

THE TENSION BETWEEN SOLITUDE AND SHARING IN THE MONASTIC LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON

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In the preface he wrote for the 1962 *Thomas Merton Reader*, Merton notes the fact that his whole life was almost totally paradoxical.

It is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and still is a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me . . . Paradoxically, I have found peace because I have always been dissatisfied. My moments of depression and despair turn out to be renewals, new beginnings. All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy.¹

And in a talk in Alaska, only a few months before his death, Merton cited Martin Buber who

talks about the man who has a "complex self-contradictory temperament" of which I could tell you much because that is a perfect description of me. It is rough to live with that kind of temperament, but a number of people have it and one should not feel too condemned to be complex and self contradictory forever. [Buber] says that in the core of our soul the Divine force in its depth is capable of acting on the soul, changing it, binding the conflicting sources together, amalgamating the diverging elements. It is capable of unifying it. He makes it quite clear that there is in the depths of our souls a power of God which can do this if we let it.²

1. Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974): pp. 16-17.

2. *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to The Asian Journal: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*; introd. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989): p. 150.

Nowhere is this paradox and “complex self-contradictory temperament” more apparent than in the tension between solitude and sharing in Merton’s life. I will limit my observations to those years when I knew him, namely, from 1949 when I entered the monastery until his death in 1968.

By August 1949, Merton had been ordained a priest only a few months. He did not have any special position in the monastery and was involved mostly in his writing and literary work. Hence it was some weeks before I was able even to identify who this author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was. When I found out, I was quite surprised. He was the jovial monk who sometimes delighted the somber novices and others by his sign comments during the abbot’s chapter talks. The monks sat in long rows facing one another, with the abbot seated at the end of the room. Hence those facing him sometimes found it more entertaining to look directly across for any witty reactions, whether by sign language or by facial expression, rather than to watch the abbot from the side. Such reactions of Merton were not directed at anyone in particular, unless perhaps his immediate neighbors. They were simply an expression of his ebullient nature as well as his spontaneous wit. Certainly his reactions were not directed to the novices since even sign communication between professed and novices was forbidden at that time.

A few months later, Merton was designated by the abbot to give some conferences to the novices on monastic spirituality. Prior to that, the main spirituality of the monastery was centered on that of La Trappe: penance, asceticism, humility, obedience and manual labor, along with a smattering of the Little Flower. Hence when Merton began giving talks on the Desert Fathers, early monastic tradition, prayer and contemplation, this was viewed by some (including the novice master!) as being “foreign” to Trappist life. There was also some tension between the enthusiastic response which Merton evoked in most of the novices and the more sober response to the novice master. Consequently these conferences ceased after some months.

During all this time Merton himself was going through a period which he characterized in *The Sign of Jonas* as being “alone in my insufficiency — dependent, helpless, contingent, and never quite sure that I am leaning on Him upon whom I depend.”³ Yet exteriorly Merton showed no signs of depression or withdrawal. Exteriorly he seemed to be his usual

3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1956): p. 234. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

affable self. About this same time, he wrote in his journal: "in the depth of this abysmal testing and disintegration of my spirit, I suddenly discovered completely new moral resources, a spring of new life, a peace and a happiness that I had never known before and which subsisted in the face of nameless, interior terror" (*SJ*, p. 226). One can only speculate as to whether there may have been some relation between this resurgence and his new work in giving conferences and sharing with others. His work in preparing and giving conferences was always stimulating to the hearers, and also to himself. It gave him the opportunity for study, reflection and some exchange on matters which were of great importance to him.

In May of 1951, Merton was named Master of Students and in October I came under him in that capacity. His whole manner of dealing with the students was one of love, respect and encouragement. The first time that I went to him for direction, he gave the blessing, as was usual, and then simply said: "Sit down." This was a real revolution in itself, for prior to this it was customary for the monk to remain kneeling during direction. He was attentive and kind and an excellent listener. He was one who seemed to be able to perceive almost intuitively what you were trying to express and to accept anything without reproof or chagrin. He was always encouraging and also stimulating to new ways of looking at things or thinking about things. He was an excellent spiritual director.

Alice von Hildebrand, in her video called *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton*, rebuked him for his use of psychology and psychiatry when he had no training in psychoanalysis. From my own contact with him, both during this period and later when he was Master of Novices, I can attest to the fact that he never tried to use psychiatry himself nor to do any analysis as such. He had read some psychology, both Freud and Jung, but he used this knowledge more as a background than as a tool for spiritual direction. He had an interest in dreams, but never used even this in any habitual way. After he was novice master he did try to compose something on signs of neuroses in monastic life. This was the occasion for his run-in with Dr. Gregory Zilboorg at Collegeville in 1956. Even though he did not use his own notes after that fiasco, he did later compose some notes together with Fr. John Eudes Bamberger on "The Mature Conscience."

Besides spiritual direction, Merton also gave weekly conferences to the students as a group. Like the novitiate conferences, Merton developed various themes of the monastic life, showing the background and basis for such elements. Besides this, he also spoke on many varied subjects as they were timely. He also, from time to time, exposed the students to recordings

of classical music, poetry and literature, so that their formation would be truly rounded in human as well as spiritual ways. He encouraged exchange with himself during the conferences, and showed obvious enthusiasm when the students became involved in the discussion. At the same time, though, he could resolutely put someone in his place if he tried to outshine him in such discussions. This was done, not in a defensive or haughty way, but in a way that showed that he had no patience with artificiality or false airs. He wanted the students to be true and well-rounded, but also humble and authentic.

In all of this, Merton shared his love for solitude. He did this both in theory, in his conferences, and also in practice. He obtained permission for the first time for the students to go out to the small woods just outside the enclosure wall. Earlier he had obtained permission to go there himself, and a small old toolshed had even been put out in the woods for his use. This became "St. Anne's Hermitage" (though it was not called a hermitage at first). Each day after dinner, any of the students who wished could go with him out to the woods, where all would scatter to various points for about an hour and a half of solitude. Later he managed to erect an old bell in the pasture so all would know when it was time to return to the monastery. Only about a half dozen students went out regularly, but he daily processed out to enjoy his time at St. Anne's. I once asked him whether it was not an impingement on his own solitude to have us go along with him. But he immediately said that he thoroughly enjoyed having us go out there and that it did not impede his own solitude at all. He rejoiced to see others respond with enthusiasm to an experience of solitude, even though so brief.

At times, on major feast days, he would obtain a truck and take any students who desired out to the large woods on the other side of the road. Sometimes this would be done under the pretext of tree planting, but even then tree planting took a minimal amount of the full afternoon that was available. Such trips were made, though, for the express purpose of having time for solitude, and conversation was still not allowed among the monks themselves. For a while the prior of the monastery (who had also been novice master when Merton gave conferences to the novices) tried something similar, but with the purpose of communication. The Rules stipulated that monks could speak to one another when they were in the presence of the abbot or the prior. So the prior organized some trips to the woods, using an extension of that rule to allow the monks to speak with one another with him out in the woods. Whether this was actually done in

conscious or unconscious competition with Fr. Louis and his trips to solitude, one cannot say for sure. But there was definitely at least something of that present, and most were aware of it. The majority continued to choose the solitude time, and the prior gave up after a while.

Merton felt this tension with others and was very sensitive to it. On one occasion when I was cantor for the choir, I approached Fr. Louis and asked him why he did not sing out more in choir. He had a very nice, melodious voice which could be a valuable addition. He answered that whenever he sang out more, his neighbor would shut up altogether and visibly show his displeasure. Merton was not one to force an issue. He did not care for conflict and usually withdrew into himself, though not in a pouty, childish way. He was sensitive to the criticisms of others about his dealings with the students, about his writings (he detested having to sit through the reading of his own works in the refectory at times), about his zeal for solitude, about his criticisms of technology in the monastery. At such times, he frequently took refuge in solitude in an effort to go beyond such misunderstandings. It was certainly a part of his sense of dereliction and desolation which plagued him at times. Yet here again, he was not one to show this in public. With others he could still be humorous and mischievous.

One area where Merton loved to share with others was in manual labor, particularly on the farm. He enjoyed working at cutting and shucking the corn, at planting and cutting the tobacco, and particularly in working in the woods. Due to physical maladies, he was not able to do this very much. But when possible he would take part in these, both as a way of sharing with the brethren in the work and also as an expression of a traditionally important element of monastic life. He was not the most organized person in directing the work, and I sometimes found it rather frustrating when I was undermaster of novices and he would suddenly decide to take part in the work and take charge of the work detail. But he applied himself with zeal. Only one area of work did he refuse to take part in: namely, the Farms Building, where the cheese and fruitcake were packaged and prepared for mailing. He felt that dependence on such a technological venture for sustenance of a monastic community was an infidelity to monastic life. He poked jibes at the Farms Building, such as "Cheeses for Jesus" or saying that the letters of the Order (O.C.S.O.) meant: "Our Cheese Surpasses Others." In this he realized that he was being impractical, idealistic and going against the current. He even objected to tractors and other farm machinery used in the fields. But he stuck to his position.

There is yet another area of the tension between solitude and sharing in Merton which I have never seen discussed, but which I personally feel is important. That is the area of his relations with Dom James Fox, his abbot. Many have spoken of the complexity of the relationship between these two men — and surely it was! Michael Mott, in his biography, characterizes Merton's attitude toward authority. "This was ambiguous at the deepest level. He was rebellious by nature, a born critic and changer, and yet he sought to appease He was a rebel who won and kept a reputation for obedience."⁴ On the other side, he speaks of Dom James' position.

Dom James was not a natural tyrant. Merton was not a natural victim. But two roles are implicit in the monastic situation. Both were emphasized by the conception Dom James held of them. The abbot is in a special sense the father, and the monks are his children. The conflicts Merton had with Dom James were not open. They could not be, because it was in the very nature of James Fox to avoid open conflict, to turn away wrath with a smile, to dissolve all surface rancor and strife in sweetness. It was the sweetness — the word is carefully chosen — that drove Thomas Merton to distraction at times Dom James, however sweetly spoken and smiling, could be ruthless. (Mott, pp. 279-280)

Merton's problems with the abbot, however, were not simply an "authority problem." Certainly he had some of that, in ways not too dissimilar from many of the monks. However I feel that Merton at times felt Dom James' authority as an intrusion on his own inner solitude, as a demand that he share in areas and ways that Merton was not prepared to share. In his "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," Merton wrote:

One of the first essentials of the interior solitude of which I speak is that it is the actualization of a faith in which a man takes responsibility for his own inner life. He faces its full mystery in the presence of the invisible God. And he takes upon himself the lonely, barely comprehensible, incommunicable task of working his way through the darkness of his own mystery until he discovers that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality, which is the only reality The words of God have the power to illuminate the darkness. But they do so by losing the shape of words and becoming — not thoughts, not things, but the unspeakable beating of a Heart within the heart of one's own life.⁵

Merton desired to be able to face this inner solitude and to be able to make decisions on the basis of what this "Heart within the heart" revealed to him. Merton tried to do this and to make his decisions on this basis, particularly

4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 279. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

5. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960): p. 180. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DQ*.

the major decisions regarding his own vocation, his writing, his eremitical life and possible travels. He knew that it was risky to do this on his own, but he felt called to such risk.

The essence of the solitary vocation is precisely the anguish of an almost infinite risk. Only the false solitary sees no danger in solitude . . . Too many people are ready to draw him back at any price from what they conceive to be the edge of an abyss: but they do not realize that he who is called to solitude is called to walk across the air of the abyss without danger, because, after all, the abyss is only himself. He should not be forced to feel guilty about it, for in this solitude and emptiness of his heart, there is another, inexplicable solitude. Man's loneliness is, in fact, the loneliness of God. That is why it is such a great thing for a man to discover his solitude and learn to live in it. For there he finds that he and God are one: that God is alone as he himself is alone. That God wills to be alone in him. (DQ, pp. 185, 190)

Merton, as anyone trained in the Rule of Benedict, certainly knew the value and role of obedience to the abbot and the customs of the monastery. Yet he was also acutely conscious of the dangers of mere social pressure. He fully realized that many people are determined by the social pressures, expectations and image of the group. But the solitary is called to avoid the illusory satisfaction of such social images.

The man who is dominated by what I call the "social image" is one who allows himself to see and to approve in himself only that which his society prescribes as beneficial and praiseworthy in its members. And yet he congratulates himself on "thinking for himself." In reality, this is only a game that he plays in his own mind — the game of substituting the words, slogans and concepts he has received from society, for genuine experiences of his own. (DQ, p. 186)

All of this led Merton to a realization of the limitation of any group, even the monastic community, even the Church.

The illusions and fictions encouraged by the appetite for self-affirmation in certain restricted groups, have much to be said for them and much to be said against them. They do in practice free a man from his individual limitations and help him, in some measure, to transcend himself. And if every society were ideal, then every society would help its members only to a fruitful and productive self-transcendence. But in fact societies tend to lift a man above himself only far enough to make him a useful and submissive instrument in whom the aspirations, lusts and needs of the group can function unhindered by too delicate a personal conscience. Social life tends to form and educate a man, but generally at the price of a simultaneous deformation and perversion. This is because civil society is never ideal, always a mixture of good and evil, and always tending to present the evil in itself as a form of good. (DQ, p. 182).

It led him to a conviction that

The solitary one is one who is called to make one of the most terrible decisions possible to man: the decision to disagree completely with those

who imagine that the call to diversion and self-deception is the voice of truth and who can summon the full authority of their prejudice to prove it. (DQ, p. 183)

He felt this in relation to the concrete circumstances of his own life and his relations with the abbot.

So that is the vow of obedience. You submit yourself also to somebody else's prejudice and to his myths and the worship of *his* fetishes. Well, I have made the vow and will keep it, and will see why I keep it, and will try at the same time not to let myself be involved in the real harm, that can come from a wrong kind of submission. There are several wrong kinds, and the right kind is not always easy to find. In other words, I do not agree with those who say that *any* submission will do.⁶

He saw fully by faith that obedience frees one, but at the same time he was acutely aware of the fact that "there is so much that is not 'redeemed' in the thinking of those who represent the Church" (VOC, p. 199). He took solace in the experience of others who experienced the same thing.

What about the life of [Cardinal] Newman, which still goes on in the refectory? It is so inexhaustibly important and full of meaning for me. Look what the hierarchy did for him! The whole thing is there existentially, not explicit, but it is there for the grasping. The reality is in his kind of obedience and his kind of refusal. Complete obedience to the Church and complete, albeit humble, refusal of the pride and chicanery of churchmen. (VOC, p. 199)

This led him to the realization of a need to be more than simply a rebel, of the need to submit himself with peace to the prejudices and human limitations of others who may be in authority.

I protest by obeying, and protest most effectively by obeying in an obedience in which I am not subject to arbitrary fancies on the part of authorities, but in which I and the abbot are aware, or think we are aware, of a higher obligation and a demand of God: that my situation has reached this point is a great grace. (VOC, p. 191)

The ideal that he sought went beyond the question of either agreement or disagreement with authorities. His desire was to be able to come to an obedience in the Spirit and to the Spirit.

The great joy of the solitary life . . . resides in the awakening and attuning of the inmost heart to the voice of God — to the inexplicable quiet definite inner certitude of one's call to obey Him, to hear Him, to worship Him here, now, today in silence and alone. In the realization that this is the whole reason for one's existence. This listening and this obedience make one's existence fruitful and gives fruitfulness to all one's other acts. It is the

6. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-195*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988): p. 148. Hereafter referred to in the text as VOC.

purification and ransom of one's own heart that has been long dead in sin. This is not simply a question of existing alone, but of doing with joy and understanding "the work of the cell," which is done in silence, not according to one's own choice or to the pressure of necessity, but in obedience to God, that is to say, in obedience to the simple conditions imposed by what *is* here and now. The voice of God is not clearly heard at every moment; and part of the "work of the cell" is *attention*, so that one may not miss any sound of that voice When we understand how little we listen, how stubborn and gross our hearts are, we realize how important this inner work is. And we see how badly prepared we are to do it.
(VOC, pp. 188-189)

In this way, his tension between solitude and sharing was at the heart of his own monastic vocation, for he realized that "it demands an integration of one's own life in the stream of natural and human and cultural life of the moment" (VOC, p. 189). The saving factor in all of this, throughout his whole life, was his flexibility and his resilience. He could be demanding, but he could be human. Whenever people ask me what is the main trait of Merton that impressed me, I always answer: his humanity. As a monk in his dealings with both confreres and with superiors, as a superior himself, as a director or confessor, and as a friend, it was his humanity which shone through most regularly.

One example of this was when I was Undermaster of Novices working with him as Novice Master. At that time we had a program of "summer postulants." Young men could come and spend the summer as part of the novitiate in order to discover whether they had a monastic vocation. There was one young man who was seldom able to rise for Vigils and yet frequently seemed groggy and withdrawn. Merton became suspicious and sent me to check out the young man's cell. Sure enough, under his pillow I found a fifth of gin, which was about two-thirds consumed. I gave it to Merton who confronted the person and then told him he did not think he belonged in the program. A couple of weeks later, Merton told me to come to his office one evening after supper on a feast day. When I came in he had some crackers and the remainder of the bottle of gin, which we proceeded to dispose of.

At the same time, Fr. Louis could be demanding, particularly in the realm of obedience. The one major run-in I had with him was in this regard. He had planned to renovate the novitiate chapel and the novices and I did the work. On the eve of Assumption, we had finished everything except hanging the ballister and drapes behind the altar. He said to wait and finish it after the feast. However, I thought it would be a surprise to him to go ahead and finish it for the feast, and so a couple of novices and myself proceeded to finish it after Compline. Working with all the windows closed

even though it was mid-August in order to deaden the noise, we proceeded to do the deed. Suddenly about 9:00 Merton loomed in the doorway with a heavy scowl. With his light sleeping, he had heard the noise and come to investigate. He was furious and first stated that he refused even to say the Mass there the next morning. Only with much persuasion did he agree to do so, but he made it clear that such disobedience was not tolerated.

Ironically, one of the major times of tension between solitude and sharing was during his time in the hermitage from 1965 to 1968. Just a few days before going full time to the hermitage, Merton looked at himself honestly and saw how challenging this new period would be. He wrote in his journals:

The solitary life, now that I confront it, it is awesome, wonderful, and I see I have no strength of my own for it. Rather, I have a deep sense of my own poverty and, above all, an awareness of wrongs I have allowed in myself together with this good desire. This is all good. I am glad to be shocked by grace, to wake up in time and see the great seriousness of what I am about to do. Perhaps I have been playing at this; and the solitary life is not something you can play at. Contrary to all that is said about it, I do not see how the really solitary life can tolerate illusion or self-deception. It seems to me that solitude rips off all the masks and all the disguises. It tolerates no lies. Everything but straight and direct affirmation or silence is mocked and judged by the silence of the forest. The solitary life is to stand in truth.
(VOC, p. 204)

The first months were a delight for him and he thrived in the realization of his long desire for total solitude. However his back problem deteriorated and he had to have surgery. Thus in March 1966, he entered St. Joseph's Hospital in Louisville again. It was here that he met the nurse, Margie, who would play such a prominent part in his life for the next four months.

In July of 1965, he suddenly recalled a young girl whom he had known in England. She was the sister of a school friend and he met her during a stay with the student at his family's home. He wrote in his journal:

Actually, I think she is a symbol of the true (quiet) woman with whom I never came to terms in the world, and because of this, there remains an incompleteness in me that cannot be remedied. (VOC, p. 194)

This sense of incompleteness bothered Merton in many ways. It left a certain gnawing doubt as to whether he was really capable of true love, whether he felt that he was truly loved by others, and consequently whether his solitude was really authentic or a partial flight from the underlying despair of himself. He was honest enough with himself that he did not try to claim that divine love would totally compensate for human love. It was this realization which left him so very open to sharing and to loving: his

brothers in the monastery, his friends outside, even those he knew only by correspondence. But even with all this, he was conscious of a certain “incompleteness” in himself.

Margie definitely filled this incompleteness and it was because of this that he responded as he did. He was conscious of his love for her and her love for him. He did not question his essential vocation to solitude, and yet he desired that they might be active and present in each other’s lives in a profound spiritual friendship which Merton summed up in the word “devotion.”

John Howard Griffin has given the main details of this period in his book *Follow the Ecstasy*.⁷ He shows both how passionate the relationship became as well as the many ways that Merton went counter to that honesty with himself that had so marked his life. The tension between this sharing in an experience of human love between man and woman and his desire for solitude became almost unbearable at times. Griffin shows that

he entered into a long series of speculations and justifications which he later viewed with dismay as not much more than rationalizations permitting him to pursue his longing with some degree of good conscience. It was deeply necessary, critical even, at this point in his life to prove to himself that he was capable of a purely unselfish love. Otherwise he would go on being haunted by the fear that he might be like certain Christians described by Leon Bloy who were incapable of loving anyone or anything and therefore persuaded themselves that they loved God. (*Griffin*, p. 84).

Merton himself wrote:

Who knows anything at all about solitude if he has not been in love, and in love in solitude? Love and solitude must test each other in the man who means to live alone: they must become one and the same thing in him, or he will only be half a person. (*Griffin*, p. 84).

Merton realized that the situation was “absurdly impossible” and yet he continued on — torn between his dedication to his life of solitude and his love for her. In the end, things were resolved by being taken out of his hands. One of the brothers at the switchboard listened in on a phone call to her and reported it to the abbot. Griffin says:

Though troubled almost to the point of panic, Merton was swept with a sense of relief that the matter was now in the open. From this viewpoint of openness, his own perspective changed. He told himself he had to face the fact that he had been wrong. (*Griffin*, p. 101)

In this way, Merton viewed the abbot’s discovery as a help. Though firm on the matter, the abbot was compassionate. Yet even then, Merton felt that

7. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, Texas: JHG Editions / Latitudes Press, 1983). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Griffin*.

he should be able to work this out by himself. The abbot required that he talk with the local monk-psychiatrist. At the time Merton remarked to me how he resented both the abbot and the psychiatrist for this. He knew he had taken a great "risk" and that he had not conducted the affair rightly. Yet he preferred to work it out in his solitude himself. Later he did admit in his journals that he found the psychiatrist helpful. However, he did try to re-enter into his solitude in real honesty before the Lord.

Finally he was able to evaluate the experience in a new light. He expressed this in an essay that he re-wrote at this time. It was entitled "Love and Need — Is Love a Package or a Message." He wrote:

In reality love is a positive force, a transcendent spiritual power. It is, in fact, the deepest creative power in human nature. Rooted in the biological riches of our inheritance, love flowers spiritually as freedom and as a creature response to life in a perfect encounter with another person.⁸

Griffin sums up the result of all this in the following way:

Ultimately the experience confirmed for him what had before been intuitive conclusions. He could now know that his profoundest statements about love between two human beings held equally true about love between man and God, and that he himself had the capacity to love fully. He now knew that he possessed an authentic potential for love and that his religious commitment was not the subtle disguise of an emotional cripple. This provided an inner liberation. (*Griffin*, p. 121)

On September 8, Merton made a solemn permanent commitment as a hermit in the presence of the abbot. From then on he worked at deepening this life that he had been given by the Lord and which he freely accepted.

The immediate pressure was over, but throughout the remaining two years in the hermitage he still faced another kind of tension. This was brought on due to the number of visits he received from his own friends, business associates, friends of the monastery as well as others who came uninvited and unannounced. He loved having visits from his friends; and yet he felt the tension of the call of solitude. In time he began to spend more afternoons in the woods rather than at the hermitage in order to avoid unwanted intrusions. During this time he still gave weekly conferences for the monks and was a brother to his brothers. The tension finally led to his desire for greater solitude than he felt he could find there in the hermitage. At the same time that he obtained permission to travel to the East to visit monks there, he also planned to look for a possible location for a hermitage.

8. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979): p. 34.

Some might wonder why he did not simply stay put and limit his own contacts more and thus be able to experience the solitude he sought. Perhaps that would have worked for many, but not for Merton. Just as he wanted to *experience* not only solitude but also love, so he wanted to experience for himself how the monks of the East train themselves for the kind of experience he sought. He said himself that his purpose in going to the East was to learn more, not just quantitatively but qualitatively. In the end, the tension was resolved for him only by the bolt of electricity which brought him into that full solitude and that full love.

Thomas Merton — or Fr. Louis — was a rare individual. Certainly I can say that knowing him and living with him has been one of the great graces of my own life. The fact that he still speaks so eloquently to so many over twenty years after his death shows that he truly had lived that type of solitude of which he wrote — a solitude which led him not only into his own heart but into the heart of every person. As Merton says:

Without solitude of some sort there is and can be no maturity. Unless one becomes empty and alone, he cannot give himself in love because he does not possess the deep self which is the only gift worthy of love. My deep self is not something which I acquire, or to which I can attain after a long struggle. It is not mine, and cannot become mine. It is no “thing” — no object. It is “I.” But the deep “I” of the Spirit, of solitude and of love, . . . who is always alone, is always universal: for in this inmost “I” my own solitude meets the solitude of every other person and the solitude of God. Hence it is beyond division, beyond limitation, beyond selfish affirmation. It is only this inmost and solitary “I” that truly loves with the love and the Spirit of Christ. This “I” is Christ Himself, living in us: and we, in Him, living in the Father. (VOC, p. 207)