

The GROUND of LOVE and TRUTH



Reflections on
THOMAS MERTON'S
relationship with the woman
known as "M"

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ie.
in extenso

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INTRODUCTION

*It is impossible for the human heart
to be opened from outside;
and then someone comes along
and does just that.*



I woke up one night with the words in my mind. I assumed they came from my subconscious. I immediately got up and wrote them down, knowing that they were to be significant in whatever came later, should I ever take up the story of Thomas Merton and the woman he referred to in his journal only as “M.” These words seemed to me to capture the paradox of intimacy: that in one way it is essential to decide to allow people into our private life; in another way, that entry can only come from another’s insistent presence. The paper on which I wrote these words had been sitting on my writing table for a long time—collecting dust, getting wrinkled and faded, while I kept putting off writing what I now offer for your consideration.

This is a book I knew I must write, although I resisted doing so for several years. My reasons for avoiding this task were several. The first was my usual hesitancy—and that of many who write—around my having nothing of importance to say on the subject, of evaluating myself as unqualified to speak on what I wanted to address. Another concern I had was the complexity of the relationship, which baffled Merton and on which he went back and forth in his thinking, feelings, and actions. Who was I to think any commentary of mine would expand and enlighten his own clear and eloquent—if often contradictory—words?

How was I to penetrate—presumably more deeply than he had—the relationship with a woman about twenty-five years his junior, about which he wrote so much and left so little unsaid?

However, several people who knew Merton personally and have read my previous book on Merton and the Enneagram, (*Merton, An Enneagram Profile*), have commented how well I seem to intuit thoughts and feelings he had only revealed to his closest friends. Since they knew I never met Merton personally they wondered how this level of understanding is possible. One of those people, Charles Dumont, in his review of my book in the periodical *Collectanea Cisterciensa*, attributed this phenomenon both to Merton's and my common monastic background as well as the dynamics of the number four personality on the Enneagram that Thomas Merton and I share. Whatever the reason for my insights, these assurances that my statements about Merton resonate with those closest to him have encouraged me to write further. While I did touch on his relationship with Margie in my previous book, I want to focus on this exclusively in this set of reflections.

Merton's journal refers to Margie simply as "M." (See *Learning to Love*. Note: All references to books will be by the initials of their title, followed by page numbers based on the editions listed in "Resources" at the end.) We know from other sources that her name was Margie and that a few Merton confidants know her complete identity. She would be in her seventies now.

To me, all these questions of her real identity and current whereabouts are irrelevant to my purpose here, which is to use Merton's own writings (real and imagined) about her to reflect on their relationship back then and its meaning to us today.

Who was this woman, and how did he, at the age of fifty-one, only two years before he died in a tragic accident while on a journey to Asia, find her stopping him in his spiritual tracks?

Margie was a young nurse in her mid-twenties when they met. Merton had been hospitalized for back surgery and she was appointed to care for him. Margie had been for a short time in a religious community. Because of that, we can assume she had read some of Merton's writings and was most likely impressed by the man she met in the hospital ward. Merton was, of course, already quite famous. His book *The Seven Storey Mountain* had sold millions of copies and was considered one of the greatest spiritual books of the time. He was now unwell and in pain and undoubtedly on medications that might have lowered his instinctive emotional defenses with a young, attractive, unmarried woman. In addition, Merton appears to have been ready for the relationship. He had written, reflecting on this hospitalization, that he was experiencing a lack of connection with the feminine in his life and saw that fact as a limitation in his personality.

The very subject of Merton's journal entries on his relationship with Margie has always been controversial. This, too, gave me pause. There are some people (I know, I have met several) who have lost respect for Merton because of this issue. I guess they feel that he was unfaithful to his vows, at least in spirit, by even entertaining a love for a real, flesh-and-blood woman. They think him weak at best and hypocritical at worst. And they are even offended that he should even write about his feelings in a "spiritual" journal.

There are others, like me, who believed that his relationship with Margie was important, even essential, for him to become a complete human being. When I heard of Merton's accidental death, electrocuted by a faulty fan after taking a bath in Thailand in 1968, I remarked to many people that to me he seemed not yet ready to die. My reason at the time was that in my estimation his writing on spirituality had become for some years before his death more and more distant and inaccessible: drier,

more esoteric, more cerebral, less relevant. Only when his journal *Learning to Love* was published—over twenty-five years after his death—did I become convinced of the timeliness of his dying. For in that journal he revealed how vulnerable, how out of control, how wildly and immaturely romantic—and therefore how human—he could be. Because of his love for Margie, I now believe, Merton finally became *incarnate*, that is, a “spirit in flesh”—as all followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the original “Word made flesh,” are called to become. As Jesus was not afraid to become “one of us,” neither any longer was Merton after he met Margie. With her, and apparently only her, he was ready to risk discovering more deeply than ever the inevitable imperfections of his humanity while trusting completely in the mercy and love of God for him...and for us.

Another question I had around writing on this topic concerned how willing people might be, in the face of scandals around sexuality and priesthood today, to accept that Merton had found himself open to so intimate a relationship. This concern is why I, a vowed religious woman, have chosen the approach you find in this book of imagining what Merton might have felt and writing it in a poem at the beginning of each chapter. Rather than giving my intellectual assessment of Merton or critiquing his relationship with Margie in these imagined poems, I have attempted to summarize aspects of Merton’s spiritual struggle in what I present as his own voice. I cannot tell you what an artistic risk I feel I am taking in doing so. Who am I to pretend to write what I think Merton might have written? I do so in a spirit of humility, only because I could not think of any other way to get to the heart of the matter. I feel that I understand what Merton was going through, not only because of what he wrote in his journal but also because of what so many have gone through in the own struggle to understand what it means to love.

I hope these imagined poems, the real quotes from Merton, and my brief commentaries on the various issues Merton confronted in trying to understand and respond to his and Margie's love for each other can help you focus on your own lovability and love for others. His comments on his relationship with Margie cut through his journal of this period, including the diary he sent to Margie in 1966 (see *Midsummer Diary for M*, LTL, 303-348). I encourage you to read them for yourself and draw your own conclusions and lessons.

All I want to do here is to do the same thing myself, with sensitivity to the pain and struggle his situation with Margie obviously caused Merton. To accomplish this task, and after trying several possibilities of how to address the challenge, I have chosen the following format: First, I start with a poem that I wrote in the imagined voice of Thomas Merton; second, I offer an actual quote from Merton; third, I offer my own short reflections on both the poem and the quote.

It seems to me there are a few salient arguments Merton grappled with that come out of the many pages of his journal from this time in his life. Because I trust that I somehow understand Merton's process, and because—as I have noted previously—I have been supported in that trust, I have attempted to focus his mental meanderings in a style similar to his journal entries. These short entries are my attempt to articulate the various aspects of his love for Margie and his struggle around them. They are not chronological but rather thematic. Though it was not my plan when I began to compose these reflections, there have turned out to be eighteen of them, the same number as the poems Merton wrote about Margie during this time (Merton, *Eighteen Poems*). While this number was coincidental, I simply mention it as being of interest to me and perhaps to you.

I still present this book with much trepidation. How do I

dare compose what I think Thomas Merton would have written about a woman whose identity we don't really know? What leads me to believe my approach adds anything to his own eloquent reflections? Most importantly for me, how might Merton himself respond to my putting words into his mouth? I can only answer those concerns by saying that I have long searched for a way to speak about this time in his life, one which I consider very significant. What follows here is the only way I know how to respond to the requests I have had to put my insights into written form. Please take them for what they are worth, in the spirit in which they are offered.

With this introduction, then, I present what I hope will be artistic, but true at the deepest level, reflections on the relationship of Merton with the woman he loved. In my opinion, it was Margie, more than any other person or any other experience, who brought the spiritual master to embrace the fullness of his humanity.

I hope what follows in these pages will at least be a clear articulation of how Merton faced and grappled with the questions of personal integrity and vocational commitment in his intimate relationship with a woman. At best, my hope is that my book helps clarify the personality of a man who was ahead of his time in so many ways, yet only learned near the very end of his life that the ground of love and truth lies not in the abstract but in the physical reality of other human beings.

Over the years in my work as a psychotherapist and spiritual director, I have come to know that people in the contemporary world and in the church privately address these questions. *Learning to Love* is a volume Merton allowed—even intended—to be published. In his prophetic way he anticipated and chose to articulate some of the issues celibate women and men religious face. Whether he foresaw what might come of his openness we do not know. What we do know is that he let us hear his hon-

est statements around them and the decisions he made. Once again, in this final aspect of his life, Merton has touched people in our time as we try in our own lives to discover what it means to be committed creatures of the Creator and followers of Jesus Christ. If this book contributes in any way to making one person better understand what it means to be fully human, I will be satisfied. When you have read the following pages, you can determine for yourself whether I have succeeded in doing so.





Thomas Merton might have written:

*I've always believed in incarnation,
But I think I haven't lived it much;
Maybe only in an occasional
Burst of some pious bubble
Blown up by me or somebody else
That says,
Let's get real. Let's write real.
But now
Let's live real is a door I'm not allowed to
Open.
But that contradicts my incarnation.
You only know how much is enough
By knowing how much is too much.
Deserts have no paths.
Risk has to be; where else grows wisdom?
But not in this arena?
This sounds insane
Any way you cut it.
Nuts if you plunge into it, into her.
Nuts if you wall off this fire at its Source.
At the body, the soul,
The all of me.*

Thomas Merton did write:

Genuine love is a personal revolution. Love takes your ideas, your desires, and your actions and welds them together in one experience and one living reality which is a new you. (Love and Living, 28)

.....

I now write:

When I first read this quotation from Thomas Merton's book *Love and Living*, I assumed he was talking about his relationship with God. Surely it could have had meaning if applied that way. Later on, however, I found that he had already experienced his relationship with Margie, the woman he always referred to in his journal only as "M," when he wrote these words. And I, like Merton, believe them to be true of all situations. We are used to words like "transformation" to describe the depth of the change that love can make in us if and when we leave ourselves open to receive it. Someone who risks this openness will never be the same again.

Merton's thesis here is that love takes you out of yourself, that you must fall into love, risking security and soundness for something "stronger than reason and more imperious even than business." (LAL, 26)

Coolness and self-possession will have to go in the face of real love, and a certain silliness is inevitable. One has to become something of a fool to allow the vulnerability necessitated by love on all levels of our existence. Merton speaks about how people in

love's emotions take over, even disturbing their eating and drinking and sleeping. Anyone who has ever yielded to love knows this to be true.

But the heart of the experience of love is more than the making of something ridiculous. It is, Merton tells us, our human destiny. Only when we can give ourselves over to someone in the way of love can we experience "a wholeness, a fullness of life." (LAL, 27)

Love is, of course, more than romance, although it can certainly include this component—as it does for so many. True love, according to Merton, embraces all of ourselves: "the capacity for self-giving, for sharing, for creativity, for mutual care, for spiritual concern."

We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another. We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated meditations. The meaning of our life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, by the one we love. And if this love is unreal, the secret will not be found, the meaning will never reveal itself, the message will never be decoded.... We will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love—either with another human person or with God. (LAL, 27)

The question that remains for me is whether human, romantic love is essential for the fullness of the experience of love. This may well be the question that always remained for Merton. Can a human being really learn the life-lessons of love without the intervention of another person with whom one is completely open and vulnerable? Whatever other people might decide is the correct answer to this question—and Merton leaves it open for others to resolve—for him the response is clear. Nothing before his

relationship with Margie had convinced him that he was lovable. And nothing after their relationship began was needed to prove to him that he was lovable. Michael Mott, Merton's official biographer, tells us that, after his experience of Margie, Merton never again talked of his inability to love and be loved. (Mott, 438)

Clearly for Merton, a human being—a young nurse about twenty-five years his junior—was the way God used to allow him to finally lose control and embrace his human vulnerability:

My true meaning and worth are shown to me not in my estimate of myself, but in the eyes of the one who loves me; and that one must love me as I am, with my faults and limitations, revealing to me the truth that these faults and limitations cannot destroy my worth in their eyes; and that I am therefore valuable as a person, in spite of my shortcomings, in spite of the imperfections of my exterior “package.” (LAL, 35)

