

introduction to his Asian experience had this dialogue not been made available. What it contains and what it suggests is well worth the hefty price of the volume. Having seen how well dialogue can be edited to work in print, we might hope that others who have access to Merton's informal conversations might be encouraged by Capps's volume to prepare their material for publication.

Thomas Merton

THE ROAD TO JOY:

Letters to New and Old Friends

Selected and Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy
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Reviewed by **Jane Marie Richardson**

*A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter:
one who finds a friend finds a treasure. (Sirach 6:14)*

Three years before his death Merton wrote: "I could fill another page with names of people I have loved to be with and loved to hear from. Lax, above all, and Mark Van Doren and all the old friends, Ad Reinhardt and so on." It is especially these "old friends" who are celebrated in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, although readers will certainly be glad for the "new" ones included, the term being used quite broadly. All of these friends, new and old, underscore the kind of spontaneous bonding that Merton could establish so readily. Making and keeping friends came as easily to him as praying.

This gift of identifying so simply and honestly with his correspondents is, of course, characteristic of Merton's writing as a whole. The personal nature of letters, however, accentuates this trait and accounts so much for Merton's continuing power to speak to an ever-widening community of earnest searchers. It is this ability to create bonds and to express them, even in letters hastily written, that helps us to realize how deeply integrated into his being was Merton's awareness of everyone's

fundamental oneness in Christ. In a special way, *The Road to Joy* abounds with glimpses of Merton at his most lovable, sensitive, and vulnerable best.

Merton had many more friends than acquaintances and, in some way or other, the majority of his correspondents would fall into the former category. For this reason, the editor had to make some difficult choices in his actual selection of which letters among the 3,500 extant would most appropriately be published in the collection. Robert E. Daggy, director of the Merton Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville, has done an excellent job of making such a selection and of editing this volume, the second in a projected series of five. There are brief and pertinent introductions to each of the five chapters, as well as notes sprinkled between and throughout the letters, enabling the reader to place them in proper context. Daggy's additions are very helpful without being intrusive.

As in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, the initial volume in this series, published in 1985 and edited by William H. Shannon, general editor of *The Merton Letters*, the reader will find so much simply to enjoy: singularly good writing, uncommon insights, breadth of vision and concerns, irrepressible humor, deep compassion, flagrant exaggerations, striking metaphors — and pervading it all, an extraordinary and dynamic faith. As is usual with Merton texts, these letters quickly focus our attention and compel us to think and feel profoundly. But there is a certain warmth and non-posturing in these letters to friends that puts us at ease, sharpens our perception of how good life is, and invariably calls us home to ourselves. There are occasional expressions of vulnerability and nostalgia that come as a surprise, accustomed as we are to a certain kind of reticence from Merton even in the act of self-disclosure: "Well, it seems like a totally different world from that in which we used to spend Christmas together at Fairlawn in the old days . . . One had so much fun then: children do not know how fortunate they are to be children!"

It was a child of ten who ultimately gave this book, so manifestly the work of a free spirit, its lovely title. When little Grace Sisson sent Merton her drawing of a house, it "had no road" leading to it. Five years later she sent him another drawing which she called "The Road to Joy." Merton responded sensitively: "I am glad you still draw things with love, and I hope you will never lose that. But I hope you and I together will secretly travel our own road to joy, which is mysteriously revealed to us without our exactly realizing." How could a book whose special focus is friendship be better named? Friendship creates its own joys and enhances all others. These Merton letters, so strongly rooted in the awareness of God's love for all of

us, make that happiness unmistakably clear.

There are degrees of friendship, of course, and the division of these letters into five sections recognizes that fact. The first chapter consists of letters to one of Merton's oldest and dearest friends and mentor, Mark Van Doren. Dating from March 1939 to November 1968, these sixty-five letters, unfailingly rich in respect, appreciation, and self-revelation, give us another perspective from which to view Merton's development, both as a poet and literary artist and as a human being always reaching out for truth. From Columbia to Darjeeling, the remarkable and congenial Van Doren, a Pulitzer Prize poet and an outstanding teacher, accompanied Merton on his life's journey, always a stimulating and sustaining presence. Letters to this faithful friend, twenty years his senior, drew forth from Merton some of his most beautiful writing: "Love's debts have this in them that they are too great to be paid, and that therefore one loves to remain in debt. I hope that I will owe you more and more that I can never repay, and I fully expect to. You are certainly one of the joys of life for all who have ever come within a mile of you." Merton's solicitude for the Van Doren family in time of stress is touching. No wonder that on receiving the news of Merton's death, Van Doren would offer this deeply-felt tribute: "I shall mourn for him as long as I live."

It is in his letters to another lifetime friend, Robert Lax, that Merton's unrestrained spontaneity, wit and imagination have their heyday. One gets the impression that nothing was ever held back from Lax, that underlying the clever playfulness and outrageous humor rampant in these letters was an unshakable trust in the recognition that here was someone who understood and accepted him thoroughly. Merton was a man of many words; Lax, of few. (In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes Lax, in part, as "a mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say about them.") These letters to Lax, their casual style notwithstanding, register a gamut of significant cares, ideas and reflections. In the summer of 1965, as the war in Southeast Asia was escalating, Merton deplored the apathy of his country and Church. He wrote to Lax, then living on the Greek island of Kalymnos: "Here all is forgetfulness of the morals and of the Vietnam, everybody just want to forget issues. The doors slam and people retire to forget the issues and stick their heads all the way into the TV where the issue is befuddled and made comfortable." Looking back sixteen years after Merton's death, Lax would say, with typical reserve: "I certainly felt I'd lost a correspondent; if I had something funny I wanted to tell him about it would be a little more difficult now, but I didn't feel lost."

I felt that he'd gone on to another stage, and I really felt that if it happened, it must have been the time for it."¹ But on that fateful day in December 1968, Lax could only respond in his telegram to Gethsemani: "Sorrow."

The eruption of joy in Merton's letters to Lax is somewhat complemented by the more or less even keel of those addressed to Therese Lentfoehr, a Salvatorian sister, a teacher and a published poet. This correspondence makes up the largest set of letters (135 of them) in the book. Sister Therese was invaluable to Merton in her skills of typing, recording and preserving his manuscripts and he consulted her on occasion. Therese first wrote to Merton in 1939, telling him how much she liked one of his poems, but it was not until 1948 that their correspondence actually began. Daggy suggests that these letters were an "alternate form of journal keeping" for Merton. Certainly, there are long, personal passages not common to other letters. He writes at length about his books in process, about prayer, about situations at the monastery, about other people's writings, about her work and his health. He continually discourages her from making him bigger than life but her praise seemed to nurture his humility. There is about these letters something that suggests that Merton really did find in Therese the sister he never had. In any case, he appears to have had no difficulty in writing to her from the heart when he so wished: "I walk around saying 'Love!' Or I just mentally keep slipping the catch that yields my whole soul to Love."

Family love constitutes a special kind of relationship, one that resembles friendship even though distinct from it. *The Road to Joy*, therefore, includes a chapter of letters "to family and family friends." These letters to relatives — three aunts, an uncle and a cousin — and others connected in one way or another with the Merton family put us in closer contact with some less familiar Merton roots and influences. In writing to "Aunt Kit" (Agnes Gertrude Stonehewer Merton), one of his father's four sisters, Merton seemed particularly at ease. Once, after sharing with her some of his thoughts on the Christian life, he added: "We live in the belief that God loves us and will let nothing happen to us that is not for our good. He is in fact always with us and indeed in us . . ." One cannot but believe that Aunt Kit remembered this when, four years later in a tragic ferry accident, she met her own death after being "a tower of courage" to others on board the sinking ship.

1. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*; ed. Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 74.

There is much more in *The Road to Joy*, like letters to Dan Walsh and John Howard Griffin and other people special to Merton. There is a whole chapter of "Circular Letters to Friends," a form Merton adopted out of sheer necessity in order to communicate with the growing number of persons who found in his words and understanding a source of strength and clarity in their struggles. It was not simply courtesy or interest or even kindness that motivated these letters. It was a conviction that this was part of his vocation, as he himself states in the first circular letter. There are, finally, letters "to and about young people," in which we see once again Merton's exceptional ability to accommodate himself to others, whatever their age or experience, background or concerns. He could and did attract younger readers, dialoguing with these "new friends" and taking seriously their questions and values. Each of them must have been grateful that Merton never did speak down to them.

Early on, Merton had expressed a desire that his writing be "frank without being boring." Small chance. One has only to read a little of these letters to see how powerfully his prayer was answered. His enormous talent for straightforward and engaging speech blesses us all. Still, I was struck by how much Merton owed to these people — and many others — and by how much he needed them to become and to be all that he was. Never one to point to himself (not seriously, anyway), Merton implicitly invites and even challenges us in these letters to examine our own friendships, our own relationships to God, to others and to ourselves. After spending time with him, one is never left in total comfort, but, paradoxically, one never feels more alive. This is the way Merton gifts his true friends, never failing to open up for them new pathways to joy.