

# Thomas Merton's Exploration of the Desert Landscape of the Human Heart

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March 2, 1966 – To go out to walk slowly in this wood – this is a more important and significant means to understanding, at the moment, than a lot of analysis and a lot of reporting on the things “of the spirit.”

(*Learning to Love*, p. 23)

Thomas Merton entered the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941. He was twenty-six years old and had been a Roman Catholic for less than three years. Merton took with him into the monastery a youthful zeal and a traditional understanding of monastic life. Much would change in the years following Merton's entry into the monastery.

A great deal of the change in Merton's life unfolded in the 1950s. In these ten years, Merton made dramatic shifts in his understanding of monasticism and of his relationship to the rest of the world. He grew deeply in his grasp of his own spiritual life. And he prepared himself to journey beyond the monastery walls.

They were busy productive years for Thomas Merton. He served his monastery as master of scholastics and in 1955 became master of novices. They were also years in which he attained considerable celebrity status in the world outside the monastery. He published at least one book every year throughout the '50s except in 1952 and carried on a voluminous correspondence. Merton's writings in this period reflect the dynamic, changing land-

scape of his interior world as he moved in two apparently conflicting directions at the same time. Merton was developing a growing appreciation of and desire for the life of solitude. At the same time his gaze was increasingly penetrating beyond the walls of his monastery and embracing the world outside Gethsemani. It was in 1958 that Merton had his powerful experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky in which, as he recounts it in *Conjectures of a Guilty By-stander*, “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs.”<sup>1</sup>

But the '50s were also unsettled years for Merton. He wrestled with his vocation as a writer, experienced turmoil with his abbot, and questioned his place at the Abbey of Gethsemani. In the late forties Merton had considered transferring to the Carthusians. Then in 1955 he thought about joining the Camaldolese. In July 1959 he wrote to Dom Gabriel Sortais hoping to help establish a monastic foundation in South America. And in late September 1959 he wrote Msgr. Larraona at the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome seeking an indult to allow him

to transfer to a monastery in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

On March 11, 1958 Merton wrote in his journal,

intellectually and emotionally there is a struggle to justify what I am doing. There is so much here that I cannot accept. And I know in the depths of my heart really that it is not supposed to be accepted, and it is better not to accept it. That if I accept in the sense of "conforming" I would be *unfaithful* to my real vocation.<sup>2</sup>

However, not long after this rather dismal journal entry, Merton seems to have recovered the ability to accept his circumstances with greater peace. By the end of 1959 when Merton received a letter from the Congregation for Religious refusing permission for him to leave Gethsemani to move to Cuernavaca, he accepted the decision with apparent peace and contentment. On December 17, 1959, after reading the letter from the Congregation, Merton wrote in his journal,

The letter is obviously an indication of God's Will and I accept it fully. So then what? Nothing. Trees, hills, rain. And prayer much lighter, much freer, more unconcerned. A mountain lifted off my shoulders – a Mexican mountain I myself had chosen.<sup>3</sup>

Over the remaining ten years of his life, Merton occasionally chafed against what he perceived to be the strictures of life at Gethsemani. But, by the end of the '50s

he seems to have reached a degree of contentment with his life as it was. Merton seems to have arrived at a place where it was possible for him much of the time to experience relative peace regardless of the external circumstances of his life. He became increasingly able to embrace life as it presented itself to him in the moment. On May 12, 1959 Merton wrote in his journal, "What I seek is simply being – and here it is. Here is the straw, here is the rain, here is the silence."<sup>4</sup>

What was it that helped Merton shift from the restless unease that kept him planning and scheming in the '50s, to the place within himself where he could accept his situation saying simply, "The letter is obviously an indication of God's Will"?

### *'The desert becomes a paradise when it is accepted as desert...'*

II. A partial answer to the question of how Merton found his way to some measure of acceptance and peace may be suggested in an extraordinary statement Merton is reported to have made in an address he gave just six months before he died. In May of 1968, as he was beginning his trip to Asia, Merton visited California where he spoke to a small gathering of men and women meeting to discuss the renewal of the life of prayer in monasticism. One of the monks at this meeting was Brother David Steindl-Rast who recorded Merton's comments and reported them in a 1974 essay that appears in the book *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monas-*

*tic Tribute* edited by Brother Patrick Hart. According to Steindl-Rast's account, on this occasion Merton said,

The desert becomes a paradise when it is accepted as desert. The desert can never be anything but a desert if we are trying to escape it. But once we fully accept it in union with the passion of Christ, it becomes a paradise.<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual discipline of acceptance is learned in the barren landscape of the desert. It is in the desert, stripped bare of the distractions and illusions of normal living that we come to face the limitations and confines of our lives and learn to accept the parameters of our circumstances as they are.

The full flowering of Merton's inner peace and self-acceptance probably did not arrive until the tumult of 1966 when he entered briefly into an illicit relationship with the young nurse known in his journals as "M." Even then, the desert seems to have had a role to play. In June 1966 while still in the midst of his confusion over his relationship with "M," Merton refers to the ancient fourth and fifth century Christian tradition commonly known as the Desert Fathers. Merton wrote of the "failures and problems of those forgotten people who actually lived as solitaries in the past." And he asked, "How many of them were lonely, and in love?"<sup>6</sup> In the very midst of the incredible turmoil caused by his relationship with "M," Merton's understanding of the spirituality of the desert helped him see that "in solitude when accurate limitations are seen and accepted, they then vanish, and a new dimension opens up.

The present is in fact, in itself, *unlimited*."<sup>7</sup>

Near the end of the 1950s Merton had begun to work on the ancient writings that had emerged from the desert landscapes of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. On March 15, 1959 Merton noted in his journal that he had sent off "two pages of quotes from the Desert Fathers" to the famous Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki in Japan. Merton hoped that Suzuki would be able to "write a preface to the little D.F. book."<sup>8</sup>

It appears that Merton had spent occasional spare moments over the previous year translating sayings from the Desert Fathers. On November 30, 1958 Merton wrote that "The simplest, easiest, and most enjoyable work I have done this year has been the translation of some Sayings of the Desert Fathers... I would do a page or two whenever I had time left over from preparing the novitiate conferences."<sup>9</sup> Merton's enjoyment of the words of the desert monastics lay he said in "the fragrance of their simplicity." And reading them made him "want to be as humble as those men were."<sup>10</sup>

His first publication of some of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers was in a 1959 limited edition of fifty copies called *What Ought I to Do?: Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. This was followed in 1960 by an expanded selection of one hundred and fifty sayings and stories published as *The Wisdom of the Desert*. Merton's engagement with this literature of the desert may have contributed to his growing ability to reconcile himself to the idea of accepting his circumstances as they presented themselves to him.

In *The Wisdom of the Desert* it is possible to discern the outline of a path

to a life of peace and rest even in the midst of extraordinary unrest and chaos. The Desert Fathers present spiritual disciplines and practices that have the power to awaken the one who follows them to a quality of faith and trust that makes it possible to learn, as Merton wrote in his journal on June 18, 1966 that

The real desert is this: to face the real limitations of one's own existence and knowledge and not try to manipulate them or disguise them. Not to embellish them with possibilities. To simply set aside all possibilities other than those that are actually present and real, here and now.<sup>11</sup>

For Merton the desert was more than a geographical location. It was the life of solitude and silence. The desert was any situation or relationship that caused him to face the reality that he was powerless over the forces of life. Merton had entered this desert and there he had learned the fundamental lessons it had to teach. There is nowhere to go but where you are. All that you need to learn can be learned right where you find yourself at this moment. The life God has given you right now is the only vehicle you need to discover the person you were created to be. There is no place that is better than this place. There are no people better than these people. You do not need to change your circumstances, fix your environment, or solve any problem. Stay where you are. Open to your life as it is and you will learn all you need to learn.

The desert tradition expressed the fundamental wisdom of acceptance in the paradigmatic desert saying that Merton

included as number XIII in his collection.

A certain brother went to Abbot Moses in Scete, and asked him for a good word. And the elder said to him: Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.<sup>12</sup>

The cell is a geographical location, the physical space the monk occupied. The cell also represents all the circumstances of life the monk encounters in that location. And the cell stands as an emblem of the inner cell of the human heart. The desert tradition instructs the monk to follow Jesus' advice to "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." (Matthew 6:6) The simple act of staying put, being in one place geographically and spending time in the inner room of the human heart, develops patience and acceptance of the circumstances of one's life just as they are.

This function of prayer is beautifully expressed in words reported by David Steindl-Rast from Merton's address in California.

We were indoctrinated so much into means and ends, that we don't realize that there is a different dimension in the life of prayer. In technology you have this horizontal progress, where you must start at one point and move to another and then another. But that is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have,

and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.<sup>13</sup>

Moving from place to place keeps us attached to the feeling that there is something, or someone out there able to provide for us that which we feel we lack. When we never sit still, we never face ourselves. We never come to truly know ourselves. For Merton, the desert was the place to discover who we truly are. In his introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton asks, "What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?" Then he goes on to assert that,

This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it all the rest are not only useless but disastrous. Proof: the great travellers and colonizers of the Renaissance were, for the most part, men who perhaps were capable of the things they did precisely because they were alienated from themselves. In subjugating primitive worlds they only imposed on them, with the force of cannons, their own confusion and their own alienation.<sup>14</sup>

We go to the desert to encounter our true selves, to learn to live authentically and truly in tune with our centre. This understanding became central to Merton's convictions about prayer. In 1968 he said,

"the real contemplative standard is to have no standard, to be just yourself. That's what God is asking us, to be ourselves."<sup>15</sup> When Merton spoke of being ourselves, he meant something much more than is often implied by the catch slogan "be yourself." For Merton, to "be yourself" meant "to be your own true self, in Christ,"<sup>16</sup> that is to live in tune with your highest, most true nature as revealed in the person of Christ.

III. The desert facilitates the discovery of our true self because the desert confronts us with a fundamental reality of the human condition. In his introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton describes the experience he discovered as he studied the desert literature. In the desert, Merton argues, the monk

could not retain the slightest identification with his superficial, transient, self-constructed self. He had to lose himself in the inner hidden reality of a self that was transcendent, mysterious, half-known, and lost in Christ. He had to die to the values of transient existence as Christ had died to them on the Cross, and rise from the dead with Him in the light of an entirely new wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

In the desert life is stripped down to its bare necessities. So in the desert we are caused to discover that the self we always thought we were is perhaps not our true self at all. The "superficial, transient" self that has spent its life attempting to build itself is focused upon the surface realities of life. This "self-constructed" self be-

believes that it is possible to find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction by reorganizing, improving, or in some way changing the details of our lives. By staying put in one place the desert monk came to recognize that the peace for which he longed was not to be found in a change of the surface circumstances of life.

The desert demands a kind of death to our need to make life be the way we think it should be. Merton writes “to be your own true self, in Christ,” “involves a kind of death of our own being, our own self.”<sup>18</sup> The desert dweller was forced to “die to the values of transient existence.” Faced with the stark often painful realities of the desert, it was no longer possible to put faith in or to have trust in the human ability to make life work and find a sense of contentment in the external details of life. We must let go of the illusions, fantasies, and grand schemes of our smaller self. That which is less true about us must be allowed to die. We come to this death by allowing the circumstances of our life situation to do their work in our lives. When we face with acceptance the desert of struggles, difficulties, challenges, irritating people, and discomfort that life inevitably provides, our small self begins to loose its grip on our lives.

It is at this point of abandonment that the desert dweller discovered a “transcendent, mysterious, half-known” self. In Merton’s June 1966 journal entry, mentioned earlier, he had described this as the moment when “a new dimension opens up.” He used a similar idea in 1968 in the talk recounted by Steindl-Rast. When speaking of the spiritual discipline of prayer, Merton said, “there is a different dimension in the life of prayer.” In the desert, we open to a

deeper hidden inner dimension of life and it is there, and there only, that we encounter the depth of relationship with God that makes it possible to approach all external circumstances with a degree of contentment.

Merton’s concept of “a new dimension” that “opens up” in the desert is crucial to understanding the purpose of going into the desert of self-abandonment. Jesus said,

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.<sup>19</sup>

The grain of wheat that falls into the ground is opened to a new dimension of existence. Without this stripping process, the seed is never opened. It remains nothing but a seed. When we abandon all our attachments we are opened to “a new dimension” of existence that Jesus calls “eternal life.” Most commonly in the Gospels, this “new dimension” is referred to as “the kingdom of God,” or “the kingdom of heaven.” It is that realm in which God is acknowledged. By letting go of the things of this world, we open now to that deeper dimension of being in which we recognize that all of life is lived in communion with God. It is to this dimension that all our longings and all our attachments have been pointing. It is in this “new dimension” that we see beyond the illusions of the world and discover the one thing in all of life that is of

true and ultimate value.

It is in the midst of this dying to all that is less than who we truly are that an awareness of God’s presence in all of life begins to be born.

Staying in one place, going deep within, facing ourselves makes it possible for us to recognize that, just as we are, we have all that we need. We have all that we need because God is present with us in all the circumstances of our lives no matter how difficult they may seem and no matter

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how much we may be struggling. Merton writes, “Every moment is God’s own good time, his *kairos*.”<sup>20</sup>

The desert dwellers had learned, Merton suggests, “to lament the madness of attachment to unreal values.”<sup>21</sup> They had come to understand that it is our attachment to external circumstances that hinders our awareness of that “new dimension” in which God is known. They had seen through the illusion and falsehood of demanding particular outcomes in their lives. They knew that getting their way would never fully satisfy the true depths of their being that could only be addressed in that inner dimension of mystery within themselves wherein dwelt the

living presence of Christ. Merton describes this beautifully in his Introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert* when he writes,

Rest, then, was a kind of simple no-where-ness 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.<sup>22</sup>

Having surrendered everything, the monk had discovered that he possessed everything. Nothing external to himself could ever contribute to his sense of well-being, or his sense of inner fulfillment. On February 2, 1960, at the end of a short discussion of the difference between contentment and acquiescence, Merton wrote in his journal, “*I need no other conditions* and no other situation in order to be free and happy.”<sup>23</sup> (Merton’s emphasis) And four days later on February 6, he wrote,

My life should not depend on anything outside myself and the Grace of God. If I *am* dependent on conditions outside myself. Then by that very fact, whatever those conditions may be, I cannot have true peace.<sup>24</sup>

Merton alludes here to a life lived independent of all external circumstances. Merton has discovered within himself, in his experience of the “Grace of God,” a freedom and contentment regardless of anything that may be occurring in the surface circumstances of his life. He con-

cludes his journal entry that day by affirming, "This is the beginning of true freedom."<sup>25</sup>

In the Christian scriptures, the writer of "The Letter to the Philippians" speaks of having arrived at the same place in his life. He writes, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have."<sup>26</sup> He then goes on to make it clear that this contentment has been achieved, not through any external well-being. It is not that the writer's life is necessarily going so well; it is not that he has nothing about which he might complain. Rather, the writer states, "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need."<sup>27</sup> "Little," or "plenty," "well-fed," or "hungry," it makes no difference. As Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples in John's Gospel, the desert dwellers and Merton were able to say, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."<sup>28</sup> This is the inner food of God's Spirit. This is food the world cannot understand. It does not depend upon comfort, acclaim, achievement, friendship, physical health, or even adequate sustenance for the body. The food Jesus promised is the inner nourishing presence of God's Spirit dwelling within the heart that is opened by surrender and faith.

The fourth and fifth century desert dwellers went out into the desert and practiced often rigorous austerities, not to prove their spirituality, but to demonstrate their trust in the absolute sufficiency of God. This is the desert path to peace and contentment. As Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."<sup>29</sup> Those who

recognize and embrace the poverty of all humanly constructed means of feeding will discover an inheritance that surpasses anything to which the illusions of the world can lay claim. Having eaten of the secret food of Christ's presence, the "poor" receive "the kingdom of God." And in that inheritance, they discover new life growing within their innermost being.

IV. A curious thing happened in the lives of those men and women who fled into the desert to escape the illusions of the world and find rest and peace. One might assume that having reached the place where they were able to accept all of life as it came to them and no longer worry about their external circumstances these desert mystics might become complacent and even inert. Merton had always been aware of this danger. Writing in the early 1950s in *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton described his personal experience of resting in God's presence. In the midst of this account Merton includes a cautionary note against the kind of spiritual passivity that the history of Christian spirituality has labelled as the "heresy" of "quietism." Merton described his mystical experience of rest saying,

I close my eyes to the sun, and live on the second level, a natural prayer, peace. When I am tired it is almost slumber. There is no sound. Soon even the fish are gone. Night, night. Nothing is happening. If you make a theory about it you end up in quietism. All I say about it is that it is comfortable. It is a rest.<sup>30</sup>

The testimony of the words, stories and actions of the desert dwellers suggests that spiritual inertia and passivity are less of a danger than is often supposed. In fact it is right at the point where the monk discovers his liberation from the poverty of external circumstances and learns to rest in God's presence, that the power of God's love is born in his spirit. The monks were set free to love because, knowing their deepest needs were met by God, they were no longer attached to any particular outcome, possession, feeling, or psychological need. Needing nothing but God, they were liberated from the agendas, the demands, and the great schemes by which we so often try to force life to fit into the mould of our need.

The same process happened in Merton's life. The more he came to accept his own circumstances, the more he found a love for all humankind born in his heart. As the 1950s gave way to the '60s, and as Merton came increasingly to discover an inner contentment, he also began to emerge as a voice of protest against the injustices of war, racism, inhumane technology, and violence in any form.

As Merton became more free within himself, he did not become complacent and uninterested in the world outside. On the contrary, the deeper Merton travelled in his own spiritual journey, the more he found himself compelled to reach out to embrace the pain and suffering of the world. This unexpected transaction has always been at the heart of the mystical journey because, as Merton explains, "The Christian mystics of all ages sought and found not only the unification of their own being, not only union with God, but union with one another in the Spirit of God."<sup>31</sup>

Merton expressed forcefully the union between love for God and love for all human beings, in his book *Contemplation in a World of Action* when he wrote,

we must always remember that union with God is not a matter of withdrawal and of special experiences, so much as it is a question of love, and the love of other men is necessary if we are to grow without illusions in the authentic love of God. The two loves are in fact one, and they are in no sense obstacles to each other.<sup>32</sup>

The supposed dichotomy between rest in God and an active life of compassion and care for the rest of humankind, is in fact a false dichotomy. There is no separation between contemplation and action. The one is the necessary ground of the other. True contemplation will always lead to a deepened life of love. And true love is only possible for the person who has been set free by discovering that all their needs have already been most deeply met in God. In order to be truly loving an action must be motivated simply by unhindered love for God, not by any need to be needed, to make a good show, or even to save oneself. When one tries to help because one needs to be seen to be a helper, or a saviour, this will only do violence to others. In order to be truly liberating actions must come from the freedom that can only be found by resting fully in God's grace.

The loving freedom of the desert monks whose journey Merton's followed is beautifully illustrated in a desert story Merton records as number CXII.

There were two elders living together in a cell, and they had never had so much as one quarrel with one another. One therefore said to the other: Come on, let us have at least one quarrel, like other men. The other said:

I don't know how to start a quarrel. The first said: I will take this brick and place it here between us. Then I will say: It is mine. After that you will say: It is mine. This is what leads to a dispute and a fight. So then they placed the brick between them, one said: It is mine, and the other replied to the first: I do believe that it is mine. The first once said again: It is not yours, it is mine. So the other answered: Well then if it is yours, take it! Thus they did not manage after all to get into a quarrel.<sup>33</sup>

When it is just a brick, the story seems ridiculous. But life is filled with bricks that we think will make our lives better if only we possess them. We hoard our bricks sure that they will provide for us the contentment for which we long. We look to our bricks to give us a sense of identity and well-being. We show off our pile of bricks as if their impressive number will gain us some deep merit or blessing in life. We use our bricks to try to fix the world, determined we know the way life should work.

But every brick to which we cling only divides us from our brother and our sister. Even when my brick is made up of all my good works, kind deeds, and generous actions, when I call that brick "mine," it

will still lead to violence. Love is set free in our lives when that small person who clings to bricks finally releases his grasp and dies. Merton suggests that the process of love "involves a kind of death of our own being, our own self."<sup>34</sup>

In David Steindl-Rast's account of Merton's words to the gathering of men and women in California in 1968, he spoke of the process by which the desert became a paradise. He said "This breakthrough into what you already have is only accomplished through the complete acceptance of the cross at some point."<sup>35</sup> For Jesus, the cross represented his utter acceptance of a difficult and painful destiny. To take up the cross for Jesus signified his willingness to abandon self-will and surrender to God's will. The cross was the fulfillment in Jesus' life of that transaction that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed saying, "yet not what I want but what you want."<sup>36</sup>

Merton describes this process clearly in his essay on "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition" in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, where he wrote,

in the desert the monk renounces his own illusory ego-self, he "dies" to his worldly and empirical existence, in order to surrender completely to the transcendent reality which though described in various terms, is always best expressed in the simply Biblical expression: "the will of God."<sup>37</sup>

In the desert the monks learned the wisdom of dying before they died. They learned that the way of freedom lay along

the path of surrender to God's will. It is the small self, attached to life being a certain way that must die. And this death is the way to freedom and contentment. The final acceptance is the acceptance of human mortality. Every choice we make to die along the way prepares us for that final acceptance and opens us more fully to be vessels and channels of that love for which we were created.

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V. Ironically, by accepting his place and the circumstances of his life so completely, Merton eventually came to transcend even the confines of Gethsemani. Merton found true freedom by embracing the parameters of his life as they presented themselves to him. And, through that process of acceptance, he was liberated from any attachment to the confines of those parameters whose acceptance had brought him to the final freedom.

Four months before his physical death, as Merton contemplated his departure from the place he had lived and loved for the past twenty-seven years, he wrote in his journal, "Really I don't care one way or another if I never come back."<sup>38</sup> Having truly embraced his place in life, Merton was no longer bound by that place or

by any particular circumstance. Outcomes were not important. There was nothing left to achieve, no needs, demands, or expectations driving his life. The abandoned self had lost its power; only Christ remained. And so, a month before his physical death, Merton could write,

The self is merely a locus in which the dance of the universe is aware of itself as complete from beginning to end – and returning to the void. Gladly. Praising, giving thanks, with all beings. Christ light – spirit – grace – gift.<sup>39</sup>

Having embraced all of life and all of himself, Merton knew that only "grace," only "gift," only "Christ light" were left. There was nothing left to cling to. All attachments had been burnished away. Merton had surrendered all his bricks. He had walked bravely into the desert landscape and there had found the wide open expansive place of his heart in which all contradictions and struggles could be embraced.

At the centre of his being Merton found Christ, and from his spirit welled up "Praising, giving thanks, with all beings." There was no longer any need for change, no longer any need to fix anything. Merton's earthly journey was complete. He was ready to travel lightly through this life. And so, he was ready to embark upon his final journey and surrender everything to the God in whom he knew that his one true place was in Christ. He had reached "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." And along with the de-

sert dwellers whose journey he had observed so closely, Merton had discovered that,

The fruit of this was *quies*: "rest". Not rest of the body, nor even fixation of the exalted spirit upon some point of summit of light. The Desert Fathers were not, for the most part, ecstasies. Those who were have left some strange and misleading stories behind them to confuse the true issue. The "rest" which these men sought 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.<sup>40</sup>

The desert landscape in which Merton had journeyed had made it possible for him to discern the wind that "blows where it chooses."<sup>41</sup> He had discovered that his only desire in life was to follow wherever that wind might blow. By surrendering his attachments to the things of this world, he had become light enough to allow God's Spirit to carry him wherever that Spirit desired. There was nothing that needed to be changed. He desired only that God might live in him. He was free of the burdens of this world. And in that freedom Thomas Merton found the sustaining grace of Christ's presence that carried him into an awareness of the fullness of God.

VI. In 1965 Merton published a selection of writings from the fourth century

BCE Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu. Merton knew little or no Chinese. He created his "Translations" of Chuang Tzu by comparing various western language translations, and then paraphrasing his own version. So, when reading Merton's versions of Chuang Tzu it is difficult to know how much Merton one is getting and how much Chuang Tzu.

Although these selections were originally prose, Merton paraphrases them as poems. One of the selections included in Merton's collections is "The True Man." This poem captures the vision of the desert wisdom we have been examining. It presents a portrait of the man the desert dweller will become when the discipline of complete acceptance is fully followed. The vision captured in this poem represents the goal of the process Merton discovered when he explored the literature of the Desert Fathers.

What is meant by a "true man"?  
The true men of old were not afraid  
When they stood alone in their views.  
No great exploits. No plans.  
If they failed, no sorrow.  
No self-congratulation in success.  
They scaled cliffs, never dizzy,  
Plunged in water, never wet,  
Walked through fire and were not burnt.  
Thus their knowledge reached all the way  
To Tao.

The true men of old  
Slept without dreams,  
Woke without worries.  
Their food was plain.  
They breathed deep.  
True men breathe from their heels.  
Others breathe with their gullets,  
Half-strangled. In dispute

They heave up arguments  
Like vomit.  
Where the fountains of passion  
Lie deep  
The heavenly springs  
Are soon dry.

The true men of old  
Knew no lust for life,  
No dread of death.  
Their entrance was without gladness,  
Their exit, yonder,  
Without resistance.  
Easy come, easy go.  
They did not forget where from,  
Nor ask where to,  
Nor drive grimly forward  
Fighting their way through life.  
They took life as it came, gladly;  
Took death as it came, without care;  
And went away, yonder,  
Yonder!

They had no mind to fight Tao.  
They did not try, by their own contriving,  
To help Tao along.  
These are the ones we call true men.

Mind free, thoughts gone  
Brows clear, faces serene.  
Were they cool? Only cool as autumn.  
Were they hot? No hotter than spring.  
All that came out of them  
Came quiet, like the four seasons.<sup>42</sup>

#### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (NY: Image Books, 1966), p. 156.
2. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Three 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S.

3. Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p.179.
3. *Ibid.*, p.359
4. *Ibid.*, p.281
5. Quoted by David Steindl-Rast in "Man of Prayer," ed. Br. Patrick Hart, *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (NY: Sheed & Ward, Inc, 1974), p.83.
6. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom: The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume Six 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p.314.
7. *Ibid.*, p.310.
8. *A Search for Solitude*, p.267.
9. *Ibid.*, p.233.
10. *Ibid.*, p.234.
11. *Learning to Love*, p.309.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (NY: New Directions, 1960), p.30.
13. "Man of Prayer," p.80.
14. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.12.
15. "Man of Prayer," p.83.
16. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.5.
17. *Ibid.*, p.7.
18. *Ibid.*, p.18.
19. John 12:24,25
20. "Man of Prayer," p.81.
21. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.7.
22. *Ibid.*, p.8.
23. *A Search for Solitude*, p.373.
24. *Ibid.*, p.374.
25. *Ibid.*, p.375.
26. Philippians 4:11b
27. Philippians 4:12
28. John 4:32
29. Luke 6:20b
30. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), p.339.

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31. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.17.
32. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (NY: Image Books, 1973), p.247.
33. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.67.
34. *ibid.*, p.18.
35. "Man of Prayer" p.84.
36. Matthew 26:39b
37. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p.287.
38. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The end of the Journey: The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume Seven 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p.148.

39. *Ibid.*, 234.
40. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p.8.
41. John 3:8
42. Thomas Merton. *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (NY: New Directions, 1965), pp.60, 61.

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