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MERTON AND THE RED THREAD

So tangled in the nets of love they lie
Lucretius¹

SUMMARY – Inspired by ‘A Midsummer Diary for M’, the journal of Merton’s relationship with Margie Smith, a young nurse he met while in hospital, this essay examines the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. After a quarter of a century of celibate life, of austerity and prayer, Merton found love not in the abstract but in the arms of a young woman. The relationship revealed Merton at his most insecure and confused, struggling with the pain of the deep loneliness he carried within. Merton’s understanding of love, solitude and loneliness were changed by this encounter. He could finally write that ‘the ground of loneliness/Is Love’ and that solitude is ‘the wide-openness of love and freedom’. The ‘red thread’ refers to a 14th century Zen *koan* or riddle that challenges the spiritual seeker to confront the power of sexuality, rather than suppress it, to integrate the physical and spiritual and to become whole. The *koan* asks ‘Why cannot even the most enlightened person sever the red thread of passion?’

Let me tell you the stories of three monks and their struggle with the red thread.

The first lived in the Egyptian desert three centuries after Christ’s death. He had withdrawn from society to seek the face of God in the solitude and silence of the barren sands. Sitting in his cell, in that huge silence that revealed the inner movements of his own heart and mind with such awful clarity, this man faced himself – his absurdity and distractions, his lostness, emptiness and need.

But the monk was not alone because a demon taunted him with sexual fantasies and urgent longings. Rather than the fire of solitude he craved the fire of a woman’s body in which to immolate himself. Suffering in solitude, this monk whose bones have for centuries now been part of shifting desert dust thought of the soft folds of a woman’s body, the curved dunes of her breasts and hips, the

¹ Cited in: Roger Scruton, *Sexual desire: A philosophical investigation*, London: Continuum, 2006, 94.

ecstasy of touch. He fingered like a rosary bead an image from his youth of his neighbour's daughter bending at the well. His loneliness had become a cold blade struck in his breastbone. There was no-one he could speak his troubles to, not one who cared for his soul. He could bear it no longer. He packed his bags and prepared to leave his cell and the desert life. Then, so the story goes, divine grace appeared to him in the form of a virgin who said to him: 'Do not go away but stay here with me, for none of the evils you have imagined has ever happened to you'. He obeyed and stayed there and at that moment his heart was healed.²

The second story concerns the Japanese Zen monk Ikkyu. He was born on January 1, 1394. His mother was a lady-in-waiting at the court of Emperor Go-Komatsu and Ikkyu was rumoured to have been the fruit of an illicit relationship between them. She was banished from the court and her boy sent to study in a temple in Kyoto where he became known for his intelligence and wit. Ikkyu grew up to become a maverick, a wandering 'crazy cloud' who preferred to be 'blown about madly, as wild as they come'.³ He despised the official institution of Zen where an *inka* or certificate of enlightenment was passed from master to disciple and was necessary to gain position or status at an important temple. He resigned his only official appointment as abbot of a temple after only ten days, and he marked it with this poem:

Between my legs the red thread stretches
and stretches.
If you come some other day asking for me,
Better look in a fish stall, a saké shop,
or a brothel.⁴

For Ikkyu, sex was integral to the spiritual path. The 'narrow path of asceticism' was not for him. He spent his mornings in the mountains sitting in meditation and his nights in town partying and 'engrossed in fervent love-play'.⁵

The 'red thread' is a Zen *koan* or riddle that challenges the spiritual seeker to confront the enormous power of sexual energy. It was the *koan* of Ikkyu's life:

In order to know the Way in perfect clarity, there is one essential point you must penetrate and not avoid: the red thread of passion between our legs that cannot be severed. Few face up to the problem, since it is not at all easy to settle. But you

² Helen Waddell, *The desert fathers*, New York: Vintage, 1998, 79.

³ John Stephens, *Three zen masters: A maverick, a master of masters, and a wandering poet*, New York: Kodansha International, 1993, 21.

⁴ Stephens, *Three zen masters*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

must attack it directly, without hesitation or retreat, for how else can liberation come?⁶

A shorter version of the *koan* asks ‘Why can’t even the most enlightened person sever the red thread of passion?’⁷ The *koan* points to the unavoidable reality of sex and asserts that I cannot amputate this part of my nature, nor can I disinherit myself of it. It captures the frisson, if not the friction, when sex rubs up against spirit. It asserts that any spiritual awakening that has not come to terms with and integrated this fundamental aspect of human nature is still lulled in the sleep of desire and delusion. In fact the red thread *koan* hints that the passions are the foundation of true spiritual awakening. They are also a paradoxical bind: to sever the red thread is to cut off the source of life and vitality, yet to be caught in its noose is to lose one’s freedom.

Ten years before his death in 1481 Ikkyu had a fleeting, passionate affair with a young woman, a blind minstrel named Lady Mori. From May to December, from spring blossoms to winter leaves, they knew the joy and harmony of mutual love and deep intimacy.

Night after night, we two lovebirds snuggle on
the meditation platform.
Lost in dalliance, intimate talk, and orgasmic
bliss.⁸

Ikkyu followed the red thread and came to a bittersweet appreciation of fleeting beauty, of love and the inevitability of death. He freed himself from forms and came home to the ‘original ground of being’.⁹ His perception of sexuality changed from one focused on women’s bodies as pleasurable objects to be possessed to a sexuality of relatedness, of person to person, mortal body to mortal body. On the meditation platform the sacred and the sexual communed, and sex did not desecrate the sacred.

The third story is of a twentieth century monk and writer who also wrestled with the red thread. His name was Thomas Merton and he was born in France in 1915. His mother was American, his father from New Zealand. Both were dead by the time Merton was sixteen. Aged nineteen, after a year studying in Cambridge, he moved to New York where he lived with his American grandparents and continued his studies at Columbia University. In 1941, after a dramatic conversion to Catholicism, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky, a monastery of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance,

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁹ Ibid., 45.

one of the most ascetic Roman Catholic monastic orders. He was twenty-six years old. It would be his home for the next twenty-seven years until his death in 1968.

In some ways Merton was an unlikely monk. His personality, on the surface at least, was naturally extrovert and gregarious. Though his vow of stability meant he could not leave the monastery, he exchanged letters with a global network of friends. This inner conflict between his need for others and his need for aloneness and silence in which to seek the face of God created a painful tension. Merton's vocation seemed to be a restless and relentless scouring out of loneliness for the truths it would reveal about himself, about life and about God. For many years he struggled for recognition of the hermit life within the Cistercians, a cenobitic order. At first he was given permission to walk alone in the woods outside the enclosure, and then temporary periods of solitude in an old tool shed in the woods that he named 'St Anne's'. He would go there for a few hours to 'pray and think and live'¹⁰ in the silence. Solitude became his prayer, silence his teacher.

From 1960 he began spending afternoons and occasional nights in a hermitage, a two-room cement-block cabin set on a hillside in the undulating landscape of lakes and woods surrounding Gethsemani. In 1965, after almost a quarter of a century of community life, Merton moved into the hermitage full-time. It was a momentous event for him: 'It is the first time in my life I ever really felt I had a home and that my waiting and looking were ended', he wrote.¹¹ In the hermitage he slept, ate, mediated and prayed, read and wrote, chopped wood, drank beer and went for walks in the woods. From now on he wanted his life to be centered on union with God in prayer and solitude.

Strange then that only a few months later, in April 1966, Merton fell in love and began an intense relationship with a young woman thirty years his junior. Or perhaps not so strange, for as Douglas Christie writes, 'how often it happens that issues of intimacy and sexuality turn out to be the places of the most severe testing of one's spiritual identity and commitments'.¹²

While recovering from an operation on his back in the local hospital, a student nurse came to his room and announced that he would be her patient. Her name was Margie. That morning she gave him a sponge bath and soon they were joking about a cartoon book they both knew. Margie was vivacious and strikingly pretty, with black hair and soft grey eyes. She knew who Merton was.

¹⁰ Patrick Hart & Jonathan Montaldo (Eds.), *The intimate Merton: Thomas Merton's life from his journals*, Oxford: Lion Hudson, 1996, 145.

¹¹ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 208.

¹² Douglas E. Christie, 'The work of loneliness: Thomas Merton's experiments in solitude', in: *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2005), 25-45: 39.

She had recently read one of his books. She asked him questions about it and was even bold enough to offer her critique. Merton enjoyed her company and care during the rest of his stay. On Wednesday of Easter week, three days before he returned to the monastery, she came in to say goodbye. She wore a dress and raincoat and her hair was free. She was flying to Chicago to see her fiancé for the Easter holidays, she said. Merton asked for her address, ostensibly because he thought she could give him valuable feedback on his writing, but his journals reveal the intensity of his emotional response to her. When she left the room he was 'terribly lonely and lay awake half the night tormented by the gradual realization that we were in love and I did not know how I could live without her'.¹³

Merton left a letter for her saying he needed friendship. A week later, the second week of Easter, she wrote to him at Gethsemani including a Snoopy cartoon in which Snoopy says 'It's nice to have a friend'. He wrote back impulsively telling her that he loved her. Three days later he telephoned her at the hospital and asked her to meet him when he went in for a check-up. She agreed, and so the riddle of their relationship began.

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Merton met Margie in Louisville on Tuesday morning, April 26, after his doctor's appointment. They went to a local restaurant with Merton's friend Jim Wygal, who left them shortly afterwards. They spent half an hour alone together. Margie admitted she was terrified. Merton too was frightened by the powerful current of 'awful, awesome rather, sexual affinity' coursing between them.¹⁴ He had no doubt that they were 'terribly in love, and it is the kind of love that can virtually tear you apart'.¹⁵ Merton gave her a poem that he had written in hospital, 'With the World in My Bloodstream'. After she left, Merton and Wygal went for a drink. Wygal hinted that the relationship was not a good idea. He drove Merton back to Gethsemani in tense silence. Merton called Margie the following evening from the monastery, using a direct phone line to avoid possible detection by the monastery's switchboard operator. Margie was happy and Merton too was 'flooded with peace and happiness'.¹⁶ He knew he was in deep and wrote in his journal about how 'badly I need her love to

¹³ Christine M. Bochen (Ed.), *Learning to love: The journals of Thomas Merton*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998, 208.

¹⁴ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 45-46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

complete me with its warmth and understanding and how utterly alone I am without her now'. 'Some talk for a hermit', he also noted, wryly.¹⁷

In 'The World in My Bloodstream'¹⁸ the poem's speaker lies 'bleeding in a numbered bed', lost, despairing and delirious, wondering 'who the hell I am'. The poem broods on 'man's enormous want', the excruciating gap between the wounded and mortal being who is 'Here below earth and bone' and the infinite, ungraspable reach of his desire and imagination. The speaker is hungry for the 'wild gift I made in those days'. Was Merton thinking of the gift of himself in entering the monastery? Or of his sexuality in vowing to a celibate life? In the coming months Merton came to realize that sex was 'something I did not use maturely and well (...) something I gave up without having come to terms with it'.¹⁹ The renunciation of intimate sexual love was an 'irreparable loss which I have not fully accepted'.²⁰ His hospital stay had opened a 'low gash' on his back, and his physical vulnerability had also reopened the old wound of lovelessness and loneliness that had plagued him all his life. The care of the nurses, and especially Margie's affection, awakened him to the fact that he had a 'deep emotional need for feminine companionship and love',²¹ for a healing and life-giving tenderness.

These struggles were not new for Merton. Several years previously he wrote that his 'worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being able to truly love, because I despair of ever being worthy of love'.²² This lack of trust in himself and other people marked many of his relationships, and not just with women. He remembered a headmaster in Cambridge who had been kind to him and offered his help, and of his own response as 'suspicious, and ungrateful'.²³ 'I could not believe him' wrote Merton, haunted by the deepening realization of how this emotional distance from others was rooted in his inability to 'believe' in love, or in himself as lovable. For Merton being loved meant anxiety over possible loss, and he was reluctant to run that risk. He was afraid of being hurt by Margie and 'humbled and confused by my weakness, my vulnerability, my passion'.²⁴

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Lynn R. Szabo (Ed.), *In the dark before dawn: New selected poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 2005, 188.

¹⁹ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 287.

²⁰ Ibid., 312.

²¹ Ibid., 334.

²² Michael Mott, *The seven mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984, 317.

²³ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 332.

²⁴ Ibid., 370.

It's not difficult to trace Merton's fear of loss to his childhood and the early death of both his parents, especially that of his mother when he was only six years old. Ruth Merton was dying stomach cancer and had been in hospital all the summer of 1921. One day the boy was playing in the garden when his father came home from the hospital and handed him a letter, addressed to him from Ruth. He opened and read it. It said she was dying and she would never see him again. The day she died the family went to the hospital but he was left in the car alone, aware only that something terrible was happening that could not be explained. To stifle his panic he concentrated on the rain streaking the car windows and the smell of the upholstery. He spent the next few months with his grandparents while his father went traveling. Tom, as his family called him, had suffered the double abandonment of his mother's death and his father's departure at a time of crisis.

What part did those early traumatic experiences play in his despairing of human love and his intense search contemplative union with God? Gary Hall suggests that he was 'sacralizing the aloneness he had learned as a child',²⁵ turning alienation and loneliness into a healing solitude, while his biographer Michael Mott wonders whether his solitude was a 'lamentation for the impossibility of human love'.²⁶ Certainly, as he took up his hermit life full-time in 1965, Merton wrote that he had a 'special covenant of loneliness and solitude'.²⁷ For healing to happen, suggests Hall, there was a need for 'redemptive experience of intimate human love'.²⁸

Two weeks after that meeting in Louisville Merton had a visit from two friends, his publisher James Laughlin and the poet Nicanor Parra. They collected Margie at the hospital and drove out to Louisville airport. Sitting by the windows, they watched jets landing on the runway, bringing in businessmen for the Kentucky Derby in two days' time. Laughlin and Parra found themselves unwitting witnesses to an unfolding relationship. Margie was radiant, though uneasy, and obviously in love with her monk. Merton took her photograph. Parra said one should 'follow the ecstasy'. When they finished their drinks Merton and Margie went outside to sit alone together on the grass near the perimeter of the airport. They cried as they kissed and held hands. It was as if everything was being made new, the whole world created again. Merton's poem *Louisville Airport* celebrates the occasion:

²⁵ Gary P. Hall, 'Autonomy and surrender, solitude and intimacy: A belated response to Walter E. Conn' (speech, given at the first general meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Southampton, May 1996). <http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/hall.html>

²⁶ Mott, *The seven mountains*, 453.

²⁷ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 155.

²⁸ Hall, 'Autonomy and surrender'.

And all the loneliness
 Is for a moment lost in this simple
 Liturgy of children permitting God
 To make again that love
 Which is His alone
 His alone and terribly obscure and rare
 Love walks gently as a deer
 To where we sit on this green grass²⁹

‘It was beautiful, awesomely so, to love so much and to be loved’,³⁰ wrote Merton when he returned to the monastery that night.

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As a young monk Merton’s spirituality was based on a rejection of the world. In his own words he ‘ran into years of false fervour, asceticism, intransigence, intolerance’.³¹ He grew slowly and painfully, opening himself out in concentric circles. He hungered to find where he belonged, to find home. It’s significant that many of Merton’s most profound spiritual experiences took place outside the monastic walls of his ‘home’ in Gethsemani. A decisive first step in his journey towards the world was taken on June 26, 1949, when he was given permission by the Abbot to go out walking in the woods by himself. Under a black, growling sky he struck out, resting finally with his back against an oak tree of top of one of the hills where the valley and woodland stretched out below to the horizon. As soon as he got away from people, he reflected, he was no longer ‘divided’ and the ‘presence of God’ invaded him.

The wind ran over the bent, brown grasses and moved the shoulders of all the green trees, and I looked at the dark green mass of woods beyond the distillery on those hills down to the south of us and realized that it is when I am with people that I am lonely and when I am alone I am no longer lonely because I have God and converse with Him without words, without distraction or interference.³²

Nature was Merton’s first home. It was where he felt a sense of belonging, of intimacy and ease in which he could simply be and unfold himself free from the self-imposed pressure to please others or protect himself. The beauty of the hills and woods conjured up the Freudian ‘oceanic feeling’ of original unity with the mother when there was no self, no division of subject and object,

²⁹ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 196.

³⁰ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 343.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

³² *Ibid.*, 93.

no-one to be lonely. Haunted by loss and rootlessness, fearful of being hurt again, Merton was seeking the preconscious unity, in nature and contemplation, which he had known before becoming an 'I'. In doing so he closely resembles those creative individuals, described by the psychologist Anthony Storr, who strive to 'create imaginary worlds, to compensate for what was missing in their lives, to repair the damage they had suffered, to restore to themselves a sense of worth and competence'.³³ Being with others revealed his alienation. Being alone, the inner and outer cohered and he had a sense of connection and wholeness. Years later, reviewing his monastic life, he wrote about 'the soft embrace of this "mother" – this silent, gentle circle of hills that has comforted me for eighteen years. One of the few things I love deeply and purely'.³⁴ Solitude in nature created a healing space, held his brokenness, allowed him to find out who he really was.

Only when he was alone could he really drop his defenses and relax the 'psychic and spiritual cramp which knots us in the painful, vulnerable, helpless "I" (...) knotted upon nothing'.³⁵ Merton could be alone, but he could not be alone in the presence of others in the sense of being vulnerable and allowing his true self to be seen. The psychiatrist Donald Winnicott described the capacity to be alone as originating in the child's 'experience of being alone in the presence of mother',³⁶ who is present and available without distracting or interfering with the child's play and exploration, acting as a secure base from which the child can move out into the world and become independent. Eventually the mother's love and reassurance is introjected as a 'good object' constituting part of one's identity, a psychic touchstone I can run my fingers over whenever I feel threatened with disintegration by the sheer unpredictability of life. That touchstone is needed most of all where so much need and longing is staked – the roulette wheel of human relationships, the dice-throw of intimacy. In protecting himself from being hurt again Merton also kept at bay the love that might have healed him and made him whole. As it was, others were indeed a threat to his fragile sense of self and inner stability. His dilemma was, in Storr's words, 'a desperate need for love combined with an equally desperate fear of close involvement'.³⁷ The seeds of his disintegration anxiety were probably sown in his 'despairing and desperate'³⁸ childhood, the death of his mother and the absence of empathic parental understanding.

³³ Anthony Storr, *Solitude*, London: HarperCollins, 1997, 145.

³⁴ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 183.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, New York: Doubleday, 1989, 224.

³⁶ D.W. Winnicott, 'The capacity to be alone', in: *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 39 (1958), 416-420: 418.

³⁷ Storr, *Solitude*, 101.

³⁸ Mott, *The seven mountains*, 25.

St Anne's was Merton's first hermitage. There he drowned himself in silence and prayer. Intensely sensitized to the sacramental moment, you can almost sense the stillness he wrote in: 'the sun and the clouds and the blue sky (...) one small bird sings quietly in the cedars, one car goes by in the remote distance, and the oak leaves move in the wind'.³⁹ His love of solitude confirmed his call to solitude. Solitude was not something extraordinary or superhuman but simply the 'climate in which I can simply be what I am meant to be: living in the presence of the living God'.⁴⁰ Solitude was simplifying and purifying Merton, making him an 'ordinary' human being, rejoining him to the human race. The crucial thing was not physical isolation from others, though that too was important. What really mattered was interior freedom, harmony and peace, a healing of wounds and knots that made living with and relating to others so difficult. In this understanding solitude is not an end in itself but a means of waking up, of seeing into the fundamental realities of existence and being liberated by this insight. Merton's journals show how present he was in St. Anne's, how he practiced deep observation, not to escape others but find inner peace and healing. Through insight into reality he hoped to find freedom from the fetters of past hurt with which he lived day and night.

In a journal entry of March 19, 1958 Merton writes about an afternoon in St Anne's after a long absence. Looking back he counts the secret blessings of many silent hours spent alone there. And three weeks previously there is an entry in which he describes a dream about a young Jewish girl named Proverb.

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect, 'She belongs to the same race as St. Anne'. I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name (...)⁴¹

The dream was profoundly significant for Merton. He associated Proverb with the solitude of St. Anne's and understood her to be an incarnation of Wisdom, also known as Sophia. The Book of Proverbs had always spoken to him. In it the love and knowledge of God is personified as Wisdom, a woman who 'delights to be with the children of humanity' (Prv 8:31) and offers insight, understanding and a holy life to all who love and embrace her. Sophia is God as feminine, creative and nourishing. Merton wrote a love letter to Proverb expressing his gratitude to her for 'loving in me something that I had thought

³⁹ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 137-138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴¹ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 158.

I had entirely lost and someone who, I thought, I had long ago ceased to be'.⁴² Later, Merton would sense a 'strange connection in my deepest heart between Margie and the "Wisdom figure" (...) Most mysterious, haunting, deep, lovely, moving, transforming!'⁴³

It was the awakening of the feminine in his life that revealed and began to heal Merton's 'inmost sickness'. What was most personal, what touched the sore and hidden recesses of his heart, was his relationship with 'womanness'. He feels there is a love, a tender understanding and receptivity, a healing touch and warmth that 'cannot come from a man and that is so essential'.⁴⁴ He acknowledges the 'giant, stupid rift in my life, the *refusal* of woman'. But as he developed friendships with women during the 1950s and, at the time of meeting Margie, realized and admitted his deep emotional need for women and for love, he grieved its decades-long absence from his life and learned to 'accept this love' even if it meant admitting an 'irreparable loss'. Not to grieve would have meant a tragic chastity of mere refusal which could not admit loss as loss. Chastity, Merton began to realize, was his 'most radical poverty', one he had not really foreseen when he made that 'wild gift' of himself as a young man whose relationships with women oscillated between the selfishness and glibness of a calculated diffidence, and an intense need manifest as inarticulate shyness.

If the young Merton had 'made whores of his girlfriends',⁴⁵ the older believed that 'man is most human and most proves his humanity by the quality of his relationship with woman'.⁴⁶ He now saw that the monk's life had to embrace 'real love for real people'⁴⁷ and he warned himself: 'Beware of the temptation to refuse love, to reject love, for ostensibly spiritual motives. Consider the awful sterility of those who, claiming to love God, have in reality dispensed themselves from all obligation to love anyone'.⁴⁸ He only needed to step out of the self-constructed and lonely prison of self and remember the 'Law of Love' written in his own heart. 'The Law of Love is the deepest law of our nature (...) our nature inclines us to love, and to love freely'; it demands that we should 'reach our fulfillment by loving (...) finally we must love others and ourselves in and for God'. To do this the 'natural force' of our sexual instinct must be used 'freely and deliberately', elevated to a 'personal and spiritual level'.⁴⁹ The

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 131.

⁴⁴ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 312.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 229.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, 122.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 121-122.

enlightened person does not try to sever the red thread but must engage consciously with this energy to realize a loving freedom.

In 1959, seven years before he met Margie, he distilled this whole development in his spiritual life in a prose poem called *Hagia Sophia*.⁵⁰ It is a song to 'the feminine child, playing in the world, playing at all times before the creator' and celebrates the homecoming of 'all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone' to a 'unity of love', to 'one Christ' who is Sophia, the radiant love and wisdom of God. The poem opens with a man lying asleep in a hospital bed who is woken from his dreams by the soft voice of a nurse, by the cool touch of her hand. This is taken directly from an experience recorded in Merton's journal of July 2, 1960, the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin, when he was in St Anthony's hospital in Louisville for x-rays on his back:

At 5.30, as I was dreaming in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream – it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life – as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the feminine voice, the voice of the Mother: yet she speaks everywhere and in everything.⁵¹

'Perhaps solitaries are made by severe mothers',⁵² Merton once wrote. Certainly he remembered his own mother as 'strict, stoical, determined'.⁵³ But in this journal entry and in *Hagia Sophia* the mother is kind, loving, soft. She comes to him when he is vulnerable and weak. She blesses him with her cool hands, and he feels her breath on his shoulder, feels the dark strands of her hair brushing against his cheek. Merton sensed the deep wisdom of 'love and joy and communion'⁵⁴ incarnate in the unnamed nurse who woke him that morning in July in St Anthony's hospital and unknowingly made him a new person, invited him to discover a new creation. She awakens him from his dream of separateness and loneliness, 'newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness'.⁵⁵

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May 7, 1966, was a bright, cool spring day. Merton and Margie left the picnic group behind and wandered off alone together down one of Gethsemani's old

⁵⁰ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 65.

⁵¹ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 200.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁵ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 66.

logging roads, finally sitting down on a mossy bank by a creek, one of Merton's favorite places. There, he wrote later in his journal, 'we talked and loved and opened our hearts to each other'.⁵⁶ Merton read his *Louisville Airport* poem to her. He was again moved and ravished by Margie's 'simple, spontaneous, total love'. Receiving and reciprocating this love had a powerful effect on his being. Mirroring Margie's giving of herself and her loving of him, he had gone from a 'failure to really trust another person enough to give myself completely'⁵⁷ to the realization that he could 'love with an awful completeness'.⁵⁸ What was awful was the depth of his own need and the consuming power of the feelings welling up from inside, the huge urge to give himself without reservation, the loss of control, and the knowledge that he had intuited on that first meeting in Cunningham's that this love could 'tear you apart'. A week later Merton woke in the dead of night in a 'splendid and terrible crisis of love':

I had been dreaming of some beautiful day and a voice said, 'of course it is beautiful, it is Derby Day and Derby Day is always beautiful'. Then I woke up with a sense of 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, all its beauty and lovableness, the enormously valuable gift of her love to me! I wept for half an hour, shaken with sobs, still not completely awake, absorbed in the deep reality of this vision and this hope.⁵⁹

Derby Day became talismanic for Merton, part of the fabric of his being. He saw it as the day that they were recreated in the image and likeness of love. Because they had both breathed in this love and been reborn in it, it could not be taken from them. It was imbibed, secreted through the pores of the skin, stored in the flesh and in the blood, in the bones and the bronchioles. Merton took the risk of being loved, of opening himself and being seen by another. He knew he had to 'dare to love, to bear the anxiety of self-questioning that love arouses in me, until 'perfect love casts out fear'.⁶⁰

This love was not abstract or spiritual, it was of the body. Something in him needed this woman. Her caress, the touch of her hand and of her love, incarnated Merton. According to philosopher Roger Scruton, desire is always interpersonal, always has that intentional component of being focused on someone, *somebody*. The body has its own wisdom and language, deeper than words and more potent than any disembodied self-image or abstraction. It is not just a collection of organs but a mode of presence, and no 'biological taxonomy could

⁵⁶ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 54.

⁵⁷ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 248.

⁵⁸ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

capture the lineaments of sexual desire'.⁶¹ Far from the body being an obstacle to love, to union and to transcendence, it is the necessary ground of them. This was very much the Semitic understanding of the inextricable, if inexplicable, unity of spirit and matter. 'We are called to recognize God contained in the soil of our clay and speaking through our earthiness', writes John Mossi. The body is sacred and its meaning is relational; sexuality is the mark of God's creative, vibrant, aroused, joyful Spirit in us because God 'pitches his tent in who we are, in the complex drives of our sexuality helps us reach out in communication and communion'.⁶²

The desert monks of fourth century Christianity believed that the sexual impulse was the 'ideogram of the unopened heart',⁶³ the place of greatest potential selfishness and possessiveness where I am least likely to relinquish control and to take the well-being of the one desired into account. Perhaps sexual desire only ends when they put the last nail in my coffin. Always there is the biological imperative, the demand for pleasure. Mahatma Gandhi believed that sex is not just a physical instinct, but an 'expression of the tremendous spiritual force behind all love and creativity which the Hindu scriptures call "kundalini", the life force of evolution'.⁶⁴ Through the practice of 'Brahmacharya', the sublimation and channelling of the sexual instinct, Gandhi mastered his passions and transformed them into spiritual power and compassionate service. After a quarter century of celibate life Merton held that he should have transcended erotic love and entered into something 'more pure, more perfect, more totally oblation'. 'But that is the trouble', he reflected: 'How can one go "further" than something to which one has not yet attained?' Drawing out the implications of his thought he wrote: 'It does mean that we cannot love perfectly if we have not in some way loved maturely and truly'.⁶⁵ By the spring and summer of 1966 Merton had reached a point of acute inner conflict. Erotic love, physical and emotional intimacy, could no longer be repressed, ignored or denigrated. He could now admit that, where he thought he had his sexuality under control, in fact it was a 'rather frantic suppression'.⁶⁶

There is no doubt of Merton's sexual attraction to Margie: he was 'haunted and comforted by her womanliness, her sweetness, her hair, cheeks, neck,

⁶¹ Roger Scruton, *Sexual desire: A philosophical investigation*, London: Continuum, 2006, vii.

⁶² John Mossi, 'Celibacy and embodiment: The symbolic and spiritual issues', cited in: David Ranson, 'What does the bible say about sex?', in: *The Furrow* 59 (2008) no.9, 477-486: 480.

⁶³ Peter Brown, *The body and society*, cited in: Mark Patrick Hederman, *Manikon eros: Mad, crazy love*, Dublin: Veritas, 2000, 71.

⁶⁴ Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in crises*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 37.

⁶⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, 190-191.

⁶⁶ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 67.

lips...'.⁶⁷ Physical intimacy was an experience of such power it left him reeling; they 'loved each other to ecstasy'.⁶⁸ If Merton had previously denied his need for human intimacy and repressed his sexual longings, he was now faced fully with his need and his desire, with the 'ardent and loving forces' in himself.⁶⁹ These forces had to be integrated before he could become a whole person, fully human. And if he chose to seek the face of God in solitude, he would do so in full knowledge of what he was forgoing and deeply grieve the loss. As one of his female friends reminded him when he told her about the relationship: 'You have given up everything on entering here'.⁷⁰ He knew that of course, but now he could state bluntly that his monastic life, though it was the one he had chosen and vowed and loved, was 'built on the central cost of a cruel deprivation. That cruelty burns into my heart at times like a brand'.⁷¹

Merton's loneliness, anguish and need, his 'baffling, inarticulate desire',⁷² is written on every page of *A Midsummer Diary for M* ('Or the account of how I once again became untouchable') part journal, part love letter, written in June 1966 as he attempted to come to terms with his feelings for Margie and the contradictions and absurdity of being a monk, and not just monk but a hermit, with a woman. The *Diary* is incredibly moving as a declaration of love and need. It affirms the acceptability, even the beauty, of need. So Merton writes to Margie:

In the sweetness of the mild morning I am reached again by the insistence, the pathos, the loveliness of your love. Something I cannot describe or explain, that seeks me out, that reaches me with its gentle appeal. The message that comes saying 'I need you, I love you'.⁷³

What did Merton really want? Perhaps his desire was not, in the words of Sebastian Moore OSB, 'an emptiness needing to be filled but a fullness needing to be in relation'.⁷⁴ Moore would have it that as beings desired into being by God, humans are absolutely desirable, and our love-hunger is not 'the cry of the empty heart' but our longing for our beauty to be recognized and affirmed by another. Merton shared the same insight: 'The basic error is to regard love as need (...) a lack, an emptiness...'.⁷⁵ Margie gave him the feeling that he was

⁶⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 305.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 313.

⁷¹ Ibid., 330-331.

⁷² Ibid., 308.

⁷³ Ibid., 317.

⁷⁴ Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the liberator of desire*, New York: Crossroad, 1989, 18.

⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *Love and living*, New York: Harcourt, 1979, 33.

worthy of love, a feeling long-forgotten and denied. So he could write that 'one of the good sane things about this love is seeing myself as loved by Margie (...) I am known to her as I am'.⁷⁶

Their relationship continued to deepen during the early summer, 'a complete physical ripening of love, a leisurely preparation of our whole being, like the maturing of apples in the sun'.⁷⁷ On May 19, The Feast of the Ascension, the anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in 1949, Margie arrived in Gethsemani in a light blue Ford truck driven by one of her nursing friends. She and Merton walked off alone together into the woods. The sun poured down heat and light. She carried a bag with food and sweet white wine for a picnic. The ice cooling the wine started to melt, wetting her blue skirt. They sat, ate, and drank but mostly they 'made love and love and love for five hours'.⁷⁸ The experience inspired Merton's poem *May Song*.

In this heaven let me lie down
 Under the fragrant tent
 Of your black hair
 Under those long lashes
 I am again found
 By your wise and lasting look
 As all the hair of the sky
 Comes slowly down
 To bury me forever
 In warm love.⁷⁹

The word 'lost' recurs four times in the poem, but Merton is 'found' by this incredible love and returns, as in *Louisville Airport*, to a profound sense of reality stripped clean, seen with astonishing newness of vision. Merton and Margie 'drown in each other' and he clings to 'the round hull' of her hips and cries for her 'saving body'. Ascension Day left him in the 'grip of this deep warm sexual love disturbing me and flooding through me, shaking my whole being from the heart'.⁸⁰ He imbibed her, took her inside him.

The print
 Of your breasts
 In my heart
 Deep inside me
 Is your lovely hill

⁷⁶ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 58.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁹ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 198.

⁸⁰ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 66.

Deep inside me
Your silken cry

It was the summer of light. That light was revealed in their mutual loving: 'Together we create the light of this day for each other'.⁸¹ Merton saw that light on Margie's face, 'shining with love'.⁸² Though they had both vowed that their relationship would be chaste, when they were together 'nature placidly and inexorably said something more profound and perhaps irreversible'.⁸³ He ended up 'impatient of sex, backing away from domination by it, suspicious of its tyranny'.⁸⁴

Compromising his vows and the life he had chosen began to cause huge anxiety for Merton. He lost weight and slept badly. In a mood of despair and self-criticism, he wrote that he was not being 'either a good monk or a good lover', and he glimpsed the repercussions of the relationship on Margie: 'I have tried to be things that were incompatible and have ended up only hurting her and leaving her sorrowful, confused, pained'.⁸⁵

On a visit to Louisville he left a letter for her saying they would have to end the relationship. As he was being driven home past the hospital he felt as though he was 'slowly being torn in half'. Later, as he prayed, 'deep silent cries came slowly tearing and rending their way up out of the very ground of my being'.⁸⁶

In July Merton went to Louisville for a doctor's appointment. By now his Abbot was aware of the relationship and had forbidden him to see Margie. Merton himself was trying to find his way back to his life of solitude and prayer, but he couldn't bring himself to let her go. He asked her to meet him at the surgery and they took a taxi to Cherokee Park where, as they put down their picnic, Margie turned her face up to him to be kissed. The weather was bright and cool. They found a quiet place in a wooded hollow and 'loved and kissed' passionately.⁸⁷ Their love had deepened in their time of separation, Merton felt; they had 'really come to belong to each other'. They talked. She was moving to Cincinnati for a new job, partly because of the reactions of the Abbot and Merton's friends to their relationship. Margie told him that he was 'the only truly kind and gentle person' she had ever known and that she knew he 'loved God'. Merton was glad that she experienced his love as 'gentle, kind, warm, tender'. This is real love, said Margie, the kind 'no one accepts'.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

They would only meet a few more times.

They held each other and rocked and swam in 'love's wordless pain', in a 'lovely desperate grip'. The big trees cast their shadows on them. As he kissed her she kept saying 'I am happy now, I am at peace now'.

*

* *

Merton was trying slowly to turn back to the life he had vowed and lived for twenty-five years, a life centred on union with God in prayer and solitude. The relationship put him with his back to the wall about his own identity, his life in a religious institution, and his vocation to solitude. Though aware of the absurdity and difficulty of such a life he was irresistibly drawn to it, a moth to the flame. 'Why do I live alone?' he asked himself.

I have to lead this absurd existence. In some mysterious way I am condemned to it. I cannot have enough of the hours of silence when nothing happens. When the trees say nothing. When the birds sing (...) This aloneness, this freedom, this being without care, unconnected, with nothing to gain and nothing to lose! Nothing to explain.⁸⁸

On September 10, 1966 Merton made a commitment, witnessed by his Abbot, to 'live in solitude for the rest of my life'.⁸⁹ However the phone calls and letters continued, though with greater infrequency, into 1968, the year of Merton's death. When Merton was in hospital again in October 1966 she came to visit him twice. He wanted to see more of her but also recognized that the affair is 'no longer so intense' and he felt 'much freer'.⁹⁰ In 1967 he was still wondering if he should have left everything to be with her. Though he felt he 'must make sure it is ended' he didn't have 'the courage to face the idea of never calling her again'.⁹¹

It was an impossible predicament for a man who seemed to thrive on predicament. There was the 'fact of passion' and there was the 'fact of vocation to deep mystical life',⁹² and while they were interrelated he had to chose one path, one way to live this passion and this vocation. It was a *koan* he had to live day by day. After calling her in Cincinnati in April 1967 and learning that she would probably marry her fiancé he wrote: 'I see again that real loneliness is all that is left for me and I must fully accept it'.⁹³ Two days later he went

⁸⁸ Ibid., 341.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 151.

⁹¹ Ibid., 222.

⁹² Ibid., 157.

⁹³ Ibid., 222.

walking through the fields and sat on a cinder block with his back against an old outhouse and realized that he had hit a 'kind of suck hole of despair'. 'Utter sadness, loneliness, hopelessness, no prospect of any human joy left. Drained of my trust in the love that has held me up (...) I will at least keep praying for her to be happy'.⁹⁴ And he noted that when his journal was eventually published his relationship with Margie should not be covered up; he wanted to be honest about who he was and about his search, his mistakes and limitations, 'my need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a "solution". And perhaps not a perfect solution either'.⁹⁵

For Merton solitude was a basic and inescapable human reality, not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived. Ultimately there are not many solitudes, with everybody sentenced to solitary confinement in their own skins for life, but 'One Solitude, in which all persons are at once together and alone'.⁹⁶ Or as the existentialist theologian Gabriel Marcel argued, 'human reality is not an interminable solo of each person's solitary encounter with the real'.⁹⁷ Loneliness is the pain of one trapped in the prison cell of self, but the cell of the solitary opens out to the world and embraces it because he sees that he is part of everything and everything is part of him. There is no separate self. 'He is truly alone', wrote Merton, 'who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one'.⁹⁸ Solitude 'tends only to *unity*' and is above all else a 'life of love'.⁹⁹ Love opens loneliness into the freedom of solitude. Of his loneliness for Margie he wrote that it was 'part of a general loneliness that I have chosen. Or that has chosen itself for me. I can never be anything else than solitary. My loneliness is my ordinary climate'.¹⁰⁰

In Merton's poem 'Song: If you Seek' it is solitude herself who calls him into the desert of silence and goes before him into emptiness.

When I, loneliness, give my special signal
Follow my silence, follow where I beckon.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 223.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 234.

⁹⁶ Merton, *Love and living*, 17.

⁹⁷ Erwin W. Strauss & Michael A. Machado, 'Marcel's notion of incarnate being', in: *The philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Illinois: Open Court, 1984 (The Library of Living Philosophers 17), 123-152: 140.

⁹⁸ Merton, *Love and living*, 17.

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, 'Notes for a philosophy of solitude', in: *Disputed questions*, Florida: Harcourt Brace, 1985, 177-207: 186, 203.

¹⁰⁰ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 319.

Solitude is 'living with wisdom'. She will pray for and protect the 'little beast, little spirit' who wanders meekly into this desolate place, until the seeker becomes the silence.

For I, solitude, am thine own self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen!¹⁰¹

Silence is the gift of solitude, the climate in which it is possible to listen deeply, without distraction. 'Silence is necessary if we are to hear God speaking in eternal silence', writes Augustinian Martin Laird.¹⁰² Merton calls this the silence in which 'the Hearer is No-Hearer',¹⁰³ which brings a deep self-emptying and reveals within 'a point or spark which belongs entirely to God (...) [a] little point of nothingness and absolute poverty'.¹⁰⁴ The marriage of solitude and silence gives birth to wisdom in which I deeply know and feel that 'the ground of loneliness/Is Love'.¹⁰⁵ Deeper than loneliness, the pain and despair of isolation, is the love that is the hidden ground of being. So Merton journeyed from an abstract and transcendent solitude to one that was earthed and relational, that did not withdraw from life but opened up to it so that he could make a 'total gift of himself to God'.¹⁰⁶ And he had something teach others: 'Simply that being alone and absurd are not things to be feared'.¹⁰⁷

Falling in love with Margie intensified the paradox of love and loneliness in Merton's life. The relationship was not something he really understood himself, but he placed it at the 'very heart of my aloneness, and not just on the periphery somewhere'.¹⁰⁸ A journal entry of April 14, 1966, two weeks after their first meeting, distills and articulates what years of lonely searching had taught him:

One thing has suddenly hit me – that nothing counts except love and that a solitude that is not simply the wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing. Love and solitude are the one ground of true maturity and freedom (...) true solitude embraces everything, for it is the fullness of love that rejects nothing and no-one, is open to All in All.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 95.

¹⁰² Martin Laird, *Into the silent land: A guide to the Christian practice of contemplation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 2.

¹⁰³ Merton, *Love and living*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, 158.

¹⁰⁵ Szabo, *In the dark before dawn*, 193.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in solitude*, Boston: Shambala, 1993, 116.

¹⁰⁷ Bochen, *Learning to love*, 322.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

As the relationship faded and Merton worked to centre himself in his hermit life the old contradictions and unhappiness seemed to continue – uncertainty about remaining in Gethsemani, griping about his Abbot, wanting more solitude but courting visitors. It's hard to know how much the relationship changed him. Merton's friend and biographer John Howard Griffith believed that Merton now knew that he had the capacity to love fully and saw love as 'a transcendent spiritual power (...) the deepest creative power in human nature'.¹¹⁰

Psychiatrist Mark Epstein writes that 'intimate sexual relations can bring us to a place of mystical knowledge, not through merger but through an opening up of the vastness that hangs between two individuals'.¹¹¹ The red thread seeks to tie itself in a noose about the desired object, to possess it and keep it forever, but comes up against otherness. The lover is forced to admit that his desire is unrealistic, to acknowledge the other's absolute freedom and integrity. So he must turn and turn again and follow the thread to its source in the rag and bone shop of his own heart, there to confront the truth about desire.

In Tibetan art, sexual imagery of a mating couple represents ecstatic union and the interpenetration of male and female energies. Epstein writes: 'In this tradition the active male desire, chastened by that gap that desire creates, becomes empathy or compassion. The desire to possess becomes the ability to relate. The beholding desire, represented by the female partner, is a metaphor for wisdom, as exemplified by the capacity to be. Compassion is male and wisdom female'.¹¹² Merton, lover of Sophia, would have agreed.

The insatiability of desire reveals the infinite. It necessitates renunciation, not of desire, but of control and of the illusion that we can ever be complete by possessing something or someone. 'Renunciation is the act of love, chastity the appropriate language of desire', writes monk Mark Hederman.¹¹³ Desire as a teacher can transform my perception and open my eyes to the wonder and sacredness of all creation. The holiest prayer of the Jewish tradition, the Sh'ma, is about this transformation of desire, of red threads becoming blue threads in the awareness that life is blessing and gratuitous gift.

Let Israel throughout her generations make
Fringes, with a thread of blue,
On the corners of her garments
To look at and remember all the blessings of God

¹¹⁰ Merton, *Love and living*, 34.

¹¹¹ Mark Epstein, *Open to desire: The truth about what the Buddha taught*, New York: Penguin, 2006, 196.

¹¹² Epstein, *Open to desire*, 183.

¹¹³ Hederman, *Manikon eros*, 41.

And do them.
 Otherwise
 All of you will follow only what your eyes see
 And your heart's desire
 Forgetting that everything you see
 And whatever you desire
 Are signs of my presence in the world.¹¹⁴

In August 1968, a few weeks before leaving Gethsemani to travel to Asia, Merton burned Margie's love letters without glancing at them. Flame and smoke rose up to the sun and blue Kentucky sky. His only remark was 'incredible stupidity in 1966!'¹¹⁵ He prayed that in his pilgrimage East he would find 'the great compassion'¹¹⁶ in which desire as having melts into desire as being, where the desire to possess becomes compassion and respect for the other in their human solitude and unfathomable depth. His journal records that he felt he knew and had seen what he was looking for. In Sri Lanka he visited an ancient Buddhist site. Standing before huge statues of the Buddha he noted the light and silence of the 'extraordinary faces (...) the great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing...'.¹¹⁷ So he sees everything as blessing and compassion, beneath the shadow and the disguise.

¹¹⁴ Epstein, *Open to desire*, 189.

¹¹⁵ Hart & Montaldo, *The intimate Merton*, 405.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 435.