

A Fresh Air Interlude

Review of:
A Search For Solitude
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952-1960
 Edited with an Introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham

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In the third volume of Thomas Merton's Journals, *A Search for Solitude*, Merton tells the story of a visit by his good friend, Victor Hammer.

Today I discovered something in talking to Victor Hammer. He was speaking of a young artist who paints falsely, deliberately, in order to make money so as "to be able to paint what he likes" — but V. pointed out that this will not work and that one has to be genuine all the time. (p. 272)

Merton goes on to muse that indeed it is not possible to turn one's genuineness on and off at will. He even laments that he himself has failed to realize this in his own life. His lament is surprising! This may well be the most genuine work of Merton's yet to be published. As a writer Merton is justly famous for his courage in writing so honestly and personally about his spiritual journey. If it is possible, this work is even more honest and personal than the writings that he prepared for publication. I suppose that genuineness is the proper milieu of a private journal but here the reader is rewarded with an intimate glimpse into the struggles and insights of an enormously gifted writer in search of God.

Covering the years 1952 to 1960, *A Search for Solitude*, is an important work that does add new insight into Merton. It is divided into two parts: Master of Students, July 1952 — March 1953 and Master of Novices, July 1956 — May 1960. While it is true that much of the material here can be found in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and that Merton's struggle with his vocation and self doubt is hardly new, we learn why this struggle itself was so important.

Entertaining the idea that a monastery is a type of "ghetto" that produces its own "hot house" type of atmosphere with its own peculiar jargon, Merton reflects:

My interior life has become a passion, perhaps a guilty passion, for fresh air. Not just to break out of the ghetto, however. Not just to get fresh air for myself but to stay and let the fresh air in." (p. 130)

Merton did let the fresh air in. He opened the window on his life not so that he could see what was happening somewhere else but so that the fresh air could come rushing in. The end result is that we get to take a privileged look into his soul.

The editor, Lawrence Cunningham, provides the reader with a helpful glossary of Monastic terms and a fine introduction, nicely framing this work. Cunningham aids the reader by situating this journal in the general Merton corpus. Despite this guide and the fact that several events that were happening in the world as well as the various works that Merton was laboring on at the time, are included in the text itself, I still found it useful to keep my copy of William Shannon's Merton "Biography," *Silent Lamp*, handy for ready reference.

As the Introduction states, there is poetry here and there is also the keen eye of the fiction writer as Merton describes the people and situations of his everyday life. Whether writing poetry or talking about whatever happens in an ordinary day, Merton always manages to move toward new insight. His writing is never gratuitous. For example, in the entry marked, March 19, 1959, Merton recounts the story of a fire near the Monastery. Once the fire is out Merton surveys the scene and describes the people involved with compassion and a vividness that leaves the reader almost able to smell the lingering smoke. His description of the three children he encounters is especially poignant. He ends the story with this heat seeking insight: "I came home thinking of nothing but these poor little Christs with holes in their pants and their sweet, sweet voices. Once again I had seen Proverb and heard her speak and remained heartbroken with love for her. If only my love could have some truth in it."

In places the writing itself is not always as polished as the works that he wrote strictly for publication, but even then it remains strong and sure and honest. That honesty comes through clearly when he records himself being petty and self pitying when things don't go his way, but far more often he was compassionate and humorous in his insights. He is even affectionate in his descriptions of his relationships with the novices and especially with his close friend, Fr. John of the Cross. Luckily, he trains his writer's eye not only on the various members of the monastery but introduces us to some of the more colorful characters who inhabit the woods surrounding the monastery.

One such character, Herman Hanekamp, was found dead one day while the community was meeting for a discussion on some obscure point of moral theology. Merton wrote: "While we argue wisely about administering the sacraments to the dying, someone depending on us for material and spiritual care has died without sacraments. I cannot help regarding it as a significant episode!"

As I stated earlier, Merton's struggle with his vocation was never a secret. He wrote about it openly in several of his published writings. Never had it been so clear before though just how paralyzing this struggle was. The self doubt is at times palpable — even neurotic. Throughout most of the journal he struggles with whether or not to go to Mexico or Latin America constantly second guessing himself and his motives. Still he could not let go of the idea. Finally he received official word in the form of a "very serious" letter that was

signed by no less than two cardinals. Merton read the letter alone before the Blessed Sacrament and "... it said 'No'." This one simple word effectively put to rest this seemingly endless struggle. Merton could not say no to it himself.

Again his self-doubt is clearly evident in his constant reconsideration of *37 Meditations*. Early on in the journal he concludes:

How mortally ashamed I am of those *37 Meditations*. Dry verbiage. What you should do, what you should do. Here is the answer. This and this and this. The mind and the will and the instincts and the emotions and the passions and the imagination and the desires and the appetites and the conscience and the virtues and the law of God and every man is a heap of abstractions. Phooey!

Let's begin reading Isaias and get serious for a change. (p. 128)

Happily his opinion of this work eventually evolved into his considering it a rather good work.

For someone who was at times consumed by self doubt Merton was amazingly self assured about his standing in the monastery and his own abilities. With absolutely no background in psychology he saw no difficulty with administering the Rorschach Test to his novices and *interpreting the results himself!* And for a man who was capable of searing personal insight it is curious to note that he kept thinking that he was about to be made Abbot somewhere, proving once again that he had a real knack for fiction.

Perhaps the biggest surprise in the entire journal is the entry marked March 19, 1958, Feast of St. Joseph. Contained in this day's reflection is the original version of Merton's so called, Epiphany at Fourth and Walnut. This original version has much more to say about women than the more famous and previously published version. It prompted Merton to reflect on his vow of celibacy as he considered the beauty of the women he saw on the street. He was not so much questioning his vow as he was realizing some new surprising dimensions to it.

Typical of a Merton journal, humor is found throughout the book. Sometimes simply whimsical it could be celebratory as when he finds out that the buzz saw is broken or even "biting" as when he tells the reader — "Oh yes. It was announced today that on March 25 Adam and Eve ate the apple." It was at this same morning chapter that Merton noted: "Today's final special — The Bl. Virgin had Christ in her womb for 9 months. Well, someone has figured out that if the Host stays in us 15 minutes, then if a man receives Holy communion every day for 63 years, he will have Christ in him for 9 months in all. This, we are told, is 'very beautiful'." Nice delivery.

I began this review by relating a story of the young artist who thought he could play fast and loose with his own personal integrity. I think it is fair to hold this book to no less a standard than the one that Victor Hammer put forth for the young artist. In fact Merton holds himself and others to an even higher standard. In reflecting on a particular morning chapter Merton wrote:

Because all along when one is quiet and listens to the song-sparrows and the crows, he knows very well that the real truth that has come here to find is not contained in these declarations, it cannot really be stated, it is lived and grasped in the depths of the heart and one must be very careful of words, for words betray it. And that is what goes on in our chapter: we use words to defile the Truth we recognize in the silence of our heart. (p. 186)

Merton was always careful with words. He used them wisely and wonderfully to convey the silence in his own heart. This journal opens a window onto Merton's fidelity to the Truth. It is a window that opens inward rather than out. In the end, because of Merton's reverent use of words, the fresh air rushes in until we begin to hear, ever so faintly, the silence within our own heart.

This book is clearly the genuine article.