

# A SONG FOR TOM

by **John Wu, Jr.**

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At times, Tom Merton must have lived in the heart of a freedom that lesser mortals can only dream of, and when he was possessed by it, his pen moved magnificently and effortlessly. We may all suspect he knew at such times that he was *not in control*. You see this in his early writings, in the sometimes uneven yet great and ingenuous outpourings of soul that mark *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in the two *Seeds*, in the journals of every period, in *The Wisdom of the Desert*, and, of course, in one of his favorites, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, when self-consciousness took a back seat and spontaneity and self-forgetfulness elevated his thought to an altogether deeper, existential and often more serene level.

In such writings, he soars to heights that must have even surprised himself, yet, at the same time, unsurprising for he understood instinctively that either Christ or some hidden natural impulse informed by the Divine, was directing his every word and movement of his soul. His greatness lay in that he never allowed himself to think he was the original source of his own thoughts. If Father John Eudes Bamberger is correct in saying that Tom took us “with him into the presence of God” (see *The Merton Annual*, vol. 4, p. 34), then it surely must be doubly true that he enjoyed the constant boon of being permitted to incubate like a pampered child in the bosom of Christ. What jolly conviviality to be a playfellow of the Divine Logos for so many years, to find welcome there!

Like Teilhard de Chardin, Tom Merton’s thought was also Christocentric. But it is in the emphasis, in the tone quality, of their respective equally grand visions where they seem to part ways. Whereas Teilhard’s Christ can sometimes seem distant and regal, ascetic, coldly metaphysical and even self-assured, the Merton Christ is compassionate, warm, existential, naked and full of human joy and pain. In a sense, Tom brought to the world a more universal and human Christ fully accessible to and whose very essence cries out to be shared by all men. My father paid a fitting tribute to Tom in a letter dated September 6, 1966:

The beautiful thing about you is that your heart is as great as your mind. Thus in you love and knowledge are united organically. Herein lies your profound significance for this great age of synthesis of East and West. [Unpublished Wu-Merton correspondence at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College]

In saying this to Tom, I suppose my father was simply throwing out a hint all persons of wisdom have naturally grasped, that only the complete person endowed with a universal heart and a feeling brain is able to work out a living synthesis and harmony in life.

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In self-forgetfulness and having “lost his way,” when he chose to embark upon an Uncharted Path, Tom Merton found himself a true Home and was able — because he was unencumbered by an often bothersome empirical self and personality which plague many of us — to explore a diverse number of “selves” which shared that one essential Ground — God’s Field of Divine Play whose only price of admission is purity of heart.

And what did Tom Merton mean by purity of heart? In *The Wisdom of the Desert*, he writes a description of it which seems to summarize the very kernel of his contemplative vocation:

. . . “purity of heart” [is] a clear unobstructed vision of the true state of affairs, an intuitive grasp of one’s own inner reality as anchored, or rather lost in God through Christ. The fruit of this was *quies*: “rest” . . . which . . . was simply the sanity and poise of a being that no longer has to look at itself because it is carried away by the perfection of freedom that is in it. And carried where? Wherever Love itself, or the Divine Spirit, sees fit to go. Rest, then, was a kind of simple nowhere and no-mindedness that had lost all preoccupation with a false or limited “self.” At peace in the possession of a sublime “Nothing” the spirit laid hold, in secret, upon the “All” — without trying to know what it possessed. (p. 8)

In coming upon the above, I am reminded of what the Taoists have called *wu-wei*, literally “non-action,” but, in fact, “the fullness of action,” for it is the Tao-in-action, and it goes where it wills without the meddlesome interference of what *we* want life to be. Although no personality is ever directly suggested for the eternal Tao, the least that we can attribute to it is that of a living cosmic principle which is everywhere but nowhere. It is preeminently immanent yet wholly transcendent. Thus, when a person lives in accordance with the Way (Tao), he or she too fulfills human destiny in becoming fully cosmic and universal in his or her nature.

It seems that this cosmic philosophy/religion which is beyond pantheism forever gropes for its natural fulfillment in something higher, deeper and larger than itself — just as a human granted a spark of light at birth can only find a final resting place upon a ground hidden from the naturally limited self. From a purely natural point of view, it would not be imprudent to say no philosophy has gone further than the *Tao Teh Ching* or the *Chuang Tzu* in helping humans aspire to an understanding of the true self. I would venture a step further in saying that the Christian saint is the “true man of Tao” gone through the solitary desert and poverty of Christ and has died in Him and found all things in His mercy. And because it is indeed the very solitude and poverty of Christ that he shares, his solitude will, as Tom Merton says, bear immense fruit in the souls of [other] men” (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 422). The vintage Merton always astonishes and catches us off-guard. It matters little how often we have read it. His best writings gush forth as if from a deeply hidden and inexhaustible Spring.

You wonder what he would have been like had he lived. He left us over twenty-five years ago at the relatively young age of fifty-three after having already touched so many of us in so many different ways. And you wonder, after having read all the praises lavished upon him through all these years, how one man secluded in some obscure Kentucky woods could have stirred such diverse chords in us in so deep and singular ways, that he was able to give himself to others in ways that we whose chords be stirred never suspected and probably will never be able to fathom.

Yet, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that he spoke and continues to speak to us individually in ways that only our own particular ears can hear, and in that speech, his ever-lingering presence takes us ever more deeply into that freedom for which we were born. An extraordinary feat, indeed, in these last fading and all-but-spiritually-deflated years of the twentieth century when words rarely hit their mark and mean what they are meant to mean.

His had wings that ever so gently took our tired hearts and battered minds on flights beyond our laughably narrow and self-imposed prisons and made us realize in no uncertain terms that we were created for something incalculably more than this world, that, indeed, if we but understand our nature at its core we would surely see that in each person, there is intrinsic in us that natural grasping after the Something beyond the here, that in fact the mere *questing after* which would restore to us our true human nobility. This was so matter-of-factly stated in nearly everything he wrote and said.

In short, truth to him was never a matter of philosophical or theological dispute, yet few men and women of recent memory have been more eloquently philosophical in speaking of and defending the dignity and nobility of humans than Tom Merton. He simply wanted to re- evoke in us what we, perhaps, hesitantly and gropingly, already know, that the process of life is nothing more than the gradual recovery of that Mystery of Being or, as he put it, of Paradise.

I blush at the thought that he cared for me. Yet, I also blush at the many biographies and critiques — some admittedly wonderfully written and researched — for dissecting and revealing him in such nakedness. I blush because in his friendships he rarely resorted to probing and judging us, for, after all, he wasn't made that way at all. Rather, like all saints, he simply accepted us in our naked foolishness — just as he knew in utter gratefulness Christ had accepted him and, later, he had accepted himself, in that way — and made us feel that, like him, we too were pilgrims temporarily passing through the world.

In both his written and spoken words, he never failed — because the mission lay at the very crux of his vocation which, after all, was that of a simple servant announcing to all the Good News — to remind us that the key of life lay in one's understanding of death, that, even as we live and breathe, Christ in His death, had called us forth from our living death, had regained for us our lost Paradise on earth, and finally paved the way for what Chuang Tzu had called the Great Awakening when we will finally have realized that even our newly-found Paradise on earth has been nothing more than a silent lamp pointing to the Heart of the Divine Logos.