, and he wanted to avoid much of that. We have quite a bit of that today in what we call holistic psychology, esoteric views of religion and anthropology—all that New Age millennium stuff.

Concerning Cooper's *Art of Denial*, I think it's time we have some of this kind of criticism. It's not negative. I think it's an honest appraisal. It may not be totally accurate. Cooper is merely questioning Merton's motives for much of what he has done and asking if Merton did deny these things. We are into this whole contemporary concern about addictive personalities and denial, alcoholism, obsessive-compulsion—all these "problems" come up in this book. I guess some of this "analysis" is relevant and the diagnostic terms might apply to Merton as well as anyone else, and we have to come to grips with that, if accurate. So, I appreciate what Cooper has attempted in his book.

Kilcourse: You had the privilege of being a friend of Thomas Merton. How would your friend, Thomas Merton, want to be remembered?

Seitz: I guess I'd have to quote people like Emerson who said, "It's not who wrote the poem, but that the poem exists." I've got one line in a Merton poem that reads: "There's not a cloud-wisp of tracery in our passing through." Merton preached this in most of his writing (possibly talking to himself as much as his audience). He believed that you don't leave behind evidence or testimonials or monuments to your achievements. Some of the greatest saints are those who are anonymous and didn't leave the trace. They exist in their work and influence, but not in their name, their identity, or fame as a personality. The author is the work. It came out of him. He was the creator, here's the creation.

As a personality, I'm sure Tom wouldn't want to be on holy cards (like baseball players are) because he was aiming to get rid of the ego. But about his "being remembered," he knew it was inevitable when he established the Merton Collection. He said, "It's going to happen. I may as well go along with it for these scholars. I will help them." I think he was very compassionate in doing that because it was hard work.

How he wanted to be remembered is a difficult question. In fact, the entire notion appears contradictory in light of his vocation. I don't think he was as self-conscious about himself at the very end. He was not too much enamored with the persona of the "famous monk." He

said, "I have wasted so much time." He wanted to make the few years he had left "meaningful" (in the sense of his being "spiritually realized").

You know, Jung divides life into two major phases: the early heroic phase of youth, then the phase of the "sage" or wise person in our elder years. I think Merton had lived out that first heroic stage. But it's a paradox that in his spiritual direction as a youthful novice-master, and in his writings at that time, he was the sage. But in his everyday life and habits and inclinations, he was still the hero. Tom appeared to be aware of this contradiction, and that's why he made the late remark about so much of his life being a waste. I think he was anxious to get over that hurdle and enter into a life of true humility.

Many say that Merton had an "untimely death," but all deaths are untimely. And at the end he still considered himself as lacking "the freedom of love." I think he tried to evolve from *The Seven Storey Mountain* persona to that of a Chung Tzu. *The Way of Chung Tzu*, I'd say, is his true autobiography because of the self-effacement you find there. There is this holy indifference, this freedom from all of those "religious" hangups he had much of his life. I think he would have liked to be free enough to trust his vision and his liberty. The "real" Merton (just listen to his tapes) was extemporaneous. He was spontaneous. He was creative in the moment. He improvised all the time. That is the kind of life he wanted to be able to trust himself to live.

Much of Merton's life was "busywork"—his conferences, his publications, and his response to others' interest in him. I'm embarrassed that I added to that. I think much of the conference work being conducted in his name since his death is busy academic work, with very little relation to who he was. Most of the people attending these meetings are sincerely interested and moved, and the speaker-scholars are truly inspired and dedicated in their work. In spite of this, Merton would not be comfortable attending such conferences. They seem to be a bit too formal. Not at all the climate of humor and freedom that Merton enjoyed.

One last thing about my book, *A Song for Nobody*. Again, I am somewhat embarrassed by it. It is about a "relationship," a very close one (for me, anyway). Some people say it almost reads like a love letter to Merton. Well, I hope I'm capable of that. I do miss him. There is a deep loss, a nostalgia of longing—my memory of the few years I was blessed to be in his presence.

I have always been somewhat perplexed as to why Merton befriended me in the first place. Other than that he saw some of the same imperfections in me that he had in himself, and that there might have been a sort of bonding in that regard. We struggled with many of the same conflicts (although obviously on different levels). He was a perfectionist (as I am), demanding so much more of himself than others.

I truly believe that Tom's final breakthrough was his realization that God did love him, that he was forever forgiven, and that he was unconditionally accepted. I don't think that happened until the last few years, maybe the last few days, of his life. And that's an awful cross to carry for half a century, his continuing conviction that "I not only am not loved, but unable to love." And, through the unbounded mercy of God, the laying down of that self-imposed load of living hell is, to me, the final celebratory, triumphant act of victory in Merton's life.