

Learning to Love and Learning the Price: Thomas Merton and the Challenge of Celibacy

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As is well known among avid readers of Thomas Merton, he himself ranked the many books that he published in his lifetime. Some he classified as 'very poor' or even 'awful' (e.g. *What Are These Wounds?*) while those he judged most successful were categorized simply as 'better' (e.g. *New Seeds of Contemplation*).¹ What he understandably did not do was rank the private journals, which he forbade to be published until 25 years after his death. All seven volumes of these have now been published and have received high praise from various persons associated with the project of bringing them to light. Merton's onetime secretary, Patrick Hart, wrote in the preface to the first volume that these journals may well contain Merton's finest writing, inasmuch as he was here 'expressing what was deepest in his heart with no thought of censorship'.² Similarly, the editor of the sixth volume, Christine Bochen, writes that Merton brought to these journals 'a poet's eye and a mystic's spirit', leading to 'compelling descriptions of the commonplace' and 'astute, even profound, reflections of one who regularly penetrated below the surface of life to explore its inner depths'.³ Bochen goes on to say that what sets Merton apart from

1. Merton's handwritten graph evaluating his own books is reproduced as Appendix 2 in Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 150-51.

2. Patrick Hart, Preface to Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939-1945; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. xii.

3. Christine Bochen, Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals, 6; 1966-67; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. xiii.

most other writers is 'the expansiveness of his spirit and his candor'.⁴ Perhaps nowhere is this candor more evident than in this sixth volume, which famously describes the period in 1966 when Merton was deeply infatuated with a 24-year-old student nurse who had cared for him following back surgery in a Louisville hospital. (Although the nurse's full name has been given in at least one book written about Merton, out of respect for her privacy I will follow the convention of the journal's editor and use only the abbreviation 'M'.)

There have been very different reactions and evaluations of this episode in Merton's life. As he himself recounts in the journal, several of the most influential monks in his monastery as well as his good friend Jim Wygal, a psychiatrist, were very critical of his behavior. Both his abbot, Dom James Fox, and Fr John Eudes Bamberger (then a monk of Gethsemani and now himself the abbot of the monastery in Piffard, New York) are said by Merton to have held that he had been 'whole and consistent' before the affair and that he now needed to 'recover my previous wholeness'.⁵ As for Wygal's attitude, Merton at one point sums it up in his friend's warning, 'You are on a collision course' (p. 85). Others, however, have judged the episode quite positively. Basil Pennington, himself a widely read Trappist author, has suggested that there was never 'any question or danger of this romance going beyond the reality of a passing romance that did not exclude a true friendship' and that both Merton and M. had 'very genuine human feelings and emotions' that 'were lived out in the context of other, deeper commitments, which never wavered'. Indeed, Merton 'could well have seen all that he was doing as very much in line with his aim of being a true monk, a man wholly integrated and free'.⁶ Another positive evaluation of the affair is that of Douglas Burton-Christie, who writes that Merton's falling in love with the young woman 'can be understood as the fruition of a life-long search to enter more deeply into the experience of love', an experience that 'helped to heal past wounds and enabled him to give new meaning [in his poetry] to the powerful symbols of birth, creation, and paradise'.⁷

Whatever one's own final evaluation of this period of Merton's life

might be, it was clearly of such moment to him as to merit extended reflection on our part. The purpose of this paper is to offer such reflection by addressing three major questions: What was the nature of Merton's relationship with M.? What were his own judgments about his behavior, both during the most intense period of their relationship and after it had subsided? And what might others learn from this part of Merton's life, especially persons who are themselves living a life of vowed celibacy? Before turning to these questions, however, a brief recounting of the history of their relationship and a word about the sources of information available to us are in order.⁸

The first meeting between Merton and M. occurred in the middle of 'Passion Week', 1966, the week preceding Easter. The previous week, Merton had undergone surgery at St Joseph's Infirmary in Louisville in order to correct cervical spondylosis (inflammation of the cervical vertebrae). During the first morning that M. was assigned to care for him during his recuperation at the hospital, the two spoke easily about a whole gamut of matters, from liturgical reform in the Catholic Church to characters in a cartoon strip. They had further opportunities to meet and talk during the first half of the following week, but said goodbye that Wednesday night, 6 April, when M. was leaving for Chicago to be with her fiancé during the Easter holidays. This might have been the end of their relationship had Merton not left a letter for her to read upon her return to Louisville. Nearly two weeks later, back at Gethsemani, he received a humorous, four-page letter from M., to which he replied with a declaration of love that he mailed in an envelope marked 'Conscience Matter' to prevent its being opened by any superior in the monastery.

Their relationship had thus intensified very rapidly. There followed a whole series of letters and phone calls, together with occasional visits. Most of the latter occurred in Louisville, where he had to return from time to time for medical check-ups, while two took place in the grounds of the abbey. The first of the abbey visits occurred when several of Merton's friends brought M. along for a picnic on 7 May. Merton would later call this 'the Derby Day picnic' in reference to the horse race that was being run in Louisville the same day. Less than two weeks later, on 19 May, another student nurse brought M. to

4. *Learning to Love*, p. xxiii.

5. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 106. All subsequent references to this volume will be given parenthetically in the text of my paper, simply by page number.

6. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), pp. 122-23.

7. Douglas Burton-Christie, 'Rediscovering Love's World: Thomas Merton's Love Poems and the Language of Ecstasy', *Cross Currents* 39 (1989), pp. 64-82 (66, 82).

8. Further information about the dates and locations of the meetings (or phone calls) between Merton and M. may be found in Michael Mott's biography of the monk, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 435-58. See also John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 50-94.

Merton's hermitage in the grounds of the abbey and then drove off for several hours so that the two might spend some time together. The following month their situation changed radically. At that time, there were no phones in the monastery that guaranteed a completely confidential conversation. On 13 June Merton learned that a monk at the switchboard had overheard one of his recent conversations with M. and had felt obliged to inform the abbot. On meeting with the abbot the next day, Merton found him more understanding than he had expected him to be, but in a further conversation two days later the abbot absolutely prohibited Merton from getting in touch with M. again. Although Merton now drastically cut back the occasions on which he contacted the nurse, whether in person, by mail, or by phone, in fact he continued to be in some communication with her at least until late the following year, for he records in his journal a phone call to M. in the second week of November 1967, and the receipt of a postcard from her two days before Christmas. This is the last mention of M. in his journals until the entry of 20 August 1968, when he tells of burning all her letters to him: 'I did not glance at any one of them. High hot flames of the pine branches in the sun!'⁹

As regards sources of information about this relationship that are available to us, I have already suggested that the major one is the sixth volume of Merton's journals, *Learning to Love*. This includes not only the almost complete text of his private journal from 2 January 1966 to 8 October 1967, but also the 'Midsummer Diary' that he wrote for M. in June 1966. In addition to these two documents, Merton also wrote a 'Retrospect' that he entrusted to the safekeeping of his friend, the late James Laughlin. This has not been made available for publication, but Michael Mott had access to it when writing Merton's authorized biography and refers to it in several places.¹⁰ Likewise not available are letters exchanged between Merton and M., although he does quote short passages from her letters at a few places in his journal. We do, however, have the 18 poems that he composed for her, 5 of them included in *Learning to Love*. Printed in a limited edition, the poems contain what Merton himself considered the quintessential expression of his love. For that reason alone the poems provide a precious insight into his state of mind during the affair.¹¹

9. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 157.

10. Mott first mentions the 'Retrospect' in *The Seven Mountains*, p. 632 n. 496.

11. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985 [1977]). The poems are printed without pagination. In his journal entry for 11 May 1967,

The Nature of the Relationship between Merton and M.

In some ways, it may seem unnecessary to devote the first main section of this paper to the nature of this relationship. In recent years, there have been numerous studies about the nature of human love, many of them carried out by experienced psychologists and practically all of them noting the frequency of romantic love among human beings. Do not most all of us know from our own experience something of what Merton felt when he fell in love? Indeed, when Merton later confided the fact of his love for M. to some of his friends, they began by congratulating him that he was human!¹² Nevertheless, precisely because this gifted writer was so candid and detailed about his feelings, to correlate what he wrote with some of the best current literature about romantic love should prove to be instructive about the nature of any such relationship.

One of the most comprehensive studies of human love in recent times is a volume that was co-edited by a professor of psychology at Yale University and one of his graduate students.¹³ Among the contributors to the book is the psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden, who defines romantic love (as distinct from parental love, filial love, etc.) as 'a passionate spiritual-emotional-sexual attachment between two people that reflects a high regard for the value of each other's person'.¹⁴ Expanding on that abstract definition, Branden writes that he does not characterize a relationship as romantic unless the couple (1) experience their relationship as passionate or intense, (2) have 'some experience of spiritual affinity ... some deep mutuality of values and outlook', (3) feel a strong sexual attraction toward each other, and (4) experience mutual admiration. No doubt a number of other characteristics could be added, but for our present purposes only one further characteristic need be noted. Two other psychotherapists, Hanna Levenson and Charles N. Harris, note that someone who has fallen in love will experience a certain loss of self, a feeling of 'selflessness and oneness with the beloved, virtually losing one's self into the bond and

Merton writes: 'The true feeling is no doubt in some of the poems. They really express it—at least they do so better than any letters' (*Learning to Love*, p. 234).

12. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 437.

13. Robert J. Sternberg and Michael L. Barnes, *The Psychology of Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

14. Nathaniel Branden, 'A Vision of Romantic Love', in Sternberg and Barnes, *The Psychology of Love*, pp. 218-31 (220).

fulfillment of romantic intimacy'.¹⁵ They note that in some respects this sense of fusion is enjoyable but that it has a negative side as well, in that the lover simultaneously 'experiences the anxiety, humiliation, and pain of being overtaken, dependent, and vulnerable ... It appears that the very feelings that impel us to fall deeper and deeper in love are also those that begin to exert a counter-force toward withdrawal.'¹⁶

Taking these five characteristics one by one, it is relatively easy to see how clearly each was prominent in Merton's love for M. The passionate intensity of his feelings pervades the pages of his journal during 1966. On 26 April, M. met him at his doctor's office in Louisville, after which they had lunch in a nearby restaurant. Writing about this the next day, Merton said that 'it was clearer than ever that we are terribly in love, and it is the kind of love that can virtually tear you apart' (p. 46). Three weeks later he awoke from a dream 'with a sense of [the] eternal reality and validity of our love and became flooded with really ecstatic love and tears in which I could see her heart, so to speak, in all its preciousness before God ... I wept for half an hour, shaken with sobs ... absorbed in the deep reality of this vision and this hope' (p. 63). Months later, after M. had graduated from nursing school and returned to her home in Cincinnati, Merton phoned her twice while in Louisville on the last day of the year. Even then, he was 'still so powerfully held by her love' that the very road signs were poignant: 'Louisville, Louisville. The name Louisville will forever mean M., and her love' (pp. 76-77).

The 'spiritual affinity' and 'sense of being soul mates' of which Nathaniel Branden writes is likewise evident in Merton's account of his love for M. Indeed, such affinity was the very catalyst of their falling in love. On 31 March 1967, the anniversary of their first meeting, Merton reflected back on 'those days when we talked and laughed and got on so well that in a week we were in love' (p. 211). A similar emphasis on their affinity recurs frequently in journal entries of the previous spring and summer. In one of these, he writes: '[I] have honestly tried to see her truly as she is and love her exactly as she is, to value her uniquely and share with her this deep faith in her. And I know that the result has been a deep, clear, strong, indubitable reso-

nance between us. Our hearts really are in tune. Our depths really communicate' (p. 45). The 'Midsummer Diary' often echoes this sentiment, as when Merton writes: 'Dear, we must not forget the reality of our love and the reality of the sharing, the penetration in our mutual secrets... We are really in possession of one another's secrets, the inmost self of the other, in its glory and its abandonment' (p. 327).

Branden's third characteristic of romantic love is that of strong sexual attraction. Merton, fully aware of his monastic commitment to celibate chastity, notes early on in his account of his love for M. that he could not communicate it sexually 'without falling away completely from the truth. Hence I will never touch her, and will make sure that this is perfectly clear' (p. 45). It does indeed seem certain from all that he wrote that they never engaged in sexual intercourse, but his original resolve 'never [to] touch her' proved beyond his power to keep. On the day he first had to speak with the abbot after the latter had been informed of Merton's phone calls to M., he ended his journal entry with the words: 'What I remember most is me and M. hugging each other close for hours in long kisses and saying, "Thank God this at least is real!"' (p. 84). Merton's reference is apparently to the picnic that the two lovers shared in the woods at Gethsemani on May 19, when Merton felt 'the grip of this deep warm sexual love disturbing me and flooding through me, shaking my whole being from the heart (not just genital excitement)—and it was as yet only a little! But this is awfully serious, because here in spite of all we were wanting and saying, nature placidly and inexorably said something more profound and perhaps irreversible' (p. 66). In 'May Song', written after the same picnic and printed in *Eighteen Poems*, Merton gave poetic voice to these inexorable claims of nature, above all in the following stanza:

It is May we are lost
 In unexpected light
 We drown in each other
 Can you still breathe
 Darling in despair
 I cling to the round hull
 Of your hips and cry
 Lend me for God's love
 Your lifeboat
 Your saving body
 Save my body for I die
 In the ideal sun
 Cool me for I am destroyed
 By too much perfection

15. Hanna Levenson and Charles N. Harris, 'Love and the Search for Identity', in Kenneth S. Pope et al. (eds.), *On Love and Loving: Psychological Perspectives on the Nature and Experience of Romantic Love* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1980), pp. 266-81 (267).

16. Levenson and Harris, 'Love', p. 268.

On a later picnic, at Cherokee Park in Louisville in mid-July, they again 'loved and kissed each other with passion' (p. 96). By this time, Merton saw clearly that he had altogether failed in his original intention of keeping his relationship with M. on the level of a 'friendly sort of affection': 'This was certainly not possible', he writes in the 'Midsummer Diary', 'and now I know it, and a strong physical desire is part of it' (p. 325).

Branden's fourth characteristic of romantic love is what he calls 'mutual admiration', that is, 'a high regard for the value of each other's person'. This trait is abundantly clear in all that Merton penned about his beloved. On 12 May he writes: 'Her last three letters have been to me almost unbearably beautiful. Her love and her heart are a revelation of a most perfectly tuned and fashioned personality, a lovely womanly nature, and an almost unbounded affection, all of which she has given to me. I can only regard this as a kind of miracle in my life' (p. 58). At the end of the same month he says that 'She is the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me and her love is a gift from heaven, it is so pure and clear and total' (p. 74). The 'Midsummer Diary' picks up the same note, for 'in her I now realize I had found something, someone, that I had been looking for all my life' (p. 328).

It should now be obvious that all four of the characteristics that Nathaniel Branden finds in romantic love were abundantly present in Merton's love for M. I turn now to a final characteristic, the one categorized by Levenson and Harris as a certain experience of 'loss of self' or 'oneness' with the beloved that has both positive and negative aspects for anyone undergoing this experience. There are numerous indications in Merton's journal and poems that he felt this sense of fusion. Referring to the picnic at Gethsemani on 19 May, he writes, 'I have the complete feel of her being (except her sex) as completely me' (p. 66), while in the 'Midsummer Diary' he notes how 'Both of us wanted to pool our lonelinesses and make one reality out of two voids and because we saw that it was really possible, an immense hope was beginning to rise up in our hearts' (p. 327). Several of the poems in *Eighteen Poems* make the same point, above all the last of the 'Six Night Letters', whose final stanza reads:

Writing to you
Is like writing to my heart
You are myself
The loneliness here ...
Envelopes me
Like your own loneliness

Exploring my dark wood
And my lost house
To find itself.

In passages like this, Merton obviously finds bliss and contentment in his felt oneness with M., allowing him even to make the striking claim, 'You are myself'. But, as Levenson and Harris note, the very same feeling of fusion generates a sense of fear and even revulsion as well. Merton valued his independence even more than most people, so it is not surprising that a note of anxiety over his 'need' for M. soon appears in his journal. On 20 May, only hours after writing so movingly of the love he and M. had expressed for one another during their picnic the previous day, he adds that 'as always, I end up impatient of sex, backing away from domination by it, suspicious of its tyranny, and this afternoon I am turning with all my being toward freedom' (p. 67). This note became more and more insistent with the passing weeks and months. The next week he writes of his jealousy of 'absolute freedom and solitude' (p. 70), at the beginning of June he reflects on his attachment to M. and on the way 'my nature at times rebels against being "held" like this' (p. 75), and by November he rejoices in the fact that 'Each morning I wake up feeling a little freer ... just as last May each morning I awoke a little more captivated' (p. 155). The strongest expressions of his yearning for freedom are found in the 'Midsummer Diary'. Here he speaks of 'the naked root of one's inmost desire, which is the desire of liberty-reality' (p. 321) and, in a particularly powerful passage, names the animals living around his hermitage as symbols of the freedom that he will not surrender even for the love of M.:

I love you darling, I love you in this mad life that I lead... I wish I could hold you and love you, but I cannot be tied to any living being. I just cannot be tied. And I cannot let myself be tied. I am a wild animal, and I know you know it, and I know you don't mind. I know in fact that you love me for it, and that it is the deepest thing you love in me... You are in love with a fox, or a deer, or a squirrel. Freedom, darling. That is what the woods mean to me. I am free, free, a wild being, and that is all that I ever can really be (p. 342).

Try as he might, Merton simply could not reconcile the two: his yearning for the most intimate oneness with his beloved and his deep need to be free of any ties. At one point he came to the conclusion that 'God alone can reconcile all that has to be reconciled. I have simply been torn by it. Reduced and walking in the sun and snow and renouncing any hope of quick answers' (p. 157).

Merton's Evaluation of his Behavior

From what has just been said, one would rightly expect that Merton came to be of two minds about his love affair. If one looks *only* at the 18 poems he wrote for M., as Douglas Burton-Christie does in his article, one can understand how this author would ask 'why, if the relationship was of such importance to Merton, he agreed to end it'. To Burton-Christie this seemed 'somewhat puzzling and problematic'.¹⁷ But if one looks at the journal entries and the 'Midsummer Diary', it becomes clear that there was much in the experience that led Merton to judge it (and himself) very harshly.

For one thing, and despite the fact that Merton sometimes felt that he had hardly ever been really faithful to his monastic commitment, he nevertheless had a definite sense that this commitment was an integral part of his very being. The incongruity between this and his largely clandestine love for M. soon became a wrenching experience. On May 28, M. had planned 'to come out and spend the day (illegally) alone with me in the woods but she did not get transportation, so went home to Cincinnati instead and I cannot help thinking it is very good she did not come. It would have been disruptive and would have led to more anguish' (p. 71). In early July he laments how much he was deluded

and how much in fact I really wanted to be deluded and went out to welcome it. Because there is such a great good in human love... But I needed to know that I was called to something else, and the fact that I risked my other and special calling now frightens me!... There is *nothing* I want but to make sense of this seemingly absurd solitary life which is nevertheless such a wonderful gift and has such enormous possibilities. I have not measured up at all and have not been worthy of it at all... (p. 92).

Shortly before writing those lines, he regretted in the 'Midsummer Diary' that he had 'made a mess of everything. I have not been either a good monk or a good lover. I have been nothing. I have tried to be things that were incompatible and have ended up only hurting her and leaving her sorrowful, confused, pained' (p. 334).

Concomitant with his laments over the incongruity of his behavior are his regrets over the 'wasteful division of spiritual energy' (p. 71). When his love for M. was most intense, it was 'almost impossible to do anything but think of her. It is an obsession and that is bad' (p. 62).

Consequently, 'For a long time—in the thick of the affair—[I] read no Scripture at all and spent time writing long diary entries... or letters to M.' (pp. 108-109).

What might well be taken as Merton's most decisive criticism of the affair was presented in a veiled way. In December 1967 and again the following May, he gave informal conferences at Gethsemani to a group of prioresses from contemplative monasteries in the United States. After his presentations there was regularly time for the women to ask him questions. At the May session, one asked him to comment on the challenge of virginity for persons entering religious communities. His reply, surely based on his own experience, touched precisely on these related points of incongruity and the displacement of spiritual energy:

When you're involved in a sexual situation, you can get very caught up in it. Anybody who's ever been deeply in love knows what it's like. If it's too involved, there's real slavery, because you can't think of anything else. And there's no question of praying.

We're not talking here about a married relationship but about a passionate relationship. It takes all you've got. There's no time or energy for anything else. It seems to me that anyone who knows what that involves would be delighted to be released from it. To feel free again, to be able to pray if you want, to have a sense of being all one, are things we value in our life.¹⁸

In the light of such remarks, it is not surprising that Merton, looking back on the affair once his contacts with M. had all but ceased, frequently used such phrases as 'an embarrassing mess' (p. 156), 'infidelity and foolishness' (p. 217), and 'shame and amazement at the way I have trifled with life and grace' (p. 234).

This does not mean that he came to see no good at all in the experience. By the summer of 1967 he was able to see that 'it had a lot of good points because it brought out the things that had to come out and be recognized. It would have been much worse had they remained hidden' (p. 260). Merton here seems to be referring above all to the fact that before his encounter with M. he had never felt deep intimacy with any woman but had instead used women for his own ends. In this respect, at least, his falling in love with her was a healing experience. Moreover, the stark decisions with which he came to be faced—above all, whether to leave the monastic life out of love for her—made him realize how much he really wanted the life of a monk

17. 'Rediscovering Love's World', p. 66 n. 5.

18. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1992), p. 179.

and hermit. Slightly more than a year after his first meeting with M., he could once again revel in the rightness of his monastic way:

Yesterday I had a lovely hesychastic afternoon! Walked up and around by the lake, past the Derby Day picnic place ... Then quietly around under the pines and up to that hidden pond with all the pines around it ... What a change since the last time I sat there, in May last year ... That Sunday [...] I was literally shaken and disturbed—knowing clearly that I was all wrong ...

Anyway, yesterday was utterly different. Once again the old freedom, the peace of being without care, of not being at odds with the real sense of my own existence and God's grace to me... It was good that I (we) went through the storm: it was the only way to learn a truth that was otherwise inaccessible (pp. 217-18).

This conviction remained with Merton for the rest of his life. Had he not died during his trip to Asia, he may well have requested permission to live as a hermit in a more secluded part of the country, perhaps the Southwest or Alaska, but there is no reason to doubt that he would have remained a member of the Gethsemani community. Five weeks before he left the abbey for his trip to Asia, he wrote in his journal that he had indeed missed opportunities and made some big mistakes during his years in the monastery but was nevertheless convinced that 'the road I am on is the right one for me and I hope I stay on it wisely—or that my luck holds'.¹⁹

What May Be Learned from Merton's Experience

Merton was fully aware that his experience of falling in love with M. was no isolated incident in the Church of the 1960s. In his journal entry for 2 June 1966, he writes of how much he is thinking about his beloved, how he will be up late that very night doing just that and asking himself a lot of questions. He then adds: 'So many other priests are doing the same tonight—everywhere! It is a strange crisis in the whole Church' (p. 76). More than 30 years later, and despite the fact that dispensations from vows and promises of celibacy are much less readily granted now than they were during the reign of Pope Paul VI, there is no doubt but that this 'strange crisis' continues. In light of that fact, I will conclude this paper by reflecting on what one might learn from the way Merton dealt with this crisis in his own life. If these reflections are in part critical of him, they could hardly be more critical than he was of himself, with his frequent use of such adjectives as 'silly', 'stupid' and 'foolish' to characterize his behavior.

19. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 151.

Seeking Wise Counsel

A telling statement about the way Merton conducted himself throughout his love affair may be found in his 'Midsummer Diary'. Agonizing over the fact that he was caught between 'two unsatisfactory legal conditions [vowed religious life and marriage,] neither of which offers me any real fulfillment', he concludes that he has to do 'the same thing I have always had to do: to find my own way, without a map, taking neither this nor that except in so far as I have to, and working it out as I go along' (p. 338). This verbalizes what is otherwise clear from the journal itself: he never sought out anyone who could have served as a 'spiritual father', 'spiritual friend' or 'spiritual guide'. It is not that Merton was unaware of the centrality of such a figure in the monastic tradition. His book *The Wisdom of the Desert*, with its fine introduction and translations of sayings from the early monks of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, is just one example of his deep familiarity with the central role of those persons to whom another monk might go with the request, 'Father, give me a word by which I may live'. Merton also wrote a series of articles on spiritual direction in the 1950s that were later expanded and published in book form. He there writes of the importance of letting one's director know 'what we really think, what we really feel, and what we really desire, even when these things are not altogether honorable'. The very act of doing this, laying bare the deepest aspirations of our hearts, may allow one to see them 'in a different light—in which they lose their mystery and their magic'. In any case, 'the director has to know what we really want, for only then will he know what we really are'.²⁰ In later years, Merton returned to the same theme, though now preferring the term 'spiritual father' to that of 'spiritual director'. Just one month before he met M., he distributed in mimeographed form an essay entitled 'The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition'. Here he uses the early monastic term *diacrisis* (discernment of spirits) as a quality absolutely necessary if one is to be attuned to God's Holy Spirit (who will always be the ultimate director). As in his earlier work on spiritual direction, Merton again emphasizes complete openness with one's spiritual father as the necessary means for fostering genuine discernment.²¹

One might reasonably ask why Merton did not follow his own

20. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960), pp. 33, 35.

21. On this essay of Merton's, which to my knowledge has not been published, see Basil Pennington, 'The Spiritual Father: Father Louis' Theory and Practice', in *idem* (ed.), *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), pp. 32-48.

advice and seek the wise counsel of a fellow monk before he became as deeply involved with M. as he did. Pennington absolves Merton on this score by writing that 'he would have been hard pressed to find anyone in the Gethsemani community at that time who would have been able to understand his freedom'.²² While it is clearly impossible at this distance in time to judge who in that community might have been available to listen sympathetically, compassionately and patiently to Merton's expression of his feelings in the days immediately following his return from the hospital in Holy Week of 1966, I maintain that he ought to have tried to find such a person. Even if the desired degree of understanding were not present, the humble manifestation of his feelings to another could itself have helped Merton sense, at the very beginning of this relationship, the falsity of a monk's writing a love letter to a young woman who was herself engaged to be married. In September 1966 he acknowledged in his journal that 'The wrong steps began with my first love letter, and the phone call on April 13 arranging to see her in town on the 26th. Yet even as I say this and admit it, there is a sense in which I see it was almost inevitable. I had fallen so deeply in love with her already that it was difficult to do otherwise—yet I suppose I could have made another choice' (p. 120). Difficult? Yes. Impossible? Not really. This is definitely not to say that a spiritual father, had Merton spoken with one, should have counseled no contact with M. at all. Genuine *diacrisis* in such matters is so unique to the individual person concerned that a general rule cannot be laid down *a priori*. My point is only that in such circumstances the better course would surely be to seek the counsel of someone respected for his or her wisdom, understanding and good judgment. This could hardly be more concisely summed up than in the words of Sr Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, in her recent study of John Cassian's teaching on the 'eight principal thoughts'. In her chapter 'About Sex', Sr Mary Margaret writes:

Most sexual urges start with wholesome, but undiscerned, thoughts regarding the goodness, beauty, or truthfulness of someone who is exceptionally attractive. Then comes the commentary about how good it is to fall in love, as if the experience of loving another helps me grow. If the attraction is healthy, then discerned love follows. If the attraction is not for me, I must let go of the thought ...

Self-deception abounds. The practice of disclosing one's innermost thoughts to another is a helpful practice to avoid such deception, but it

must never be to the object of one's fantasy, the potential lover. Another wise elder is preferable. Raw emotions are tamed by humble admission.²³

Recognizing the Power of Sexuality

If we can learn from Merton's flawed attempt to 'find his own way' without the help of a spiritual friend, we can also learn from his failure to recognize the power of his sexual urges. As noted earlier in this paper, he had originally resolved not even to touch M., but within weeks there was prolonged kissing and embracing. At times he tried to justify this. Of their 19 May picnic at Gethsemani, he wrote the next day: 'in the end we were getting rather sexy—yet really instead of being all wrong it seemed eminently right' (p. 66). But at once he sees the duplicity of this statement and adds in parentheses: '(bad argument—it could justify anything)'. He also came to recognize that the power of their sexual attraction for each other was much stronger than he had anticipated, so strong that he found himself unable to keep the relationship 'something rather detached and pleasant, not too involved. This was certainly not possible, and now I know it, and a strong physical desire is part of it' (p. 325).

Contemporary studies of romantic love support this conclusion to which Merton came after so much emotional turmoil. In a witty but compelling essay, Ellen Berscheid, a professor of psychology, writes:

...the role of sexual desire and experience has been neglected in contemporary discussions of romantic love. It is all very well to look down one's nose at Sigmund Freud's cursory analysis of romantic love as repressed, suppressed, or frustrated sexual desire, but, for me at least, Freud seems to have gotten much smarter as I've gotten older...

I end this chapter by returning to the first question the editors asked their contributors to confront—'What is love?'—by confessing that, in the case of romantic love, I don't really know—but, if forced against a brick wall to face a firing squad who would shoot if not given the correct answer, I would whisper 'It's about 90 percent sexual desire as yet not sated'.²⁴

If this is so, then Merton's original belief that the sexual aspect of his relationship with M. could be easily controlled appears very ingenuous and should make us more aware of the power that the ancient Greeks called divine *Eros*. Some of the best spiritual writers of our day

23. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 45.

24. Ellen Berscheid, 'Some Comments on Love's Anatomy: Or, Whatever Happened to Old-fashioned Lust?', in Sternberg and Barnes, *The Psychology of Love*, pp. 359-74 (372-73).

22. Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*, p. 124.

have recognized this, and it would be well to take their words to heart. Thomas Keating, the Trappist author best known for his works on centering prayer, said in a recent interview that taking a vow of celibate chastity certainly does not foreclose genuine friendship, but 'it does imply a discipline that filters out of that growing intimacy with another the genital attraction that may be there, and which is perfectly normal if it *is* there. But one ought not to conclude from this that a genuinely spiritual friendship must exclude all warmth or emotion; it is only those excessive marks of affection that lead to deep sensuality or acting out that have to be sacrificed, not friendship itself.'²⁵ Similarly, Cardinal Basil Hume, in a talk he gave to his monks while he was still abbot of Ampleforth in northern England, said that 'Celibacy must make us more human, not less, more loving, and more lovable. But like all loving it must be controlled and disciplined. A celibate has to say "Yes" to everyone with whom he comes into contact, and "No" to himself in a hundred and one different kinds of situations.'²⁶ Words like 'discipline' and 'control' are not readily heard in some quarters today, but they are indispensable if one is to avoid the kind of anguish that is so evident in Merton's retrospective reflections on his love affair, anguish made all the more severe because of the pain that he caused M.

The Challenge of Midlife

That Merton fell in love at midlife also has something to teach those who are in or near that stage of life. The clinical psychologists Jesse Geller and Richard Howenstine have noted that as midlife approaches, a male may seek to correct the narcissism that characterized his earlier years. Thus, 'a man at mid-life who has been "married to his career" may seek in romantic love opportunities to heal the disharmonies in his life structure'.²⁷ One might object that Merton was not 'married to his career' in any normal sense of that phrase. There was unquestionably much generosity and selflessness in the way he lived at Gethsemani in the 1940s and 1950s. But at the same time there was no doubt an unhealthy degree of 'unworldliness' and 'separateness' in the Gethsemani of those days that Merton had first embraced and

25. Thomas Keating, 'The Heart of the Matter: A Dialogue between Father Thomas Keating and Andrew Cohen', *What Is Enlightenment?* 13 (spring/summer 1998), pp. 90-101, 150-55 (97).

26. Cardinal Basil Hume, OSB, *Searching for God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), p. 53.

27. Jesse D. Geller and Richard A. Howenstine, 'Adulthood: Men', in Pope *et al.* (eds.), *On Love and Loving*, pp. 61-88 (84).

then gradually came to reject. This troubled him to such an extent that at times he expressed deep regret for most of what he had done with his life before encountering M. He writes in the 'Midsummer Diary':

My work is in fact invalid in so far as it seems to make sense and in so far as it seems to say that solitude is something to be desired. Of course one has to make some kind of sense: I do not deny that I want to write coherently, in accord with a basic realization. But merely to spell out a logical message, or worse still a sales pitch for something spiritual, something religious, something 'interior', or worse still 'monastic' ... what a total waste. More than half my life and work have been wasted in this kind of thing (p. 322).

The same sentiment was expressed poetically in lines quoted earlier in this paper: 'Cool me for I am destroyed/By too much perfection'. Of course, such feelings do not simply 'cause' one to fall in love, but it would be unrealistic to think that a residual dissatisfaction with much of what he had been doing for years did not lie behind the rapidity and intensity of his falling in love with M. In a very real sense, he had been 'married to a career' that was not fully satisfying.

What, then, might a person at or near midlife learn from Merton's experience in this regard? Basically that one is then vulnerable simply because so much of almost *anyone's* life is not all that satisfying. Every choice, every decision we make entails a foreclosing of alternatives, and those alternatives may appear, even subconsciously, all the more attractive as one realizes that at least half of his or her life is now in the past and so many possibilities are no longer realistically available. Thomas Keating, in the interview quoted above, has commented judiciously on this issue as well. After noting that sexual attraction is one thing in adolescence and quite another in early adulthood, he continues: 'Then, in the midlife crisis, a whole new aspect of our sexuality emerges that has to do with the temptation to return to the unfinished relationships of one's youth or regrets about not having experienced certain things before one became celibate. As a result the temptation to depart from one's commitment is also very strong at that time.' What is then needed, he suggests, is readiness to face honestly the question of whether, and to what degree, one's sexual energy has been 'transmuted and transformed by discipline, service to others and devotion to God, so that in those moments when the attraction of sexual satisfaction is extremely strong, there's enough inner strength to resist it'.²⁸

There is no possible way to judge how much more of this kind of

28. Keating, 'The Heart of the Matter', p. 97.

transformation might have been possible for Merton. He was very hard on himself in this regard, writing in the spring of 1967: 'I am humbled and confused by my weakness, my vulnerability, my passion. After all these years, so little sense and so little discipline. Yet I know there was good in it somewhere, nevertheless' (p. 203). Rather than attempt to judge him, we (and celibates in particular) may nevertheless gratefully learn from his own most laudable candor something of the vulnerability that lies within each one of us. Thus aware, we may gain some increased confidence that it is indeed possible for us to love others—even sexually attractive others—both wisely and well.