

A LOVELY DAY FOR A FRIENDSHIP:  
The Spiritual and Intellectual  
Relationship Between Thomas Merton  
and John Wu as Reflected in Their  
Correspondence

John Wu, Jr.

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In preparing this essay I have had the chance to return to some of my all-time favorite writings, those of John C. H. Wu, my dad, and Thomas Merton. There is, of course, no way to do justice to the writings, to them personally, or to their marvelous friendship. So, this paper is simply a serving up to you of some mere impressions of a doting son and obsequious admirer, respectively. I come to them cap-in-hand, humbled at the thought of God's bounty in having let me perceive them close up. I have loved them dearly, in ways that go far beyond words, and much of what I am spiritually and intellectually today I owe to them directly. This modest paper is therefore my heartfelt homage to these two wonderfully saintly and human men.

Should their entire correspondence be published one day, some who are interested in Asian wisdom and in what a Taoistic-Thérésian-Christo spirituality might entail and signify will truly relish and thrill at the delicacies they so simply and in childlike fashion served up to each other. I for one have been the recipient of a great feast and, in the case of my father, feasted with him on earth until his passing in 1986 at the age of 87.

A more fruitful intellectual and spiritual friendship could hardly be imagined between two men of letters from such diverse backgrounds. In fact one other correspondence comes to my mind, and that is between my dad and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes which

lasted a good twelve years, from 1921 when my dad had just turned 22 to 1933, just two years before the Great Dissenter's death at the age of 94.

At the beginning of the Wu-Merton correspondence (covering the period from March 14, 1961 to January 26, 1968 and including some 75 extant letters), the two men already had many things in common, while in the case of my dad and Holmes, many barriers—not the least being cultural and gene rational ones—had to be overcome. Yet, not only were they naturally overcome by their loftiness of ideas and vision but, as it turned out, their friendship was as great and mystifying as any that an exceptional writer of fiction might have conjured up. Moreover, Holmes did my dad the great honor of having preserved every letter—save the very first missive—in a correspondence numbering 110 letters, many of which were of a goodly length.

Holmes the skeptic could not have been further removed from Merton the mystic-poet, yet in my dad's letters to them, there is an undeniably distinctive thread running from the pen of the young Wu of the 20's to the spiritually mature Wu of the 60's, a thread best characterized by the word guilelessness and a sincerity of style rarely found among intellectuals. I will speak of this in a later part of the paper.

Though the beginnings of the respective correspondences are separated by one month short of 40 years, and it was not until December 18, 1937—fully four years following his last letter to Holmes—that my father was received into the Catholic Church, what intrigues me is that the seeds for his mature spirituality as found in the later correspondence were in their unmistakable incipient stages in the Holmes-Wu letters throughout. In fact, it is both quaint and ingenuous to see a young Chinese and budding legal scholar in his twenties and early thirties presuming to move the obstinate heart of an octogenarian who was at the time possibly the most renowned jurist in the world from the position of a dogmatic skeptic to a simple belief in a Divine Mover.

Yet, probably in his heart of hearts, Holmes must have thrilled at the thought that there were still young men in the legal sciences who had such unwavering faith in both God and man, not withstanding the fact that this young idealist for whom he had an affection as intimate as one could have for a son had come from the other side of the earth.

The following words by an English Carmelite nun, herself a convert to Catholicism, as quoted by my dad in the Epilogue to his autobiography, *Beyond East and West*, may help shed some light on

what I have suggested above regarding a thread in one's life, particularly a life in touch with and constantly moved by the Spirit:

Intuition tells me that we have never really been "pagan" or "heretics". The very inmost—the most precious—of our souls has always, consciously and unconsciously, asleep or awake, sought the Face of Jesus, seeking truly the Truth and catching glimpses of all values. Sometimes perhaps captious as willful "children" but always in love with our God,—because in His Infinite Mercy He loved us first.<sup>1</sup>

To which my father wrote:

All the scattered leaves of my life have been gathered together by His loving hand and bound into a harmonious volume. Indeed, the Spirit of Love has arranged all things sweetly.

... If I am a debtor to men, how much more am I a debtor to God! That is why I have always had the feeling of being a bankrupt... but I know too that this feeling itself comes from above, the very salt that the loving Father infuses into me in order to preserve all the other flavors  
(BEW, pp. 345-6).

To my dad, "scattered leaves" are impregnated with the signature of God's love. Fifteen years later, in a letter to Thomas Merton, he begins by lamenting "These days it's all ashes, no inspiration... I realize more than ever that every breath depends upon the movement of the Spirit" (Wu, 1/10/66).<sup>2</sup>

It is an existential lamentation, yet, typically in the very next breath, he expresses a quiet but deep-felt gratitude to God. He knew instinctively at such moments that God was playing hide and seek with him, and that the more God hid from him, the deeper he was allowed to

1. John C.H. Wu, *Beyond East and West*. (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1951). Reprinted in Taipei, Taiwan: Bookman Publishing Co., 1991. p. 345. Hereafter referred to in the text as *BEW*.

2. John C.H. Wu, Unpublished letters to Thomas Merton, 1961-1968, The Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. [TMSC] Hereafter referred to in the text as *Wu*.

enter into His Desert. Thus, to him, his expression of gratitude was mere common sense, really a spiritual reflex.

In reflecting on his relationship with Holmes, I clearly see it now that what my dad even at a relatively tender age was trying earnestly to do was to make it plain to Holmes the loss that he and intellectuals in the West had suffered due to the overriding influence of the positivists who had made inroads not only in the law but in every other profession as well. It was not Holmes that he was primarily concerned about but future generations of professional men and women whom he felt would become thoroughly swept into the positivist camp.

From the point of view of law, the loss to him centered squarely on the outright abandonment of the hallowed natural law traditions, the demise of which he later foresaw would lead to the eventual shrinking and the loss of the souls of the west as well. In short, the west was closer to a brave new world than she herself realized and that the road to national and cultural salvation lay plainly in a return to her spiritual roots, though at the time he had not fully understood—how could he have?—where these roots were to be found. But, it is certainly to his credit that intuitively he knew some thing had gone amiss in the West and that a radical return was a *sine qua non* for any future cure.

Forty years later, in letter after letter and in a far more personal and spiritual vein, my dad's true offering of love and friendship to Tom was to hint ever so subtly and gently to the importance of abiding by his vocation as a contemplative monk, which was in my father's judgment a jewel of immeasurable beauty. It was the fraternal counsel of a fellow contemplative who, though remaining in the world and loving it—because Christ had redeemed the world through the Cross—had long ago lost all taste for earthly things and who was convinced that if Tom pursued his vocation farther, he would more than ever become "all things to all men," a paradox that only true contemplatives can realize. Even the experience with Chuang Tzu, he thought, would further his solitude and make Tom more aware of the "usefulness of the useless."

To what extent Tom was moved is of secondary importance. My dad simply wanted to indicate as plainly as possible, in his inimitable way and through his enthusiasms and simple way of life, his deeply-felt priorities not only for a monk of the contemplative order but for any person living the life of the Spirit. The letters were written to a bosom friend whom he loved far deeper than his own

brother, and with this in mind, we can, perhaps, have some understanding of his intense concern for Tom and his treasured vocation.

The true and lasting value of the Wu-Merton friendship, as in all eternal friendships, I think, lay in this: despite their differences, they had already travelled spiritual millenniums to reach their respective stations at the time of their meeting and had finally met in the only place where differences no longer matter much, at "the eternal place that is no place" (Wu, 11/24/65), at a point we might call the peripheral center.

Looking at their lives and careers, I am deeply struck by what Tom and my dad had in common: they were both converts and had written rather famous autobiographies chronicling their spiritual odysseys; although their main interest lay in the writings of the mystics, East and West, they read voluminously and broadly, refusing to make any superficial distinctions between so-called secular and sacred writings.

They had a profound love for solitude and the contemplative life, and were both steeped in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas; both acknowledged their debt to St. Thérèse of Lisieux for their conversions; they shared an interest in Dante and in Blake and Rilke; they wrote on subjects that went far beyond the boundaries of their original callings and, more significantly, wrote perceptively on much of what they touched.

Both shared a life-long passion for justice, my father through his legal writings, and Tom, in his social and political concerns and protests; both are acknowledged "bridge-builders between East and West," their broad compassion and commitment to a harmonious world order stretching their concerns universally; they shared the belief that Chinese studies would serve as an invaluable guide for the future development of Christianity, convinced that the ancient wisdoms of the East would naturally cry out for fulfillment in the Gospels. These wise men of the East, in Tom's words, would be instrumental in "the recovery of our own Christian orientation" (Merton, 4-/2/61),<sup>3</sup> and, according to my dad, the eventual "re-Christianization of the West" would most assuredly come "through the East" (Wu, 4/7/61).

Finally, in retrospect, there is no denying that both were and continue to be far ahead of their times. In embracing the Catholic Church, both men brought their total experience into Her waiting

3. Thomas Merton. Unpublished Letters to John C.H. Wu, 1961-1968, TMS. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Merton*.

arms, convinced that the nature of truth bespoke of a sacredness hidden from us only because through an accumulated vanity of the spirit imperceptibly incurred over the centuries we have lost that inner vision without which the sacred cannot be seen nor experienced. Thus, in a sense, their mature lives were dedicated to disclosing within themselves and to those who knew them both personally and in their writings the boundless boon of having found Christ, or, of Christ having found them.

### Part I

#### Jongleurs de Deux: the Spirituality of the Child

Their providential friendship was what the Chinese would call a relationship based on *yuan fen*, of spiritual brothers writing candidly to one another, delighting in each other and echoing what was surely deepest in both, and, particularly in my father's case, unabashedly pious and childlike. Take the following, for example, in his reply to Tom's initial letter, which sets the tone for the rest of the correspondence:

I have waited for you to take the initiative, because you are "another Christ," while I am only a member of His (Church). Let it be a part of my vocation to serve you as altarboy and cooperate with you on your Chinese studies . . . . It is Lao Tzu and St. Thérèse who have helped me to remain a little child, so that my heart always thrills whenever I respond, "Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meum" (Wu, 3/20/61).

They became bosom friends because, in fact, the joy of their friendship, though ostensibly begun on Tom's part as a project to "discuss the Four Classics . . . on the most elementary level, like any Chinese schoolboy of the old days" (Merton, 3/14-/61) sprang naturally forth from their mutual love for solitude and the desert experience itself.

In *Seeds of Contemplation*, Tom had written that solitude and the desert "is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by traveling; but by standing still."<sup>4</sup> My dad certainly took these words as seriously as

4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*. (NY: New Directions, 1949). p. 59. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Seeds*.

Tom did, and the following would have joyously elicited both intellectual and spiritual alleluias from him:

. . . we look for solitude in order to grow there in love for God and in love for other men. We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them . . . (and) to find out the way to do them the most good.

(Interior solitude) is an abyss opening up in the center by a hunger that will never be satiated with any created things. (*Seeds*, pp. 58-9)

Had their friendship not been anchored on a simple spirituality, there surely would have lacked that depth and richness that mark the letters. Because of it, our hearts too can forever reverberate to their joy!

Even in signing his letters, my dad was playful and self-effacing, very often using words that evoked images of the child. Here are some typical examples: "Your son in Jesus through Mary—with a smile," "Your old good-for-nothing son in Christ," "Your naughty son in the Logos," "Your naughty old boy in Christ the True Man," and "Your lonely child in the world." Chinese scholars, having been put through both Western and Eastern academic mills, are known to take themselves far more seriously than my dad naturally ever could.

Needless to say, the suggestion of childlikeness as a spiritual quality is widespread in the classics, East and West. In the East, we find it not only in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu but in Mencius as well, and it need not be pointed out the eternal significance that Christ Himself placed on having a childlike heart. It was especially for my dad the doorway to the spiritual life, and after his conversion to Catholicism and particularly following the lead of Thérèse of Lisieux, he seemed to have perfected playfulness into a science. To my mind, it is certainly the key to an understanding of his spirituality and inseparable from the spirit of piety and compassion that he wore so naturally. These qualities kept him from indulging in spiritual pride and often encouraged him to make himself the butt of his own jokes.

In one exchange, Tom notes the tremendous liberation that St. Paul had undergone and suggests that Christians ought to be "carefree and undetermined . . . with no care save to listen to the Holy Spirit and follow wherever he beckons." He then compares this spirit to "the gaiety and childlike joy of Chuang Tzu," adding that "spiritual

childhood must be a characteristically Chinese grace . . . one which the Chinese temperament was prepared for" (Merton, 4/11/61). He thought of my dad in such terms especially after the latter's visit to Gethsemani.

My dad, in turn, agreed wholeheartedly with Tom's assessment of St. Paul, adding the following:

I remember when I was translating the New Testament, I felt most at home with his Epistles. I felt as though Chuang Tzu was writing, especially in the two Corinthians and Philipians. In the Pastoral Epistles, he was more Confucian. But whenever he let himself go, he was *Taostic to the bones*. (my emphasis—Wu, 4/14/61)

The letters are naturally full of references to Chuang Tzu, but future readers will note that neither makes the error of seeing this great Chinese sage through discursive eyes. To them, Chuang Tzu is not a mere intellectual exercise of dead bones but entirely flesh and blood, and consequently, more alive today than ever and speaking a language of the heart so profound and personal that the experience of tasting the Chuangtsian soul casts one beyond the artificial categories of subject and object so that he will find himself solidly anchored on the Void itself. It was hardly a surprise that Tom was moved to say that "Chuang Tzu is my delight" (Merton, 6/23/63).

But, in the letters, the plain observation is that Tom is the parent and my father—sixteen years his senior—is the child. Yet, this phenomenon ought not be surprising to those who had any degree of intimacy with my dad. He was naturally—like Tom—a playful sort and loved to aim his good-natured jibes particularly in the direction of the religious whom he loved as his own brothers and sisters. Here is what Tom has to say about him and his humor:

John Wu is a man of profound and Zen-like humor, a humor which adds to the depth of his Christianity—to his Christian parhesia. He does not mind what he says. He got into an argument with Pope Pius XII, who told him it was because of "his merits" that he had such a lovely family. John protested, and I think rightly.<sup>5</sup>

5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968). p. 231. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Conjectures*.

And, again, during his only visit to Gethsemani in late June, 1962:

He spoke to us in the monastery and said blandly: "You monks can be happy and you can laugh, in this monastery, since you know that nothing worse can happen to you." I wish some of us had the sense to see it that way (*Conjectures*, p. 231).

Besides the obvious humor underlying these words, they also reflect a growth in spiritual wisdom resulting from the three years of pain and deep sense of loss that he had felt, up to that time, following the passing of his dear wife and my mother. Thus, in telling the monks that "nothing worse can happen" to them, he was, for all practical purposes, telling it to himself as well. For, indeed, if "something worse can happen," then one would still be living in some degree of anxiety and his happiness would be colored and conditioned by that anxiety.

Humor served other purposes as well, and there are many indications in his writings which clearly illustrate that his spirituality could not be divorced from a healthy sense of humor and that this insight did not come to him through his later studies in Zen: The latter simply reinforced it. His autobiography, *Beyond East and West*, is full of humor. We see, for example, that he loved St. Peter most because, beyond doubt, he was by far the most foolish and, therefore, the most human as well among the Apostles, always promising this and that, and when unable to deliver, repenting and weeping like a baby. Moreover, Peter had a childlike heart with which he could fully identify.

My dad loved Tom for many reasons, not the least being that he was a religious with great wit. One annoyance he had was in meeting a religious who took himself or herself too seriously. To him, nothing could be more destructive to a vocation than a self-centeredness resulting from mistaking puritanism and excessive scrupulosity for genuine virtue and goodness. Hence, a religious more than anyone else, had to free himself *from* himself lest the self interfere with the workings of the Holy Spirit or the Tao (which to him over the years had become indistinguishable). And he felt nothing accomplished this better than cultivating the ability to "laugh at ourselves" which would cause the self to "let go" or, as the Zennists would have it, to "dismount from the ass"—which is really *you*—or, simply put, in plain English, to get off your high horse.

Aside from supernatural grace itself, "letting go" and "dismounting" was, at least, psychologically to my dad, indispensable to the spiritual life. Thus, if one cannot find room for laughter, one cannot provide room in one's heart for Christ, for then there would be too much of the self unnecessarily cluttering up space that does not rightfully belong to one's self.

As Aelred Graham playfully but in great earnest suggests, the trouble with most of us is that we exhaust ourselves by "playing God" rather than "allowing God to play."<sup>6</sup> This "playing" is not the manipulation of a cold and heartless God; rather, it seems to be in tune with what Tom writes in "A Note to the Reader" in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*:

For Chuang Tzu, as for the Gospel, to lose one's life is to save it, and to seek to save it for one's own sake is to lose it. There is an affirmation of the world that is nothing but ruin and loss. There is a renunciation of the world that finds and saves man in his own home, which is God's world . . . Chuang Tzu would have agreed with St. John of the Cross, that you enter upon this kind of way when you leave all ways and, in a sense, get lost.<sup>7</sup>

"Allowing God to play" is, in the words of Blessed John Ruysbroeck—a favorite Merton Mystic—nothing else but "an eternal rest in the fruitive embrace of an outpouring love," and that God is the "wayless Being that all interior souls have chosen above all other things. This is the dim silence where all lovers lose themselves."<sup>8</sup>

This idea of loss, permeated through and through in the paradoxical truths of both Taoist and Zen literatures probably reached its richest expression in the writings of St. John, who wrote as matter-of-factly as any Chinese sage might have: "To possess everything, desire to possess nothing. To be everything, desire to be nothing."<sup>9</sup>

6. Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism*. (NY: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1963). pp. 116-135.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. (NY: New Directions, 1965). p. 12.

8. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. (NY: E.P. Dutton and Company Inc., 1948, 16th edition). p. 346.

9. John C.H. Wu, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality: the Essays of John C.H. Wu*, edited by Paul K.T. Sih. (Jamaica, New York: St. John's University Press, 19665). p. 45.

And almost as a corollary, my dad had written: "To acknowledge our nothingness . . . is a sign of sanity, which is the foundation of sanctity. Not only are we nothing, but the whole universe apart from God is nothing . . . the spiritual life is nothing but a self-realization through self-immolation in Christ."<sup>10</sup> On the natural plane, these words are echoed by Lao Tzu who, in my father's translation, sounds more like a 20th century healer of the mind than an old Chinese sage:

To realize that our knowledge is ignorance  
This is a noble insight.  
To regard ignorance as knowledge,  
This is mental illness.

Only when we are sick of our sickness  
Shall we cease to be sick.  
The Sage is not sick, being sick of sickness;  
This is the secret of health.<sup>11</sup>

Without this simple but profound spiritual path or nonpath of "losing our way" and letting the "dim silence" of the "Wayless Being" guide us at every step, we shall never be able to let go of our empirical ego fully which the West, Merton believes, falsely identifies with the deeper self. What he says in a letter dated 1/31/65 in which he identifies the person as void as principally a Zen insight but also, at the same time, quintessential to all mystical traditions. It deserves to be quoted at length:

I know of no one in the west who treated of person in such a way as to make it clear that *what is most our selves is what is least ourself* (my emphasis) . . . It is the void that is our personality, and not our individuality that seems to be concrete and defined and present, etc. It is what is seemingly not present, the void, that is really I . . . It is the Not-I that is most of all the I in each one of us. But we are completely

10. John C.H. Wu, *The Interior Carmel: The Threefold Way of Love*. (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1953). Reprinted in Taipei, Taiwan: United Publishing Company (Hwakang Bookstore, Chinese Culture University, 1975). p. 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as *The Interior Carmel*.

11. Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*. Translated by John C.H. Wu. (Boston: and Shaftesbury: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1989). Chapter 17. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Tao Teh Ching*.

enslaved by the illusory I that is not I and never can be I except in a purely fictional and social sense (Merton, 1/31/65).

And since he had found himself in this curiously lovely convoluted path, the result no doubt of a high state of spiritual clarity that he was feeling on his birthday, he continues to exploit what he calls "this strange dialectic" and approaches a new level of understanding and liberation regarding the self:

. . . there remains so suppress the apparent division between self and real or inner self. *There is no such division* (my emphasis). There is only the void which is I, covered over by an apparent I. And when the apparent I is seen to be void it no longer needs to be rejected, for it is I. How wonderful to be alive in such a world of craziness and simplicity. (Merton, 1/31/65)

To which my dad answers, humorously,

Now, Father Void, this is truly a pointing to the Moon. I do see eye-to-eye with you, although I cannot tell you who am I and who are you and where are the eyes and what I mean by "with." O Father Void, you are indeed a wizard! (Wu, 2/5/65).

As to Tom's "when the apparent 'I' is seen to be void, it no longer needs to be rejected, for it is 'I,'" he jests further: "With this fundamental insight we can spin the Buddhist scriptures as the boys toy with the tops" (Wu, 2/5/65).

Sometimes my dad was quite capable of using earthy humor and images in driving home a philosophical or moral point. Once in a graduate class on Zen Buddhism in which I was in attendance, there was a rather heated debate among the students over some delicate point. My dad, in his fine, dark-blue Chinese silk robe and with a long Cuban cigar dangling loosely from his mouth—quite an incongruous sight indeed—sat beaming while following what had in fact developed into a verbal fracas. It may have lasted a good twenty minutes.

Suddenly, exhaling a large puff of smoke, he held out his left arm and said, "Good! A very good debate!" Then, seeing that the cigar had nearly gone out, he poked his right hand into his robe, took out his trusty Ronson lighter, struck it whereby a huge flame came up to meet the foul smelling cigar, and without skipping a beat, continued, "I

enjoyed everything you said. Everything made sense. This is a very perceptive class and your reasons are airtight. I can tell you're all Aristotelians. But I have to confess one thing: despite your fine arguments, nothing that you have said has as much cosmic validity as a simple bowel movement..."

Puffing furiously on his cigar, he first gave a slow, sweeping gaze to the whole class, and then nodding and smiling from one perplexed student to another, he added, "Don't you see?" At that second, who could have doubted that there had instantaneously occurred a vast spiritual bowel movement that rumbled through the stuffy campus?

In his *Golden Age of Zen* for which Tom wrote a long and insightful introduction, we come upon a passage which can serve as an excellent commentary for the above:

An exhaustive discussion of the abstruse is like a hair thrown into the infinite, and the fullest exertion of all capabilities is like a little drop of water falling into an unfathomable gulf (attributed to Te-shan, p. 152).<sup>12</sup>

Somewhere in Chuang Tzu, too, we are reminded of the futility and the outright silliness of trying to fathom the depth of an ocean with a short pole.

We who have been educated in the West where a great premium is placed on scientific scrutiny in whatever field we happen to be experts and without which we may suddenly find ourselves as academic outcasts are forever running the risk of mistaking the means for the end or, as the Zennists would remind us, of "mistaking the pointing finger for the Moon itself." Such a simple confusion, yet how spiritually fatal it can sometimes be. In a speech to graduating seniors of St. Louis College in Honolulu on June 6, 1951, my dad warned:

The trouble with the modern world is that there is too much love of science, and too little science of love. Science is not a bad thing; but it furnishes you only with the fuel for the fire of your love. If your fire is weak, the fuel will only extinguish the fire. If the fire is strong, then the more fuel the merrier.

12. John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen*. (Taipei, Taiwan: United Publishing Company, 1975). p. 152.

In the same address he also brought out a critical point that Tom would have been in full agreement with, an idea that Aldous Huxley—without the benefit of my dad's piety—had first stirred up in him before he entered Gethsemani. These are simple but perceptive words which, I suppose, are rarely heard at Commencements today:

You know that the ultimate end and significance of life lies in becoming a filial child of God, while all other things, including scientific knowledge, are but the means and materials of that ultimate end. If you confuse the means and ends, regarding the end as means and means as ends, then you will not be able to make head or tail of life. We must put the first things first . . . You should get a livelihood to take care of your physical needs. But you must never identify livelihood with Life.

## Part II

### Interior Landscapes: the Desert Rascals

As I have already suggested, my dad lived freely only because he recognized the healing power of the desert experience, a desert that perfects the deepest qualities of the heart and directs all our daily activities. Exteriorly, there is nothing dramatic about it. Below, he throws out a strong hint as to what the basis of his friendship with Tom might have been:

I confess to you, Father, ever since my childhood, I have always been haunted by the desert within me, "mysteriously designated by the finger of God." It is in the desert that I meet you, Father. It is in this desert that I find the living waters and learn the lessons of true love. Every word of yours finds an echo in me (Wu, 12/26/62, first letter).

For, indeed, true words will always find their home in a true heart, which is their natural resting place.

To my dad, Tom's philosophy of solitude was inseparable from the desert experience of Christ Himself that we find in Luke 5:14-16. He tells Tom that when he was translating the New Testament, he had not yet had true insight into the experience of the desert and that he had imagined the desert at that time more as an external milieu than as

spiritual reality and solace. After reading Tom's "Philosophy of Solitude,"—which he found an extraordinary piece of writing—he had finally been awakened to its true sense. As he says,

St. Luke did not say that in the daytime (Christ) was curing and preaching, but He retired into the desert at night. Even when engaged in curing and preaching.... He was always in the desert and in prayer (Wu, 12/26/62, second letter).

In the previous missive, initially reacting to the same essay (which was later included in *Disputed Questions*), he gives us a crucial insight into Tom's mind, likening it to a crystal in its transparent clarity,

. . . and in the wonderful fact that every unit of it possesses the characteristic features of the whole. And is this not how the Creator Himself works? There is no atom which does not reproduce more or less faithfully the structure of the solar system! This essay on solitude is exactly what Chuang Tzu in his mature years was trying to say (Wu, 12/26/62, first letter).

So that indeed Tom's magnificent achievement in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* came as no real surprise to "the old child," only that it was even better than he had expected it to be. It did not signify a new direction but instead a deepening of a spirituality which had become more in tune with the commonplace.

Tom's reaction to the older man's enthusiasm for the essay also gives us an insight into the Mertonian heart and into what he truly cherished in the midst of all his activities: "I am glad you liked (it). It is one of the things I have most wanted to say, perhaps the only thing I have said that needed to be said" (Merton, 12/20/62).

He had begun the same letter in a humorous vein by saying that he had put aside all other letters to answer because the power of Chuang Tzu and Tao was able to "get action out of one buried in the inertia of too much activity," a dilemma that more than anyone else he realized he had fallen into and from which he was sometimes finding it very difficult to extract himself. He continues: "The very name of Chuang Tzu restores me to sanity, at least momentarily. You deserve the fruits of the lucid moment." Both without question recognized the paradoxical truth of the "usefulness of the useless" which marked the writings of the great Taoists and, obviously, of all mystics as well.



In their friendship, Chuang Tzu seemed to have served as a harbinger of Tao in reminding each of The importance of not being earnest, of practicing the Taoistic wu wei or "non-action," and of allowing God or Tao to play as they will, of abandoning as far as possible man's fruitless ways, and that if there is a way to be followed, then it should be to follow "the little way" of a Thérèse or Lao Tzu. Each letter indeed may be considered as a summoning to return to what Ralph Waldo Emerson had called "the aboriginal self," an echoing and reechoing of this one theme essential to living the way of Christian perfection.<sup>13</sup>

Below, in an inspired pre-Christmas letter, Tom exhibits not only his great universality of spirit but the subtle link between two apparently diverse traditions which he was to find wholly/holy compatible. He speaks of "an essential element" in Christianity or "the way back to our child-mind" which our desensitized minds have somehow eclipsed. His words deserve to be quoted at length:

Insanity. Anything but (Chuang Tzu's) quiet debunking view is plain insanity. Even within the framework of the Gospel message there is too much temptation to forget what Jesus Himself wanted at every step. One thing is necessary. Christianity . . . has become a complex and multifarious thing. It takes Chuang Tzu to remind us of an essential element in the Gospel which we have simply "tuned out" with all our wretched concerns. The whole Sermon on the Mount, for instance.

And the Discourse at the Last Supper. Even the central message of the Cross and the Resurrection. (Merton, 12/20/62)

And, as Christmas was drawing near, he ends with a touching stroke:

And the crib full of straw, in which the Lord of the world laughs and says, 'You should worry!' . . . every blessing in this holy season when the animals and holy shepherds show us the way back to our child mind and to Him in Whom is hidden our original face before we are born (My emphasis). Be of good cheer. They cannot silence either Chuang Tzu or this

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Complete Writings*. (NY: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1968). p. 12. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Emerson*.

Child, in China or anywhere. They will be heard in the middle of the night saying nothing and everybody will come to their senses.

This is a Christian satori of a mighty magnitude if ever there was one. In fact, "satorical"—not satirical—insights abound in many exchanges.

In a second letter which he wrote on the same day (12/26/62) upon receiving one from Tom, my dad continues with the desert theme in which he attempts to fathom the mysterious logic of their friendship:

If the Lord had not led each of us into this wonderful desert how could we meet and take delight in each other? The Lord has whispered to me, "Seek first the desert, and everything else, including the friendship of my modern Prophet Thomas Merton will be added on to you."

He adds to this the notion of "spiritual drunkenness" and suggests that only in the desert experience does one become "filled to the throat by the intoxicating Spirit of Life," saying that though Tom had "drunk like a whale," the fault had not been his. Rather, he says playfully,

. . . the "mad" Lord . . . in His unreasonable hospitality has urged you (to) "Bottom up" too many times. Look at me, Father. I am supposed to be a lawyer, and a lawyer is supposed to be as sober as a Scotsman; even I have not been able to resist the overwhelming hospitality of our Divine Host. In your case, Father, the resistance is almost nil (Wu, 12/26/62, second letter).

He goes on to call Tom a "dead-drunk man...so filled with wine that even your exhalation has an intoxicating effect." If that is the effect of the desert, who indeed could resist its open-ended invitation!

In the 1950's, in such books as *Beyond East and West* and *The Interior Carmel*, my dad had spoken lovingly of the cloister. In fact, he had often referred to the world as a cloister. This transition, from the image of the cloister to that of the desert, it seems to me, was for him a natural spiritual progression. While the image of the cloister suggests a comforting, warm womb, the desert evokes images of

nakedness, emptiness and void, solitude, and space without walls. It is at the same time fearful and unconditioned and suggests a merciless stripping away of all human crutches and amenities that prevent us from looking at ourselves truly as ourselves, that is, as Tom would say, as void.

However, the gradual turning toward the desert, natural as spiritual progression, must nonetheless have been difficult to someone who was by nature gregarious, had been lovingly pampered by his mother and later by my mother, had fathered thirteen children, and was fearful of loneliness—as even the letters attest. Yet, this entering into ever greater solitude and its inevitable dark night—which, in fact, he had so brilliantly written of in *The Interior Carmel*—was an experience he knew as a gift of God and one that he was at the time *existentially* beginning to face.

The death of my mother was a painful earthly separation from which he never fully recovered and stirred up in him an ever greater thirst for God and Heaven. His bouts with loneliness, even after his second marriage, lasted over a quarter of a century until his own passing in February, 1986.

Tom's friendship was perhaps the greatest consolation of his life during the sixties, and the compliments and seemingly pious-sounding platitudes were wholly consistent with the spontaneous and sincere style of the man. From a spiritual point of view, the devil became a frighteningly living reality, and he instinctively knew that the devil would more relentlessly than ever try to claim his soul. On several occasions in Taiwan, I recall his saying to me with great trepidation, "The devil is doing everything in his power to trap me!" To converts, the reality of Satan must be far more stark than to ordinary Catholics.

When Tom wrote on July 31, 1961, that "*The Interior Carmel* is being read in the evening chapter, to the satisfaction of all," my dad naturally expressed his gratefulness to Abbot James Fox for having introduced his "humble book". But he added immediately,

Father Louis, one of the greatest pains in life is to see the yawning gulf between what one writes and what one has attained. May the Lord turn this stone into a living child of His! What a consolation it is that what is impossible with man is yet possible with God! (Wu, 8/4/61).

Although Tom in his letters rarely expressed himself so personally and revealingly, no doubt, he too, being a fellow convert,

found echoes of this sentiment in himself. Given the extreme sensitivity of soul that was my father—a quality which, had he not been endowed with the intellectual gifts and depth of compassion for both his fellow men and even for himself, would have placed him clearly in danger of that spiritual malady of over-scrupulosity, but without which he probably could not have become a Catholic—it should not surprise us that he underwent wide swings of the spiritual pendulum.

Having been in his own eyes a "sick soul" saved by a merciful God, he was therefore always aware of the possible dangers of returning to his former days before the shedding of his "old skin," and the memories of the old days haunted him relentlessly—particularly in his old age. With this in mind, it is both touching and revealing to read, and well for us to remember, the following observations that Dom John-Eudes Bamberger makes about Tom. This simple truth tends to be lost on us in all the fuss over Tom's countless activities:

He truly thought of himself as a sinner who had been sought out and forgiven by God . . . He had been an outcast, but was now united with the Lord. He had been alienated and knew the anguish and desolation of spirit associated with the alienation that is sin; and now he was reconciled and knew the pardon of love.<sup>14</sup>

My father's sense of joy and piety—"that nothing worse can happen"—was certainly based on a similar religious intuition and experience. The so-called "healthy soul" has absolutely no need for God. Yet, despite the joy of forgiveness and God's mercy, the day-to-day temptations of living—whether as cloistered monk or active layman—was very real to both. In his autobiographical "Confessions," my dad speaks of his newly-found simplicity and contrasts it with that of St. Peter. Tom doubtlessly would have appreciated the difference as well, for I think my dad could have spoken for both when he said,

My naiveté is post-sophistication, whereas Peter's was primordial. I have become simple in the same way that Mary Magdalene became by her contact with Christ; whereas Peter's simplicity was on a par with the Virginity of Our Lady. (BEW, p. 310)

14. John-Eudes Bamberger. "Thomas Merton, Our Brother", *Cistercian Studies*, vol. XIII, 1978:4, pp. 390-395.

Tom's friendship and letters served as a crucial ballast in keeping my father both intellectually and spiritually on an even keel during the sixties. Throughout, we see Tom's quiet encouragement which was regarded by the older man-child as a perpetual source of joy and consolation. As it turned out, they proved to be one of the richest periods of my dad's life, being fruitful in every way, deepening him both intellectually and personally, and confirming in him those intuitions and insights into Asian thought that he had long been entertaining; in his earlier life and works but which reached a natural fruition and blossoming and a simplicity and beauty of expression in such books as *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, a collection of essays *The Golden Age of Zen*.

These works explore the most fertile mystical and contemplative traditions of China and delve into some comparative studies that can only be characterized as intellectually daring, even heroic. This is particularly true of his essay comparing the thought of Thérèse of Lisieux and Lao Tzu which, as far as I know, remains virgin ground—with the exception of his own studies. Not unlike the spirit that we might find in the *Confucian Analects* itself, it is the sheer beauty of the author's personality that holds all the seemingly contradictory elements together, being so thoroughly subjective that its profound subjectivity breaks new ground and enters into a deeper objectivity that is wholly fresh and revolutionary. That "new ground," in fact, is nothing else but the Desert. The body of those writings together with Tom's own efforts may one day very well form the basic structure and perhaps even substance of a much needed and more universal Catholicism of the future.

During this period, he seems to have written everything with a sureness of touch and nimbleness of style that can only be indicative of a remarkably mature spirituality which he had spent a lifetime cultivating and which was finally coming home to roost. On a personal plane, without this maturity, he could hardly have withstood the trials that plagued him during the last two decades of his life.

The following exchange is a touching example of the way Tom encouraged my dad. The latter had been somewhat dragging his feet on the Zen book, and Tom had thought that, perhaps, this had partly been his fault because of his tardiness in writing back:

Where are the other chapters of your Zen book? I hope you are not going to give up because I take so long to answer. I do not promise to be more prompt but I would like to keep

up with you, even though I may be incorrigible about responding, the wrong kind of wu wei (Merton, 11/11/65).

To which my father replies, revealing both a weakness and a need for good friends:

. . . yours of November 11 gives me such a tremendous stimulus. Between true friends the Lord Himself serves as the Postman. It is true that with me there is a tendency to give up when there is no urge from a friend.

And adds,

But I have found that if it is something that He really wants done, He inevitably inspires the proper friend to goad me on. (Wu, 11/16/65)

The above exchange reveals not only my father's simplicity of faith but also the childlike attitude and deep personal and trusting relationship that his entrance into the Catholic faith had taught him to master so well. It was no wonder, then, that Tom, in an entry dated June 26, 1962 in his yet-to-be-published *Restricted Journal*, speaks of my dad's "great, simple spirituality" following their one and only meeting.<sup>15</sup> Their warm friendship was mutually beneficial in many unsuspected ways.

### Part III

Mei Teng as Divine Command:  
"What's in a Name, Buddy Boy?"

On December 17, 1965 (at a time when Tom was becoming increasingly more involved in social and political issues, and there was talk even of his leaving Gethsemani), my dad sent him a poem in Chinese brush. In the enclosed letter, he gave Tom a Chinese name—Mei Teng—to which the latter happily responded:

15. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 382.

. . . it was moving to be "baptized" in Chinese with a name I must live up to. After all, a name indicates a divine demand. Hence I must be Mei Teng, a silent lamp, not a sputtering one (Merton, 2/28/65).

He then expressed the wish that he could "reply in kind, calligraphy and all," but writes instead what I will quote in length due to its sheer poetic beauty:

. . . in considerable joy, I resort again to the green tea, and in fact the kettle is whistling by the fire right at my elbow, and the sun is rising over the completely silver landscape. Instead of putting all this into a poem, I will let it be its own poem. The silent steam will rise from the teacup and make an ideogram for you. Maybe sometime I will add a poem to it as an exclamation point of my own. But are such exclamation points needed? (Merton, 12/28/65).

In the same letter, Tom gives us a hint as to the extent of his identification with and compassion for Asia, showing the depth of feeling he had for her:

I have been in the woods just staying quiet. And since the earth is one I think I have plenty of Asia under my feet. The thing is to recognize it. This is the only real contribution I have to make to a tormented political situation. Instead of fighting Asia to be it. And stubbornly, too.

Indeed, my dad recognized in his cloistered buddy a compassion that was as deep as it was boundless. The lines below are surely some of the most profound and spiritual in his letters to Tom:

Your way (of compassion) . . . is (to) let the Lord beat your heart into a pulp, so that it is no longer your heart but the Heart of God with its all-embracing Compassion . . . The beautiful thing about you, Father, is that your heart is as great as your mind. Thus, in your love and knowledge are united organically. Herein lies your profound significance for this great age of synthesis of East and West (Wu, 9/6/66).

The part of Merton dad loved most and found most attractive was doubtlessly his contemplative side. In fact, among the many religious with whom he was friends and religious orders with which he had some affiliation, the ones he gave his most attention to were those associated with the contemplative orders. This is not hard to understand, for the instrument of his own conversion was The Little Flower. Moreover, the renowned Spanish Carmelites and mystics, St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross were also two of his most cherished saints, as they were for Tom as well.

To say that he had a profound spiritual love affair with the Saint of Lisieux would be an understatement, for his first explicit Catholic writing was a long essay entitled, "The Science of Love, a Study in the Teachings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux" (Collected in *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, St. John's University Press). Being a contemplative himself, he was convinced that there was no greater religious vocation than the cloistered orders. Like Tom, he saw the contemplative vocation both as an unimaginable privilege and calling into the very solitude and poverty of Christ and as a radical and uncompromising reminder of the true end of man. To my dad, living very actively in the world, there was ironically nothing more real nor authentic than this solitude of the desert. And Tom surely had done much through his writings is to foster this love in him.

That is why giving Tom the name Mei Teng, "Silent Lamp," he might have been calling Tom's own bluff with regard to the priceless value the latter had placed on the "usefulness of the useless" which the study of Lao-Chuang had reenforced in him. This was the import he placed on the grandeur of the Cistercian vocation in general and Tom's own privileged position as a monk. In a letter he sent to *Cistercian Studies* ten years after Tom's death, he reflected:

In those days there was a widespread rumor about the possibility of his change of vocation. I did not believe it, but still the rumor was persistent. I thought it would be a great pity if the rumor were true. To me, the Cistercian was a beautiful vocation. It certainly has a vital function to perform in this *restless and noisy world*.<sup>16</sup>

Then he goes on to say what very well may reflect the heart of John Wu himself :

16. John C.H. Wu, "Letter," *Cistercian Studies*, vol. XIV, 1979:3, pp. 305-306. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Letter*.

The more cloistered one remains, the more (those in) the world would be attracted to him. On the other hand, the more you desire to go out into the world so as to meet it halfway, the more the salt is likely to lose its flavor. Anyway, these thoughts were in the back of my mind when I hit upon "Mei Teng"—the Silent Lamp (Letter, p. 306).

In the Lao Tzu Classic, there is a wonderful passage which perfectly accords with my father's sentiments:

Without going out of your door,  
You can know the ways of the world.  
Without peeping through your window,  
You can see the Way of Heaven.  
The farther you go,  
The less you know.

Thus, the Sage knows without traveling,  
Sees without looking,  
And achieves without ado  
(*Tao Teh Ching*, Chapter 47).

Aelred Graham, writing on Zen, says in a perceptively simple way: "To live on the spot where one is is to live the spirit of Zen" (*Zen Catholicism*, p. 50). In casual conversations regarding Tom in the midsixties, my dad, thinking of those rumors, and Tom's great desire to journey to the East, would say to me with a sigh, "Ah, Father Louis has everything he would ever need being where he is!"

Yet, at the same time, he was wise enough to understand that Tom's restlessness stemmed from a desire to experience deeper and more existentially the oneness of man, that his hidden motivation lay in his compassionate heart, and that his "turning to the world" was rooted solidly on divine love or, as Tom himself says, "in that wonderful spirit of acceptance" (Merton, 11/11/65) that Christ Himself had shown to the world. For, without that Understanding that is beyond understanding, one's turning would be a mere return to that untransfigured and willful self anchored only on the empirical ego.

In friendships, my dad rarely advised, let alone made demands. He seemed to have relied primarily on spontaneity and naturalness and faith in God, and, in this sense, he was overwhelmingly Taoistic rather than Confucian. Even as a father, at least in my case, he practiced

great patience and allowed me to come to decisions on my own and would thereafter—whether he agreed with the decision or not—give as much support as possible. He was sensible enough to understand that there was no such thing as an absolutely objectively correct decision, and that once a decision was made—no matter how unpromising it may appear—there were always ways to profit *personally* from it.

More than most, I think, he knew how much the Asian journey profited Tom and he thereafter never speculated as to the wisdom of Tom's decision once he had made it. Moreover, when Tom wrote that following the Bangkok conference he would be off to Taipei to visit him, my dad was, in his own words, "agog for the coming reunion." This was simply another indication of his childlike heart at work and only God knows how much he loved Tom and cherished their friendship.

#### Part IV

The Ordinary is the Extraordinary:  
"How ordinary could Christ be?"

It is truly remarkable to see how consistent a logic both my father's life and writings courted through the years; he had come upon his basic intuitions early in life and, to my mind, even his conversion—without question made possible finally only through a leap of faith, of course—was a divine crowning of natural impulses that had already been carved deep in his heart. The only "newness" one spots is an ever-enriching tonality in his spirituality which, similar to Tom, led him into orbits of compassion and piety that probably neither suspected existed and for which they were obviously tremendously grateful to God.

Upon rereading *Seeds of Contemplation*—which he had first read in Rome in 1949 and which he always regarded as his personal favorite among Merton's books—my dad early in the correspondence wrote of the similarity of thought he saw between Tom and the Taoist masters. Commenting on Tom's line, "The Holy Spirit is sent from moment to moment into my soul" (*Seeds*, p. 96), he concludes that it was "exactly what Chuang Tzu would have written had he been a Christian" (Wu, 4/7/61). As I have already mentioned above, for my dad, there was really very little difference between the Holy Spirit and the Tao, for the mode of function of the Tao was just as free and unpredictable and mysterious as the Holy Spirit Itself. And just as the Tao was everywhere and nowhere, so, too, was the Holy Spirit. One

would have to indulge in splitting of fine hairs to find differences as far as he was concerned.

Nothing was more certain than his belief that God was absolutely free to do what He wills to do "from moment to moment" and that, therefore, the fruitfulness of one's spirituality depends also on the extent to which we are open to this Will. The following exchange in the summer of 1966 is clearly indicative of this trust.

Tom had expressed some uneasiness over my dad being in Taipei and doing a government-sponsored project—the writing of the official biography of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic. Perhaps Tom felt that the Taipei government would be using my dad to further its own political cause. He said:

I cannot convince myself that (everything there is) wonderful, but I'm afraid we all live in strange situations these days, in which nothing quite makes perfect sense. If it did we would all drop dead from shock (Merton, 7/11/66).

My dad who had at first himself dreaded the prospects of this project (see Wu, 11/19/65) allayed Tom's worries, in the process revealing a pious heart and the strong conviction that even a "secular" task had eternal value:

My friends in America tend to imagine that I might not feel at home so far away. But this is an illusion. In fact, the Holy Spirit stirs where He pleases, and He seems to be very active in me and around me (Wu, 7/18/66).

But a year later, in a letter to me, Tom continued to express his concern in no uncertain terms, though the last line clearly indicates a penetration into a deeper understanding of the "dilemma":

I am worried about your father. I haven't heard from him, and I think he must be suffering a bit, perhaps in ways he himself does not understand. I must write to him, just to show a sign of life . . . Anyway, let's pray for him. I really do not envy his position at all. I think the people he is with are hopelessly wrong in many ways, yet I can see where he would feel he had to go along with them, and I am sure he is not totally at peace with it. I admire his fidelity and understand his silence, and in the long run I know his integrity is the kind that

matters, especially because it is the kind you cannot easily explain (Merton to John Wu, Jr., 6/9/67).

At that stage of his spiritual development, my father seemed able to divine the signs well and to assign proper values to ordinary things and events. Once, as though carried away with delight, he exclaimed, "O Father Louis, how happy we are! The Lord has enabled us to live unconditionally in this very much conditioned world" (Wu, 4/7/67), evoking, of course, what is indispensable to all mysticisms, but also an attitude of perceiving life which had first entered his conscious mind some forty years before in a bit of down-to-earth advice that an old jurist had given to a young budding Chinese legal expert:

If you are going to study law I shouldn't spend more time on the generalities. After such interests as have occupied you, details are apt to be sordid and uninteresting, but a horse must eat hay as well as oats and it is in transfiguring details that a man shows his power. I can't help believing that you will enrich yourself more intellectually by studying the practical aspects of the law than by attempting to see it *sub specie aeternitatis* (Holmes to Wu, 7/26/23).<sup>17</sup>

Forty-two years later, my dad was to say to Tom, in way of a hint,

. . . just because life is a great play, we must play seriously, keeping to our roles and identifying ourselves, as you have done (Wu, 2/5/65).

Mundane as Holmes' advice may appear, it helped to transfigure my dad's perception of life, and in an ironic sense brought him back home to his own native turf: the Chinese sense of beauty for the commonplace. Even the writing of the official biography of Dr. Sun—a task so far removed from his then present interests in Zen and other studies—could find a significance for him in the larger scheme of things. Unexpectedly, Holmes the great dissenter, skeptic and, perhaps, agnostic, played a crucial role in enkindling my father's

17. John C.H. Wu, Unpublished Letters to and from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1921-1933, Harvard University Library, Cambridge, MA.

religious consciousness and put him on the *mystical* path! How ironic things work indeed.

When Tom complained that he had to return to "my nonsense," that is, activities that kept him away from Chuang Tzu, my dad substituted the Holmesian image of "drudgery" with a less genteel one of his own. But, after all, Holmes was a Victorian figure and my dad, a child of Tao, not much given to ceremony:

It is precisely this kind of nonsense, Father, that serves as the necessary manure for the flowers of your spirituality True, sometimes the manure is a bit too concentrated; but so much the better for the fragrance of the flower. However, if I persist in this line of thinking, I may land ultimately in cynicism under the delusion that I was being holy (Wu, 12/26/62, second letter).

Elsewhere, taking up the theme of the ultimate identification of transcendence and immanence, he had written comparing the "full-fledged humanism" of Justice Holmes with Neo-Confucianism: "The ordinary duties of life (acquire) a transcendental dimension, and are charged with a mystical significance."<sup>18</sup>

Intellectual and spiritual maturity brought my dad to an awareness in all writers, East and West, past and present, of that universal and timeless element in their thought. What he considered universal and timeless were thoughts—perhaps what Jacques Maritain had called "prephilosophical"—that hark back to the dawning of history and are no longer a very relevant part of our all-too-conscious present. This may indeed be why, in researching his book on Zen, he finally concluded that Zen was "history-less" (Wu, 11/16/65). These truths are not lost to us in the sense that they are "of the past" and, therefore, irretrievable, but rather have entered so deeply into our Unconscious that we often—living so much in consciousness and so dominated by our empirical ego—need to be jolted from our present spiritual and moral slumber in order to have a taste of that which, in fact, is the deepest and truest part of the self, what Tom had called the *void* (see Merton, 1/31/65), which burst forth only when all human resources are exhausted and when we are driven to "our wits' end" (Wu, 8/14/65) and we finally come to rest on and

18. Mattias Christian. "Shakespeare, O.W. Holmes and Thérèse of Lisieux as Taoists: a Comparison of Three Papers of John C.H. Wu," unpublished paper. p. 12. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Christian*.

accept that which is unnameable and boundless. What both of them felt was "an indescribable homesickness for a lost Age of Innocence and Simplicity" (Christian, p. 15).

The life of the mystic is first and foremost a deep and unabated craving to become reunited with those forces that lie in the subterranean regions of the human soul. This craving and the similarity in the mode of thinking unites our two contemporary Taoists with the ancient Chinese Taoist Masters. Although Tom was to claim modestly that he "knew nothing about Chuang Tzu" (Merton, 7/31/61), my dad was wholly aware that Tom's basic mystical orientation coupled with his natural earthiness made them blood brothers. More significantly, to my father, Tom in fact not only understood the great Taoist sage but had gone *beyond* him as well. He writes:

Yours is an Integral Humanism, with Humanity of the Divine Logos for its scope and depth. Since the apex of your Pyramid is in Heaven, you could not be otherwise than universal (Wu, 12/26/62, second letter).

Increasingly in his later writings, Tom gave the Spirit a more human and compassionate voice and, in so doing, we, hearing that voice, find a rich resonance of it in our own hearts which lifts us into the Heart of the Spirit Itself. He taught us to love everything in its *radical* immanence, for he knew that in that root lay the heart of Transcendence. To the Taoist, this is none other than "the return," for to go far is, indeed, to return. Perhaps, this is what happened to Tom on his Asian journey, though I think we ought not view this return in terms of any particular event but as a continuous feast that occurred throughout his monastic life and which took on as many faces and features as there were manifestations of this.

Even as regards the much-written-about Polonnaruwa experience, I often wonder if we have not placed too great a significance on it. If we read Tom's books with that "sound eye,"<sup>19</sup> there are countless so-called peak experiences either jumping or dancing off the pages or encased in pregnant silences. I think it is typically Western to dramatize events by ordering things in terms of importance. Tom would agree that where the Spirit stirs, it stirs in *all* its fullness. Often, beautiful words may very well do great harm by giving the

19. Jean Leclercq. "Merton and the East," *Cistercian Studies*, vol. XIII, 1978:4, pp. 309-317. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Leclercq*.

illusion of having captured what is fundamentally unfathomable and imageless. Like Zen, why not leave Tom “history-less” as well?

On October 11, 1961, Tom wrote of the Chuang Tzu project, and one even senses a slight frustration. My father offered an interesting and encouraging answer without which, perhaps, Tom might have dropped the project altogether:

Here, Father, you are wrong, that is, so far as mystical writings are concerned. The words (Chuang Tzu) used are capable of so many interpretations that one is easily confused (Wu, 10/21/62).

Then he adds with great insight on a theme which Tom himself would later pick up on in the Introduction to his *Chuang Tzu*:

My theory is that all genuine mystics feel and see the same things which are no-things, Chuang Tzu is one, and you, Father, are one. The same Living Tao that taught him (rather vaguely) is revealing himself to you every day afresh. In His lights you see its lights (Wu, 10/21/62).

In the next letter, in his enthusiasm for *The New Man*, which he calls a “living synthesis of East and West,” he says:

. . . You read *contemplatively*. I mean you absorb everything you read because it only serves to confirm your own experience and insight. That is why much learning has not made you a pedant (Wu, 11/28/61).

Then, affectingly, almost gushingly:

Father, I honestly think you are (a) major prophet of this age. You need not bother about improving your knowledge of Chinese. You *are* Chinese, because you are universal.

In reply to my dad’s “You *are* Chinese,” Tom wrote the following which gives us a wonderfully clear capsulization of the nature of mysticism his ever-evolving spirituality was heading toward:

Maybe you’re right . . . because (reading Chinese things) is just what makes me feel most happy and most at home. I do not know whether or not I am always happy with mystical

writings that are completely out of touch with ordinary life. On the contrary, it seems that mysticism flourishes most purely right in the middle of the ordinary. And such mysticism, in order to flourish, must be quite prompt to renounce all apparent claim to be mystical at all . . . I know you agree, for this is what St. Thérèse so well saw (Merton, 12/21/61).

Nothing in the letters is more obvious than that both men were heading toward a similar direction, in particular, into an experiential encounter with Zen Buddhism. As divergent as their careers were—and it is precisely this great divergence in their life and career roles that make their encounter in the desert all the more genuine for lack of purposeful planning—their universal sense of piety, their compassion for all beings, their curiosity for all genuine religious and philosophical insights and, finally, their tremendous feeling of awe for the Incarnation as an irreversible universal phenomenon all contributed to making such a journey inevitable. To both, the journey was, of course, of a deeply interior nature, the proper understanding of which would one day pave the way for a greater sense of universality in the Christian Church. To my dad, the rekindling and renewal of Chinese studies was likened to the presentation of the Gifts of the Magi to the Baby Jesus who would sanctify them and give them a proper place in the ineffable scheme of His Wisdom.

There was nothing that made them more inseparable intellectually and spiritually than the implicit belief that Christ was the only possible link between East and West, and Zen—with its emphasis of seeing the most extraordinary in the most ordinary—was not only, on the one hand, a perfect reconciliation of Taoist transcendentalism and Confucian humanism, but also an ideal vehicle for a deeper and broader understanding of the Mystery of the Incarnation itself. The vital impulses inherent in this simple and natural mysticism was, to them, totally compatible with the deepest impulses of Christianity. More and more, they saw the Incarnation as that sacred thread through which all so-called secular knowledge would find its proper place, where “all bits of knowledge become welcome fuel to the fire” (Wu, 3/20/61), and where, in fact, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are found to be illusory, entertained only as an academic game and only as something real because of our ignorance and failure to see. In short, the thrust of their lives and writings give simple yet profound witness to the fact that Christ demands from us



far more compassion and understanding than what we have up to now been able to summon forth, so that true Christocentrism is necessarily universal and a continually evolving spiritual reality.

As a Chinese Catholic deeply nurtured in its native religions, my dad insightfully observed that "Only when we are united with the Word Incarnate can we be full-fledged Confucianists and thoroughgoing Taoists at the same time" (Wu, 3/20/61), for he knew well that even the most sober and mundane of our actions and words spring not of itself but from the Spring of Love Who "links up the supreme goodness in the act of Incarnation with all actions, great and small" (Wu, 1/2/67).

## Part V

### Piety and Compassion of the Ordinary Heart

#### a. "Stretching the Mystical Body"

An ever-deepening piety and compassion constituted the leitmotif of their lives. This was coupled with a consciously-cultivated, ever-expanding intellectual canvas in which no genuine ideas were alien to their natures and the belief that the most mundane of ideas issue forth from and would therefore find their ultimate Home in the bosom of Christ. Don Jean Leclercq said that Tom distrusted "an intellectual growth which would develop outside the confines of a contemplative life" (Leclercq). This was certainly true of my dad as well. Moreover, theirs was the sort of piety not only reflected in their religious practices but, more significantly, in their deep and abiding sense of gratitude to God.

Up until the last years of his life when physically it became too great a burden to do so, my dad was a daily communicant. He would often say that attending daily Mass gave him the chance to offer all his activities and joys and sorrows for that day to God. With regard to the notion of gratitude, it took on an interesting cultural twist which he expressed in this way:

. . . in the Chinese soul one quality stands out above others, and that is the sense of gratitude (which is what) "ancestor-worship" is based upon . . . This feeling of gratitude can easily be transferred to its proper place, that is, in our relations with God . . . When a Chinese is converted, it is but

natural that gratitude should constitute the dominant note of his spirituality (*Beyond East and West*, p. 34-6).

He then goes on to confess in his typically simple and Wuesque manner that reveals without much fuss his total acceptance of the hidden workings of the Divine Creator as well as his own spiritual psychology:

My gratitude towards God has something of a wholeness about it which does not admit of analysis. Furthermore, it is a growing process; for the more I know of the ways of His loving Providence, the more I admire Him, and the more grateful I feel. Even in the days of greatest trials I have had an implicit confidence in His infinite Love and Wisdom. I may not know His purpose in sending the crosses; but *He knows what He is doing, and that is enough for me.* (my emphasis) I have often been disturbed but never mystified. I am too mystical to be mystified (*BEW*, p. 346-347).

Tom's piety certainly ran as deep as my dad's though its manifestations may sometimes have taken some rather whimsical turns. As contemplatives, both sought and found the presence of God everywhere, and the boldness of Tom's ventures of course shocked not only the censors and his readers but members of his own religious community as well.

When my bride and I visited Tom at Gethsemani around June 19-20, 1968, as the three of us were walking from the main gate to my Chevy-2 which would take us to the hermitage, we ran into Father Raymond Flanagan. Tom introduced the Cistercian writer to us, we chatted casually for a short while and, as we turned to leave, the older man—I think more in jest and with an impish smile—said in earshot of some other visitors, "Tom, stay in the Church!" to which Tom responded with a grunt and groan and turned away quickly. My immediate reaction, if my memory serves me right, was surprise at the way Tom had reacted. After all, I had just met him five minutes previous and expected him to be a pious and docile monk!

In the summer of 1990 on my one-day visit to Gethsemani, I had the privilege of talking to Brother Harold while he was on kitchen duty. The latter told me that Father Raymond who had passed away earlier on June 3 had had a rather "foul mouth" (Brother Harold's words!) and had been cussing away to the very end until he had gone

into a coma. In view of this new disclosure and in looking back at those honeymoon days with Tom, I think now Tom should have been happy that he was not hit by a verbal fusillade of a more creative nature from this crusty old Irish-American monk who was already a well-known writer before Tom had made his name. Nonetheless, it thrills me to know that members of cloistered orders are such robust men able to combine such earthiness with piety. I certainly found Tom to be such.

I write the above not to reveal a side of Tom that few of us—at least in those days—suspected but rather, perhaps, ironically, to show the profound depth of a piety that had in the last decade of his rich life put on the face of compassion and literally compelled him to explore regions of human knowledge and culture far beyond the scope to where others in his vocation and Church had not dared to venture forth. And it was to his great merit that he had the courage to live out this complete life of piety both exteriorly and interiorly, which, from the Chinese point of view, was a perfect blending of Confucian and Taoist elements.

He was, I think, far more faithful to his calling than many of us—particularly on the outside—could have imagined. From the perspective of a deeper and broader contemporary piety necessitated by a shrinking but far more dangerous world, his constant craving for knowledge, experience and understanding was not so much Faustian as it was an unceasing effort to retrieve all the special gifts to humanity for sanctification in the divine will. Moreover, Tom was forever seeking, experientially, deeper levels of the self, and this “going towards” was in fact nothing other than a “returning home.” From the very beginning, exploration of the self had long become second nature to him. In time, of course, it had become impossible to separate Tom’s efforts to understand the true workings of the Holy Spirit in retrieving all “secular” knowledge for itself from this profound craving to return to his True Home. Despite his penchant for discursive thinking, he nonetheless was wise enough to understand the futility of trying to use words in describing a reality which, as my dad had written, “does not admit of analysis.”

After reading the essay, “Contemplation and Ecumenism,” my dad wrote back these glowing words which put in a nutshell the Mertonian notion of *catholicity* and which is worth quoting at length:

Father, you were dancing over a precipice, yet, as I watch you dance, you make me feel that you are dancing on a spacious flat ground. This is what I call *catholicity*! I imagine that this is the way St. Thomas would write if he were living in this age.

The creative fire is there; yet I can see no smoke! You have stretched the Mystical Body as far as anyone can, yet this stretching, I feel, does no more than register the necessary growth toward the full stature of Christ. So it has the spontaneity of the inevitable. Oh the beauty of the Golden Mean, when it is authentic and not a cover for mediocrity! (Wu, 8/14/65).

Just as my dad’s writing can be viewed as a vehicle in bringing the universal Church to Asia, conversely Tom exploded the provincialism which he felt had begun to corrode its universal texture and believed that the healthiest cure for this unsettling narrowing was to find the universal and compassionate Christ everywhere. And that is one reason he so willingly consented to undergoing an *emptying* process of such dramatic proportions. He sensed vestiges of the old skin in himself in terms of his having neglected the old hallowed traditions of the East, and his emptying took the form of a going towards these traditions with the naivete and simplicity of a child’s heart and, consequently, with a great gusto.

While a case may be made that Tom’s entire life was a search for self-discovery, this concern, I believe, was subordinate to the more primary one of exploring areas of human knowledge and experience that were formerly considered ecclesiastically out-of-bounds and taboo. Both he and my dad intuitively knew the joy of self-discovery and of truth and the province of truth for the contemporary Church had to go beyond the presumptuous and antiquated categories of pagan and Christian, for God in His infinite mercy—and this appears to be the key to the understanding of the duality of their piety and compassion—would not allow even one person, let alone one entire culture and tradition, to go totally adrift. And can we not say that the quality of this piety is most highly characteristic of Catholic converts whose salvation, they feel, is the resulting gift of an absolutely merciful God? Hence the gratitude and the often magnificent response to this extraordinary gift.

My dad would often say that saints were different from ordinary people because they were “too pious to be pietistic and too moral to be moralistic.” This was absolutely true of Tom. His deeply-seated piety simply made him acknowledge truth wherever he found it. He had a wonderful sensitivity for the authentic, and it is both liberating and heartwarming for an Asian to see the natural way he approached her wise men. Tom came to them as unaffectedly and

artlessly as my dad had earlier been drawn to the Christian mystics. In such men and women, they had joyfully found their alter egos who helped to confirm in them the oneness and unity of life.

In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Tom gave his reasons for liking the Taoist sage in an almost matter-of-fact manner:

I simply like Chuang Tzu because he is what he is . . . He is far too great to need any apologies from me. If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averroës (both of them certainly a long way farther from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was! ), and if Teilhard de Chardin could make copious use of Marx and Engels in his synthesis, I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shares the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person (pp. 10-11).

Whenever I read the above, I imagine Chuang Tzu standing at a doorway alongside not Lao Tzu, the author of the Taoist classic, *Tao Teh Ching*, but someone like Eldridge Cleaver, and in chorus with the latter, smiling and saying enthusiastically, "Welcome Brother Merton!"<sup>20</sup> This is the sort of compassion that cuts through races and cultures, for it is the simple yet profound acknowledgement that we are indeed all brothers if we but look into our hearts and see the simple overriding humanity fragily residing there. My dad, being simple of heart himself, recognized Tom's greatness of heart, and both he and Tom would have appreciated the words of the Russian poet, Samuel Marshak, who said, "I wish for you throughout your life that your heart be intelligent and your brain be kind," for surely these words were existentially present in abundance in everything they wrote and did.

The depth and nature of the piety and compassion to which Tom had arrived in the last decade of his life are clearly indicated in his "Preface" to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. There he says what had changed most in his decision to secede from the world since the publication of his autobiography was "the attitude and assumptions behind this decision." The original decision to renounce

20. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*. (NY: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1968). In this book, Cleaver marvels at the degree of insight and compassion that Merton exhibited in writing about the travails of the blacks in Harlem in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

the world, perhaps because of the author's youthfulness, gave the book, as he puts it, a "somewhat negative tone." But, he goes on to say,

Since that time, I have learned . . . to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself.<sup>21</sup>

In a period relatively short for a spiritual odyssey, Tom—as the mystics would put it, in the Way of Love, had travelled great distances, from renunciation to final affirmation, a journey that would hardly have been possible had he not, along the difficult way, grown in piety and compassion. From the same Preface, in a passage which is a clear departure from the tone of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he writes,

My monastery is not a home. It is not a place where I am rooted and established in the earth. It is not an environment in which I become aware of myself as an individual, but rather a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion. To exist everywhere, I have to be No-one (*Honorable Reader*, p. 65).

Towards the end of this short but insightful piece, we find Tom at his most compassionate having, I think, approached a point of illumination that my dad would have called the ripening of love in which one realizes, in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, that God "has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated." (*The Interior Carmel*, p. 206) in rejoicing in finding the divine spark in himself, Tom understands fully that it is in recognition of this divinity in man that makes brotherhood a possibility. He says:

If I say NO to all . . . secular forces, I also say YES to all that is good in the world and in man. I say YES to all that is beautiful in nature, and in order that this may be the yes of freedom and not of subjection, I must refuse to possess anything in

21. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader—Reflections on My Work*. (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, Inc., 1989). p. 63. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Honorable Reader*.

the world purely as my own. *I say YES to all the men and women who are my brothers and sisters in the world* (my emphasis) but . . . I must live so that no one of them may seem to belong to me, and that I may not belong to any of them. It is because I want to be more to them than a friend that I become, to all of them, a stranger (*Honorable Reader*, p. 66).

In fact, the “stranger” is a far more intimate friend than any ordinary friend could ever hope to be and shares with “other strangers” and, more importantly, with God, the joy of creation itself!

In keeping with his ever-deepening path of compassion, Tom completes this very personal little essay with these wonderful words:

I seek to speak to you, in some way, *as your own self*. (my emphasis) Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both! (*Honorable Reader*, p. 67).

#### b. “All Men without Exception Are Our Brothers”

Tom did not do full justice to himself and perhaps even unwittingly misled some readers and friends in suggesting—even to me—that his early books were too pious for his taste. Yet, I think the fact remains that without that initial and profound expression of piety which, through his years at Gethsemani, eventually grew into such a solid rock in, and became second nature to, him, he could not have so often hit the bull’s eye in his later writings, particularly those on social and political issues.

In those salad days, to someone like myself concerned about civil rights and the war, I read his *Seeds of Destruction* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* with great relish, being thrilled in reading a contemplative monk writing in a vein more deeply compassionate than anyone else on such matters at the time. And how clearly and refreshingly he seemed to have set forth the larger questions! There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that I used Tom as both my anchor and bridge in helping me to understand the subtle connection between the inner and outer aspects of my life, and that the series of “yeses!” that

would leap forth from my lips and heart as I read his words were a confirmation of what I had already intuitively felt, that is, that life was one and that authenticity somehow implied living one’s deeply-felt values and impulses and not merely thinking them. This simple truth later helped me to understand the main thrust of Asian philosophy as well when I began to lecture in Taiwan. Tom’s profound piety, so American because of its matter-of-factness gave depth and substance to what he said and added a crucial and ineffable dimension to his basic overriding humanistic strains.

In comparison with his earlier, “more spiritual” books, I felt it was only the style that was different for, as his concerns for the world intensified, he was seeking new forms for expressing what was gnawing at him morally and spiritually and trying to understand his own vocation vis-à-vis the world’s problems.

What had not changed, I felt, and in fact what kept on overrunning erstwhile frontiers as his so-called secular concerns increased was his sense of the sacred. If one failed to look steadily into where Tom had solidly anchored his life, one might have indeed missed it all. Friedrich Holderlin, the 18th Century German lyric poet compresses into a few beautiful words what we might take as a clear picture of Tom’s more mature spiritual life:

Heart’s wave could not curl and break beautifully into the foam of spirit, unless the ageless silent rock of destiny stood in its path.<sup>22</sup>

As it is now well known, Merton’s spirituality grew in ways that annoyed many and became unacceptable to others. And it would have been even tragic if it had not been so amusing that his former readers no longer found him “a pious, spiritual writer.” As I write this today, I can still picture Tom stoically telling me that there were by the late 60’s more non-Catholics reading his books than Catholics. This surprised me at the time but it should not have, given the antagonisms he had created among middle-of-the-road Catholics via his involvement in controversial social issues and, of course, Asian philosophies and religions.

Josef Pieper in “The Philosophical Act” gives us a valuable insight into men like Tom and my father when he says:

22. Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. Translated from the German by Alexander Dru, with an Introduction by T.S. Eliot. (NY: Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, 1964), p. 123. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Leisure*.

The greater the power of establishing relations the greater the degree of inwardness . . . The more embracing the power with which to relate oneself to objective being, the more deeply that power needs to be anchored in the inner self of the subject so as to counterbalance the step it takes outside (Leisure, p. 86).

Characteristically, my dad, reflecting on the tremendous physical and intellectual potential man has unleashed in this present century, puts it in a simple nutshell: "the body, now larger, calls for a larger soul."<sup>23</sup>

Difficult as it is to situate Tom's writings, nonetheless, I strongly feel that they follow a wholly *classical* tradition. His social and political writings remain more illuminating than ever, being far richer in texture and brighter in tone than typical contemporary social and political treatises that often lack any larger context other than the immediate situation or conflict to which they deal. It is this ubiquitous quality of *luminosity* which cuts through the murkiness of difficult issues and lifts them to a level beyond the merely polemical and journalistic. In short, there is manifestly a quality of *timelessness* that will keep them from becoming dated. Doubtlessly, as in all great classical writings, past and present, they will continue to give clarity even to issues that are not directly related to the specific theme being addressed.

Like Tom, my dad too wrote with a decisive conviction and clarity fired by a passion that emerged from the well-cultivated soil of his inner most heart. He rarely if ever wrote as if he had an axe to grind; rather, his writings emerge as though compelled by an inner necessity, in fact, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to separate the man from his writings. This is perhaps what I mean by one following a classical tradition.

In the Chinese classics, for example, particularly in the *Analects of Confucius* and *The Mencius*, though of course there are passages whereby ideas can be viewed "objectively," for the most part, the most appealing quality to me are the forceful personalities that naturally *color* the writings, so that one hardly can tell whether it is the man or the writings that is more engaging and wise. Such then

23. John C.H. Wu. "The Natural Law and Christian Civilization," *Philosophy and the Integration of Contemporary Education*, edited by Rev. George F. McLean. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1962). pp. 158-175.

is the nature of sapiential works of art which appeal not to the mind alone but to the whole man.

There is never any conscious attempt either on their part or their disciples to hide their personalities or personal whims nor is there any clear delineation between the personal and the non-personal, which is a fairly recent innovation now being pushed to its absurd extreme by a runaway "academic hegemony" determined to squeeze the last breath of life from both personal knowledge and experience. In a word, the old sages were no mere academicians and taught from deep inner and personal conviction and compulsion. In fact, *they were out to save a society*.

In my college days—being sophomoric—I had a slight prejudice against my father's more "personal" writings and was probably even a bit ashamed about his "confessions of faith," and preferred his more so-called academic writings. It has only been in recent years that I have come to a far greater appreciation of those writings which are directly related to his *lived* experience and which indicate a depth and quality of feeling that the other writings lack.

Although my dad spent many years as an academician, he was simply too wise and learned a man to be a mere pedant and no writings of his—even *The Golden Age of Zen* which was first conceived as a history of Chinese Zen of the T'ang dynasty and for which Tom wrote a lengthy introduction—can strictly be classified as an academic work. Thank God for that, for I am sure those funny little Zen men and women in Heaven would have beaten my dad to a sorry pulp if his book about them had reeked with bookish nonsense!

Somewhere it is written that the style is the man, and if that is the case, my dad's writings, stylistically and in content are rarely "out of character." His apparent stylistic inconsistencies do, as I see it now, reflect an honesty and a confidence seldom found among contemporary scholars. His writings simply reflect life as he saw it in all its plenitude, not in its chaos but in its hard-to-graspness, and for a person schooled so thoroughly in the art of juridical studies, it was simply a quirk of nature that he was so easily able to liberate himself from the harrowing maze of legal language to a freedom of style that became distinctly his own. Instead of consciously having found a voice, an inner voice beyond anything he was fully conscious of seemed to have found *him* and dictated a style consistent with subject matter. Moreover, it is particularly significant to me that this voice, whose authority he rarely questioned, simply took over his life after his conversion.

In randomly rereading his books and articles, I now see they truly reflect John Wu the man in all his wonderful diversity because they run the gamut from the most unabashedly pious—his piety naturally flowing forth from the recognition of this inner voice—to the most brilliantly intellectual, spiritual and mystical. And his letters to Tom are of that nature as well and, in some sense, he seemed to have stood more naked in the correspondence than Tom. But this difference lay in the style of the two men and did not reflect the depth of commitment they each had for the other as friends.

Their friendship covered one of Tom's most turbulent yet creative, and my dad's loneliest and one of his most painful, periods. It was certainly providential—my dad acknowledging it as such—and at least from my dad's point of view, he would have agreed with Emerson's famous and simple words that "A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him, I may think aloud" (Emerson, "Friendship").

Retrospectively, his letters to Tom were indeed a "thinking aloud" because in those lonely years, besides his confessor, he did not have another friend to whom he could so intimately confide. As the scope of his academic and personal interests naturally grew and took some surprising and wholly unique turns—as had Tom's—and he had in fact intellectually outgrown even his bosom friends and colleagues, there were few whose minds and hearts were truly in tune with his own. Tom keenly sensed his friend's loneliness.

On January 10, 1966, my dad, apparently despondent over the uncertainty of both his personal and professional future, had written:

In my utter loneliness I think of you. I have just written (a)  
haiku to you:

Silent Lamp! Silent Lamp!  
I only see its radiance  
But hear not its voice!  
Spring beyond the world!

You see, Father, this poem began plaintively, but ends with a  
joy not from this world.

Even in his dark night, the quality of his spirituality was such that it did not allow him to be mired in his desolation which he instinctively knew was part of a Larger Plan. He could always read these divine ciphers well.

Two months later, two days before his 67th birthday, he paints for us a darker picture of his inner turmoil. Yet, again, in the end, we find an understanding that transcends the immediacy of the moment. The paragraph is worth quoting in full:

For the last two months or so, I have mysteriously gone through the darkest tunnel so far. I have felt so shatteringly *lonely* that I did not even feel the impulse of writing to you! I don't know why the Lord has led me into this cave, except, perhaps, He wished to open up a new scope of my all-too-limited sympathies. This experience has made me think of those who are in jail and who are tempted to commit suicide. Formerly I could never sympathize with people who kill themselves. But now I have come to understand them and therefore feel tenderness for them. O Father, *all men without exception are our brothers*. I am sure that you had attained this state of all embracing, nondiscriminating compassion long ago; but for me, your old boy, it is only recently granted to me! But what a suffering! (Wu, 3/26/66).

What we see above is not only a deeper reconciliation with the hidden workings of the Holy Spirit but a recognition of the importance of an expanded sympathy for the downtrodden human creature and the human condition in general. Here, he comes close to the universal compassion that possible only when the self is forgotten and transfigured in a journey through the dark night. To the mystic, the journey is a gift of the highest value, and despite having to travel "through the darkest tunnel," the mystic knows that in time—in *God's good time*—his life will bear the fruits of divine illumination. However, though God's grace be a divine balm, yet the suffering is absolutely real.

And, in a final interesting twist indicating the sort of compassion that one might associate with a wise man from the East, what my dad in commenting on a poem that Tom had sent him may, perhaps, be compared to what a Christian bodhisattva ("an enlightened one") might say:

Like Our Lord, you rate the harlots far above the Pharisees. So do I. But Father, by this time, I have gone even farther than Our Lord, by His own way. I regard the Pharisees as Harlots, prostituting their religion, and therefore they too

deserve our compassion, and they *need* it more than the harlots (Wu, 12/26/62, second letter).

#### CONCLUSION: AT THE PERIPHERAL CENTER

They lived in the Center despite existing at the periphery, and it is to that Center to which both continue to draw us irresistibly from our own peripheries. And in living in the Center, they both hallowed and allowed the intrinsic hallowness of all the countless peripheries to which they belonged to emerge quite naturally in all their blessed and naked dignity. Or, perhaps, better put, they taught us to understand there are, in truth, no such things as peripheries if we but have eyes to see and wings to soar to the Center of each periphery where the Center *gladly* reveals itself in its fullness for, indeed, each sparkling periphery does reflect the universe, *is* the universe, and is as dazzling as every other. In fact, Tom and my dad were the sparkles given to us by God in and through which our little sparkles may learn to share their lives as lived in and sustained by an *intruding* Center that is none other than the Compassionate Christ Himself.

They have returned to Eternity, but what a lovely day of wind and moon they meant for all of us!