

Merton in Love

By Cynthia Bourgeault

“For one human to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation. That is why young people, who are beginners in everything, are not yet capable of love: it is something they must learn. . . . But learning-time is always a long, secluded time. And therefore loving, for a long time ahead and far into life, is – : solitude, a heightened and deepened kind of aloneness for the person one loves.”

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

My topic in this paper is just as the title describes: Merton in love. And my stance, I suppose, is fairly well summarized in the introductory quotation by Rilke. I wish to explore how Merton’s brief but intense love affair two years before his death, far from being either a fling or a fall from grace, was a conscious “ultimate task” and bore within it both the healing and the alchemy that opened the way to the final integration of his being.

The details of this love story are now fairly well established. In late March 1966 Merton entered St. Joseph’s Hospital in Louisville for back surgery. There he was attended to by a young student nurse (generally referred to as “M.” to protect her privacy). An easy intimacy soon flowed between them, and by the time Merton was released from the hospital, they were in love. A brief, manic spring romance followed, dotted with a few sneaked visits, many illegal phone calls, and an escalating intensity, pushing to the brink of full sexual expression before the bubble burst. In mid-June an illegal phone call was overheard and reported to the abbot; but even before that Merton realized – as he had known all along – that the relationship had to end. The summer brought the anguish of grieving and a slow disentanglement, but by mid-fall Merton had his heart basically back inside himself again, and his and M.’s lives gradually moved on. By 1967 she crosses the pages of his journal only occasionally, as he settles back fully into his life as a hermit.

In exploring the inner dimension of this story, I should say right from the start that I have no insider’s information. My sources are those available to everyone: Volume 6 in Merton’s *Journal*, entitled *Learning to Love*, and including Merton’s “A Midsummer Diary for M.,”¹ written in the early stages of his disengagement; and the commentaries by John Howard Griffin² and William Shannon.³ I am not approaching this as an exhaustive piece of research, and I am well aware that there may be some gaps in my information which I would be happy to have filled.

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But what I *may* bring to this story is an “insider’s vision” from a somewhat different perspective, in that the experience Merton lived I also lived. Like M., it was my fate to fall in love with a Trappist hermit monk in the final years of his life, an experience I have written about in my book *Love is Stronger than Death*.⁴ And the parallels between Merton and my own partner-in-love, Brother Raphael R., are in some ways strikingly close. Like Merton, Raphael was a real freedom fighter who understood the hermit life not as a set of external conditions revolving around physical reclusion, but as a way of being totally present to the reality of one’s existence. And like Merton, “Rafe” (as he was universally known) had suffered profound abandonment in his early childhood which left him uncertain of his capacity to love and be loved.

Unlike Merton, Rafe didn’t back off. In the “kinder and gentler” monastic ambience of the 1990s – and thanks to an almost preternaturally compassionate and forbearing abbot – we were given the space to emerge out of infatuation into a mature and stable commitment. But neither did Rafe leave the monastery or abandon his hermit’s vocation. Instead, he took the paradox into the center of his own heart and I believe lived into action what Merton so powerfully intuited when he wrote as the dedication of his “Midsummer Diary for M.”: “I will never really understand on earth what relation this love has to my solitude. I cannot help placing it at the very heart of my aloneness, and not just on the periphery somewhere” (LL 302).

This insight, I believe, is absolutely true and holds the key to Merton’s integrity in his relationship with M. But it is also not easily understandable apart from what one might call “the hermit hermeneutic”: the hermit’s unique angle of vision and way of making connections. And so, with the help of Rafe’s understanding of this paradoxical synthesis, I want to try to look at the crucial role Merton’s brief and poignant romance played in his final transformation.

Erotic Love and Monastic Striving

I have to admit from the outset that I am constantly unpleasantly shocked to be reminded how inimical Christian spirituality has been – and continues to be – to erotic love. So engrained in us is the notion that celibate love is a higher path of purity, that to give oneself entirely to God means abstaining from a human partner, that eros has to be sublimated before it can become a path to God – that it is hard to look at Merton’s dalliance as anything other than a “fall” – and this is how it has generally been presented and interpreted. John Howard Griffin’s otherwise very insightful biography falls into this trap. His starting assumption is that Merton’s engagement with M., while perhaps inevitable for developmental reasons, resulted in a confusion and distraction from his monastic vows. Merton eventually regained his senses, terminated the relationship, and slowly recovered the equanimity he had temporarily lost. In virtually all accounts of this romance, you hear the same undertone: Merton lost his senses but came to them again and emerged out of this “phase” a sadder but wiser hermit. But to approach the story this way – as all the “official versions” seem to – is to drown out Merton’s own voice and collapse the paradox which in his own highest moments of truth he knew he both could and had to bear.

So before we can even begin to approach this relationship with an open mind, we first need a higher anthropology of erotic love: one which does not see it as an “impure agape,” but as a unique instrument of divine self-communication and healing. For me, two lifelines along the way to the recovery of such a vision have been *The Meaning of Love* by Vladimir Solovyov⁵ and an essay called “Love” by Ladislaus Boros in his volume *God is with Us*.⁶ If you do not know these works, get them. Study them. They provide a template in which Merton’s love can be seen not as a fall from a monastic ideal of purity, but as having its own intrinsic beauty and coherence.

“The meaning and worth of love,” writes Solovyov, “is that it really forces us, with all our being, to acknowledge for another the same absolute central significance which, because of the power of our egoism, we are conscious of only in ourselves. Love is important as the shifting of the very center of our personal lives. This is characteristic of every kind of love, but predominantly of sexual [erotic] love; it is distinguished from other kinds of love by a greater intensity, by a more engrossing character, and by the possibility of a more complete overall reciprocity. Only this love can lead to the real and indissoluble union of two lives into one; only of it do the words of Holy Writ say ‘They shall become one flesh’; i.e., shall become one real being” (Solovyov 51). Echoing an intuition that has been present in our tradition since at least the time of Plato, Solovyov envisions how two beings, willing and able to consummate this sexual attraction in a complete laying down of their lives for the other, do indeed become one soul, one being. Their unity, dimly perceived in this life, becomes their *actual body* in the next; they are clad in the Oneness that they have become.

From Boros’ brilliant essay, I would simply like to string together a few “one-liners” I’d underlined in the text in order to paint a picture of how this mutual reciprocity and deep laying down of their lives works: “Clearly, love embraces not merely some part of the beloved, but his whole being. It is the other’s whole being that is embraced in love . . .” “There is not ‘something,’ no tangible thing which he receives; he receives his own *self* from the other . . .” “The gift that is given in love is ultimately always the giver himself . . .” “When two people say ‘we’ because love has made them one in reality, a new sphere of existence is created. . . . This new sphere of existence is not simply ‘already there’; it comes into existence as a function of the free self-giving of one person to the other” (Boros 6-7).

When I read Merton’s journal, I experience infatuation and giddiness, to be sure. But at the root I experience something far deeper and more solid. From the very start – from those earliest conversations while still in the hospital – Merton realized that a trust existed between himself and M. that was itself a gift and made possible this deepest giving and receiving of self. In his “Midsummer Diary” he writes:

We had been together so little, yet . . . we were fast learning every aspect, every inch of each other, not in the usual sort of collision of objects that love turns out to be, but in the need to give and surrender without disguise and without pretense, in our complexities and in our obsessions, in our deepest need for love, for comprehension. . . . Dear, we must not forget the reality of our love and the reality of the sharing, the penetration into our mutual secrets. We have really done this and done it much more than lovers ordinarily do. We are really in possession of one another’s secrets, the inmost self of the other, in its glory and its abandonment (LL 326-27).

This does not strike me as the language of immature infatuation. Merton glimpsed the real thing, and its real import: “I cannot regard this as ‘just an episode.’ It is a profound event in my life and one which will have entered deeply into my heart to alter and transform my whole climate of thought and experience There is no going back to a time in which I did not love” (LL 328).

“If only we were never trapped . . .”

Why, then, does he draw back from it? Of course, in one sense the outcome has been known all along; there was never any real doubt that when the hourglass of grace ran out on them, Merton would abide by his vows. The more amazing fact is that knowing this from the start, he was willing to risk the pain in the first place. But in fact, from early on in his journal – his entry for April 28,

1966, barely a month into the relationship – he is already beginning to envision his love as a race against time, the goal being to absorb as much of the other as they can, before the human walk is terminated: “I want to share as much as I can of my heart and life with her in the next couple of months so that we are as much as possible ‘transformed’ in each other and that no matter what happens we will always love each other and be filled with each other no matter what people do to us” (LL 47). It is as if something in him knows that what he drinks now, even with reckless abandon, he will eventually get to keep.

In the end, I believe it is not loyalty to his vows but fear of entrapment that finally causes him to snap the tendrils of their involvement – i.e., it emerges not from his conscious commitments as much as from his unconscious terror. From early on in the journal, when the thought occasionally crosses his mind of actually leaving the monastery to make a life with M., what keeps surfacing in response is the childlike, “but how would I ever *live* in the world?” Beneath his shrill condemnations of the tawdriness of the marketplace one feels the exposed raw nerve of his most ancient childhood wound, the question of belonging: “They brought a few copies of the *New Yorker* . . . and the sight of the ads just turned me inside out. I was in complete revolt against them and all that they imply . . . This is a realm that I cannot take, I cannot be part of. . . I am ashamed of myself, but I am set in this. I belong in the woods” (LL 313).

What finally triggers the confession to his abbot is apparently a very intense encounter he’d had with M. the Saturday before, when he’d “borrowed” Jim Wygal’s office for the afternoon (LL 81; journal entry for June 12, 1966), and the two lovers had apparently come right to the brink of intercourse. As the heat of their passion ripped away the last pretenses of mature control, suddenly all the old terror was in Merton’s face again – the terror of his sin- and shame-ridden youth, and the terror of being trapped. In one passage of naked, alcohol-enhanced honesty in the “Midsummer Diary” he writes: “It is the freedom in me that loves you. If only you were wild in the woods with me. If only we were never trapped in any way. But we cannot be free and wild together, because I am afraid of it. I am afraid I would be held and imprisoned” (LL 342).

In the end, Merton simply could not push through his terror. It was too old, too deep. What would have happened if he could is a chapter that will never be written in this sphere. Gradually, slowly, after reaching the edge of escape velocity from the ancient wound of his abandonment – his mother’s death when he was six, his father’s ten years later – he slowly sinks back into his usual atmosphere. “My loneliness is my ordinary climate,” he writes (LL 319). The risk is too high, the terror too primordial, to stay with the raw recklessness of his heart, and from that point in June, his passion slowly recedes. Yes, monastic equanimity gradually returns – along with his physical ailments, which throughout this giddy, unbalanced time have miraculously left him. “Certainly I had much less trouble all around when I was seeing M.,” he writes; “last year, apart from the back operation and bursitis, was one of the best as far as health went” (LL 254). And though his life regained its order and freedom, “Yet,” he poignantly confesses, “I felt so much more real when we were in love” (LL 269).

In one sense, then, the moment passed; the brief rainbow of danger and beauty gradually faded from Merton’s sky. But in another sense it did not, and it is this sense that I want to speak about as my final point. I do not believe that Merton ever really ended this romance; he simply transposed it to a new dimension – the realm of eternal reality – where he knew full well that it existed already in its fully consummated reality. And in his hermit solitude, he knew how to join that reality.

The Hermit Hermeneutic

I am not talking about fantasy here, but something else; the hermit life understood as participation in a truth that underlies and harmonizes the opposites. Such truth is not found at the level of consciousness, as an intellectual synthesis, but at a deeper level: as a way of being. The real vocation of the hermit has little to do with solitude per se – although solitude is usually the only condition in which this real vocation can be practiced. But the real vocation is *to bear the paradox*; to open one's heart and consciousness so deeply that one pierces through the apparent contrarities of the surface – the great “either/ors” that give shape and definition to life at this level – and sinks down into the underlying wholeness, the root unity, allowing it to be restored and mirrored in the stillness of one's own being thus consecrated. This is the great work of the “neutralization of binaries” that Valentin Tomberg speaks of so profoundly in his essay on “The Hermit” in *Meditations on the Tarot*.⁷ Whether so named or not, every true hermit instinctively recognizes the motion, and Thomas Merton was a true hermit. As he describes it in his “Midsummer Diary”:

Solitude as act: the reason no one really understands solitude, or bothers to try to understand it, is that it appears to be nothing but a condition. Something one elects to undergo, like standing under a cold shower. Actually, solitude is a realization, an actualization, even a kind of creation, as well as a liberation of active forces within us, forces that are more than our own One has to work actively at solitude, not by putting fences around oneself but by destroying all the fences and throwing away all the disguises and getting down to the naked root of one's inmost desire, which is the desire of liberty – reality (LL 320-21).

Rafe also understood this aspect of the hermit's vocation brilliantly, and taught it to me – but with a nuance that I believe holds the key to Merton's own situation. “When you're a hermit, you're never alone,” he used to say. But for Rafe, this was not simply a connection with all souls in the communion of saints although that was certainly a part of it. It was a *connection with the fullness and consummation of his own life* – all the roads not taken, like the full of the moon dimly visible behind the sliver he was actually able to live in time and space. This fullness of being is not future, he taught me; it is inner. It actually exists, and it is vividly real. It is eminently clear to me that Merton knew this as well.

And so when he says that he believes his love for M. has relationship to his solitude, when he places it at the very heart of his aloneness, what he is actually saying, according to “hermit's hermeneutic,” is that he is willing to entrust it to that place which is the “root of my innermost desire” and let its reality stand or fall there. If it is real, the life it engenders – the ideal form of the reality they both glimpsed in this brief spring romance – will open itself to them from there and hold a place for them which they can access now, through solitude; and fully consummate in the life beyond. The way of the heart is to hold the paradox; then it will hold them. And so, in extraordinary boldness he can write at the end of his “Midsummer Diary”: “I cling to one hope: that future morning in heaven which the morning of March 31st ‘prefigured.’ That is the beautiful day I live for. The rest is nothing but time to pass until the real morning comes. I am not patient. I don't expect you will be either. Meanwhile, we have to both make it there. . . . And by the mercy of God we will” (LL 347-48). I do not believe this is a put-off or a pious truth. It is a reality that the hermit's eyes already keenly see. If this love is true, it will stand. And if they can hold the paradox, neither denying or forgetting, the truth that has already begun to live itself in their love will continue to unfold in their lives.

With that realization – won not with his head, but at the core of his being – something shifted in Merton. And not just in the relationship with M., but permeating and flowing out into all other aspects of his life. From a spiritual journey which had begun a quarter of a century earlier in jagged dualisms, he more and more was able simply to *be*, resting in the unity that underlies the play of opposites. As he left for his final Asian trip in early fall 1968, he spoke to the nuns of Redwoods Monastery in California: “You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it’s not there. . . . Don’t consider dualistic prayer on a lower level. The lower is higher. There are no levels. At any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God’s gift in Christ. In the end, Praise praises. Thanksgiving gives thanks. . . . Openness is all.”⁸

Now perhaps this brief spring romance was but a passing flower, but I do not think so. I sense it as a gift from God, bringing a lifetime of honesty and searching and questing to its final fusion – “where all your deeds and words, each truth, each lie, die in unjudging love.”⁹ Those words are written by the poet Dylan Thomas. But perhaps I should let Merton’s own words conclude this discussion – words delivered as a special closing prayer at the Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta in October 1968, less than two months before he died. You may hear these words in the macrocosm, as a prayer for the world. You may hear them in the microcosm, as the reality of what he has learned and bears in his heart from his three-month romance with M. If you hear that the macrocosm and the microcosm are one and the same, then you will perhaps understand the holiness of their fleeting but eternal exchange of hearts:

We have to part now, aware of the love that unites us, the love that unites us in spite of real differences, real emotional friction. . . . The things that are on the surface are nothing, what is deep is the Real. We are creatures of love. . . . Oh God, we are one with you. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open with one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.¹⁰

1 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.

2 John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth: Latitudes Press, 1983).

3 William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

4 Cynthia Bourgeault, *Love is Stronger than Death: The Mystical Union of Two Souls* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

5 Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 1985); subsequent references will be cited as “Solovyov” in the text.

6 Ladislaus Boros, *God is with Us* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967); subsequent references will be cited as “Boros” in the text.

7 Valentin Tomberg, *Meditations on the Tarot* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1993) 218.

8 David Steindl-Rast, “Man of Prayer,” *Thomas Merton Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1974) 89.

9 Dylan Thomas, “This Side of the Truth” in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 117.

10 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 318-19.