

GIVING VOICE TO THE FIRE:

A Commentary on Thomas Brooks'

A Moment of Love

by **Rusty C. Moe**

Zen interpreter R. H. Blyth has concluded that “it is the nature of human beings (that is to say, our true nature) to harden into something or other. Eternal life means having it without hardening, having it abundantly and overflowingly” (*Zen and Zen Classics*, p. xiv). Ever-softened, Thomas Merton yielded to life and that yielding was, finally, the shape of his life’s praise and its abundance. Rejecting nothing of his human experience allowed for the sought-for life of painful transparency and detached vulnerability. The wrestlings in which he engaged — am I infant or elder? spokesman or solitary? grit, grace, or both? — led him to create the truth of his life. In reporting the inner and outer events of his days, Merton achieved an inordinate lucidity wherein ordinary activities, exquisitely attended to, attained universal resonance.

This is the Thomas Merton who emerges from Thomas Brooks’ *A Moment of Love: Thomas Merton’s Ascendancy into Light*. As yet unproduced, this one-person play is less a theatrical event than it is what the Sufis call *sohbet*, spiritual conversation.

Ask me why I’m smiling. God knew how to handle all of this, and I am as sure of that as I am that you are here tonight. I have always been somewhat of a fool, a buffoon. It was God’s way of letting me know that He was watching. And I was watching, too, in my humbleness before the grandeur of the world. I am the living contradiction of God’s grace. I am His darkness and I am His light. None of us can ask of God one single question. He answers us in silence. He answers in contradictions that are all a deeper part of the mystery. Do not think that you are supposed to understand. I did. I began by thinking that one day I would understand with absolute certainty.

It does not work that way. Each of us, as it were, is God’s buffoon. Standing in the light, we are in darkness. And when it is dark, the light comes. And each of us is an aspect of Him in which we seek our salvation. And in that mystery of Him we will never know

Yet in love you will know him.
 Yet in love you will touch His realm.
 Yet in love do we know the Father.

For all of life, however seemingly endless it may seem, comes down to being only a moment of love. Strange how, without a home, I nevertheless found my home. (pp. 66-67)

Thomas Merton’s life — his true life — is, like everyone else’s, mainly invisible. And his life’s story is more truly told, not by his biographers, but by artists — those involved with essence, not

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events; with the heuristic, not history. Artist Brooks' Merton, by gradually becoming thoroughly Merton, exposes us to ourselves. He rises from the ash of intellect and shame and merges with the Riddle, Life — that insufferable *koan* that happens between birth and passing. What begins in anthropocentrism ends in profound impersonality and compassion.

Listening to Brooks' Merton is not unlike biting into a partially-ground peppercorn while eating a Hershey bar: tongue, comfortably awash in the familiar food, is suddenly pitched against the berry's swift fire. The well-known patterns and passions, and the events surrounding them, are all recounted, but not in a public voice reciting sure facts. In a quiet voice, rather, that comes from the mouth of one who is finally free of curiosity and the burden of time; in the voice of one whose inner elements have embraced within their silent, disparate depths; one who has acknowledged himself, renounced who he "is," and moved on, becoming not more but — nothing, forgotten.



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I was out in the world. No longer did I have to hide from it. And I had spent my life trying to explain, trying to talk to you, to tell you, about an experience of life and love and loving God, and it cannot be told. It can be known in silence. But joy, it seems to want to make a sound. But as it makes itself heard, it is transformed and diluted and eventually it is lost. Silence. God is silence. He is a lingering, eternal moment of silence. And in that silence His song fills the soul. But do not be afraid of silence, do not be afraid of darkness, because that is where God is. That's why I'm smiling. (p. 78)

It is difficult to speak or to write of Thomas Merton in the past tense, so alive is his memory among us, so virile and relevant are many of his insights and discernments — which is why *A Moment of Love* deserves widespread production and reading. The play is, in the end, the inner biography of all of us as seized by and sifted through, the silhouette of one person. Life *happens*. It *is*. That's all: tears, the *thwack* of putter against golf ball, steeping tea, birdsong rising within spring-gray rain, placenta, the slow pressure of lips lain upon lips. We need neither press this life to enhancement nor allow our fear of its seeming chaos to reduce us to inertia. Life *happens*, and neither physicist's matrix nor religious declarations nor psychologist's model nor lover's word can bank the fire that blazes unconscionably within us. In *A Moment of Love*, the fire has a voice — uncensored, prophetic; totally willing to proclaim that we and the Creator are one.

Sometime that afternoon after I finished my talk I bathed and then took hold of an electric fan with faulty wiring. Bang! I was dead. I fell with the fan on top of me and it burnt my belly, though of course I didn't feel it at the time. I urinated, which is what you do when you're electrocuted. And then I simply lay there until they found me.

Twenty-seven years before, to the day, December 10, I had entered Gethsemani, a snowy day. Well, on another snowy day, after a SAC bomber flew me home, they put me in the ground. The eulogy that was given was about mercy. What I had known by living my life was the kindest mercy of God. I wish with all my heart that I could leave you with more than just the truncated tale of a man's worldly and spiritual ambitions. That I could go on from here, give you all that I have learned up to here, beginning here, taking one more step toward you, but others will do that for me. The most

glorious thing about life is that we must each make our own journey, we must not turn our backs upon one another. We must live our lives knowing that God's eternal light shines on all of us. By His mercy we reside in His love. (pp. 81-82)

For further information about *A Moment of Love: Thomas Merton's Ascendancy into Light*, contact Thomas Brooks at 91 Plainfield Avenue, Malden, Massachusetts 02148.