

Being True to Oneself with Another

Insights from Thomas Merton's friendship with
Fr. John of the Cross – Edmund 'Cap' Wasserman

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'Stones placed together'

In December 1957 Thomas Merton wrote about how he and his fellow Trappist Fr. John of the Cross were out late after delivering Christmas trees — the journey took them through 'the open and bare land, poor dark land, wild land, my home' which reminds Merton of a similar journey on the afternoon of Fr. John of the Cross' solemn profession. Reflecting on this Merton writes about the two of them: 'We are stones placed together in this Church by the Providence of God.'¹ Journal entries by Merton from 1952 until 1963 offer the reader insights into their friendship, the closest Merton had at Gethsemani — insights into what friendship means and whether it is possible to be true to oneself with another.

Edmund 'Cap' Wasserman was known as Fr. John of the Cross whilst he was a monk at Gethsemani; his nickname 'Cappy' or 'Cap' was given him by his father who on the day of his son's birth in 1930 remarked, 'The captain has arrived.' He was from Toledo, Ohio and in 1948 entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, where he took simple vows in 1950, and studied with Merton who was then Master of Students. He was ordained on June 6, 1955 following which he worked closely alongside Merton as Undermaster of Novices. In 1958 he became Master of Students and then Master of Novices for lay brothers. For some time in 1958 he acted as Merton's confessor, but, late in 1962, after difficulties with Abbot James Fox, Fr. John of the Cross left Gethsemani.

In a journal entry of September 1952, Merton describes a visit from Fr. John of the Cross' parents and siblings. Whenever they visited Merton was included:

Father John of the Cross and his parents and sisters sitting on ancient solid chairs under the sweet gum trees out in the front avenue, partly protected from the view of passerbys by a line of parked cars. I went out to them twice, which is inordinate I suppose.²

And there are a number of references to Merton's 'adoption' into the family: 'His family "adopted" me several years back, so I do manage to get in on a few minutes of their annual visit.'³ One can hypothesise about the attraction for Merton in this large family, and his published correspondence includes letters to both Fr. John of the Cross' parents and to his brother Robert. Ann Wasserman, one of the sisters, had already written to Merton about spiritual matters before becoming a Discalced Carmelite Sister in Cleveland, Ohio, taking Sister Anita as her religious name. Their long and meaningful correspondence continued after Fr. John had left Gethsemani, most of their correspondence concerning the spiritual life but references to the family are included: 'Since I have been adopted by the family, your letters rate as family mail.'



Thomas Merton and Fr. John of the Cross as young monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani with Fr. John of the Cross' sister Ann who became a Discalced Carmelite Nun, taking the religious name Sr. Anita.

Photo credit: Sister Anita Wasserman, OCD and the Wasserman family

In this same letter Merton reveals his affection for her brother who was on retreat before his solemn profession:

Cappy ... is so happy. You must use the good qualities you share with him — reserve and good sense and a good kind of independence and fidelity to God's will. ... And he really loves God with a lot of deep spontaneity. He is a real person, and an unspoiled person. I have watched him go through the rough spots of early religious life in which he could quite easily have become slightly warped and artificial, but he didn't. ... The first rule of all life is to be yourself, because that is the only way we can be real. We have to take ourselves quite simply as we are.⁴

Another sister, Carol, was married at Gethsemani at Fr. John of the Cross' first Mass, and in a letter to Sr. Anita Merton records the news of 'our family' and the occasion:

Everything was wonderful. ... I had a lot of fun with the family, except that I must admit the first day I went out there I got rather a workout. ... Monday there were only the six of us and it was much nicer.⁵



*Thomas Merton and Fr John of the Cross
Photo by Ann Wasserman*

Photo credit: Sister Anita Wasserman, OCD and the Wasserman family

'Being in a bind I cannot cope with'

In August 1963, nearly a year after Fr. John of the Cross had left Gethsemani, Merton reflects in a Journal entry:

An entirely beautiful, transfigured moment of love for God and the need for complete confidence in Him in everything, without reserve, even when almost nothing can be understood. A sense of the continuity of grace in my life and an equal sense of the stupidity and baseness of the infidelities which have threatened to break that continuity. How can I be so cheap and foolish as to trifle with anything so precious? The answer is that I grow dull and stupid and turn in false directions, without light, very often without interest and without real desire, out of a kind of boredom and animal folly, caught in some idiot social situation. It is usually a matter of senseless talking, senseless conduct and vain behaviour, coming from my shyness and desperation at being in a bind I cannot cope with — and if there is drink handy I drink it, and talk more foolishly. This of course is rare — I was thinking of visits of Father John of the Cross' people (other side of the field) when I was not true to myself. With him I suppose I rarely was. And now where is he?⁶

The 'bind' Merton refers to seems to be about the simplicity of trusting in God and loving Him — in other words the private relationship with God — contrasting with the expectations and demands of how to be in relationship with another or others — a public relationship. In this section of the essay this 'bind' — how to be oneself in relation to another — is explored in the light of Merton's reflections on whom and how he was with Fr. John of the Cross as their friendship deepened.

Using psychological terminology, when we are with someone else our persona is to the fore. This is, as Carl Jung explains, a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, 'fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual'.⁷ This is a universal human concern as we all adopt an artificial personality to a greater or lesser extent based on the person that one would like to be together with the person that other people want one to be; and the degree of artificiality is dependent on how much authenticity and how much of our true nature can be included in that mix.

This may of course vary according to circumstance, upbringing, needs and mood.

The passage from Merton above seems to suggest that he sometimes felt himself to be less authentic because of 'shyness and desperation', and it is easy to see the potential difficulties fuelled by Merton's need to be liked and his persona within the large Wasserman family grouping. Of more relevance however is Merton's own analysis of his relationship with Fr. John of the Cross, and there are several journal passages that are helpful in exploring this dynamic of how true to oneself one can be with another.

Merton writes in his journal entry of September 3, 1952 following the annual visit by the Wasserman family that: 'I am now almost completely convinced that I am only really a monk when I am alone in the old toolshed.'⁸ In his deconstruction of why this might be Merton projects onto the place the state of mind that he can experience there: 'I have the *prayer* of a monk in the silence of the woods and the toolshed. To begin with the place is simple, and really poor with the bare poverty I need worse than any medicine and which I never seem to get. And silent. And inactive — materially.' With the space comes the Spirit and the relationship:

What is easier than to discuss mutually with You, O God, the three crows that flew by in the sun with light flashing on their rubber wings? ... The prayer for solitude is answered when my will is moved by Your Spirit to reach out and find You in solitude. I receive what I want as soon as I want it, when it is You who moves me to want it.'

Here Merton is not only being a monk but also being himself, and this entry contrasts with later reflections on how true he can be to himself with Fr. John of the Cross who has just taken over as Merton's confessor at this point:

Yesterday I was forced to think a lot about my real inability to be spontaneous with Fr. John of the Cross who is the person I most like and admire in the monastery. ... In trying to be natural with him I am so natural that I am unnatural and in trying to be super-sincere I say things I don't mean to say, as if I were somehow expected to make the most outrageous possible statements about everything.⁹

This is very much the persona in action, and Merton can analyse the anomalous situation which he appreciates was not present when the balance of power was different and Merton was Fr. John of the Cross' director. He sees this reversal of roles as increasing his insecurity, and because perhaps, as Merton notes, the confessions are not 'strictly business, short and sweet, and strictly detached and to the point'. He continues in the same section:

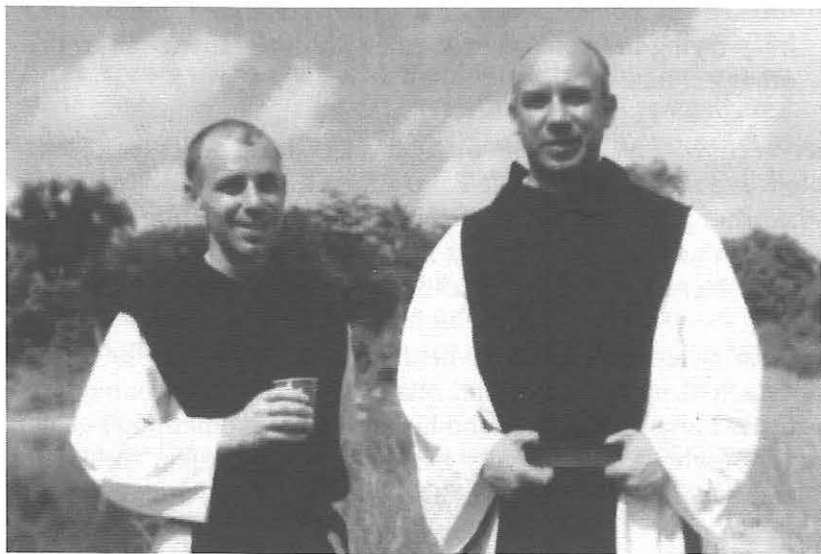
Here — I want to be perfect, I want direction, I want response, I want to be appreciated, I suppose. And it is no go. So be it. He seems incapable of saying anything to me, probably because I don't let him — as soon as he opens his mouth I take the words out of it, compelled to be always so smart. ... When I talk to Fr. John of the Cross now I act like a complete phony and he is aware of it and I guess embarrassed by it, for my sake as well as for his own. Because, after all, that is what I really am. ... But the phoniness comes from over-anxiety and impatience. On paper I have time to compose myself, and I can be more 'real'. With another person I am thrown into confusion and do not foresee the consequence of the next statement and am too busy trying to avoid a crisis that I do not really listen to the other person.

It has been widely accepted that Merton in his correspondence with people was able to adapt himself and adjust his style of writing to how he saw the other person as a way of engaging and connecting with them; but here Merton understands that his friendship with Fr John of the Cross is affected by Merton's admiration and love for the man:

With other persons I am disinterested enough to be more detached, more serene, and relatively normal. But John of the Cross I love and admire and his affection is something I value very highly and I am very insecure about it. I fear to lose it and imagine that I already have.¹⁰

With God Merton can feel unconditionally loved but for all of us human relationships are based on conditional love. Michael Mott sees Merton's ability to identify with others as both a gift but also as a burden where he might dominate or be lost himself in the exchange. Mott links the

comments made by Merton about his relationship with Fr. John of the Cross to Merton's admiration for a sermon preached a month later by Fr. John of the Cross, seeing the two passages as two sides of the same feeling and bound together for Merton by a lack of trust.¹¹ The sermon was clearly important for Merton who noted down much of what was said which was on the subject of love and friendship. Merton affirms his view of Fr. John of the Cross as 'true to the love that is in his heart' which is not betrayed by formulas or the search for human respect, and so with integrity Fr. John of the Cross speaks 'the words of Christ' about friendship with Christ. He says that in all friendship there is first a stage in which 'we see the acts of the other and come, by them, to know who the other person is. But after that we know who He is, we see his acts in the light of who He is.' Merton notes from the sermon that 'the transition point comes when we clearly see the inmost desires of our friend's heart.' The sermon links human friendship with friendship with the Christ who loves the Father. Merton adds that the sermon was deeply consoling for him in the context of his friendship with Fr. John of the Cross, adding: 'but if we do not know and trust our earthly friends how shall we know and trust Him?'



Fr John of the Cross and Thomas Merton

Photo credit: Sister Anita Wasserman, OCD and the Wasserman family

Merton ever insightful to his own psyche adds:

My worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being truly able to love, because I despair of ever being worthy of love. But the way out is to trust one's friends and thus accept in them acts and things which a sick mind grabs as evidence of lack of love – as pretexts for evading the obligation to love.¹²

Beyond the bind

Merton notes in his Journal in February 1959 how Fr. John of the Cross has been made to suffer for his originality:

What they are continuing to do to Fr. John of the Cross is a shame to mention. Tragic and stupid righteousness with which he is being 'brought into line' — made to conform. It is true, he has given them reason by being independent ... so he is being made to suffer for his superior gifts of heart and mind and soul. Made to suffer because those he has helped (whose vocation and spirit he has saved) continue to love him. It makes me sick to the stomach.¹³

The difficulties appear to have continued over the next few years with at one point Merton discussing with Fr. John of the Cross, still acting as Merton's confessor, a move to Tortola on the British Virgin Islands where they could both support one another in a life of solitude: 'We could have a small, unofficial, eremitical group on the island. No new order or foundation. *Nothing – just live for God, with poor and simple people on the island.*'¹⁴

By the autumn of 1962 it is clear to Merton that Fr. John of the Cross was probably going to leave Gethsemani and Merton sees it in part as 'a symptom of the deficiencies of this monastery'. He is 'disturbed to think that his decision may in the long run be traced partly to my influence, and his independence to an extreme interpretation of some of my own teaching. ... He is a complete mystery, and you never are sure whether you are dealing with a saint or a heretic. He can still be a saint.'¹⁵ Fr. John of the Cross asks for Merton's support in his decision to leave, but Merton feels himself in the middle as 'Fr. Eudes and Fr. Abbot want him to stay and want my support.'¹⁶ After Fr John of the Cross has left Merton has many insights into the problem, perceiving it as primarily to do with the

character of the Abbot and the way he handled the 'case'. In his poem 'Gethsemani (May 19, 1966)' published in *Eighteen Poems*, Merton refers to Fr. John of the Cross as 'A taut, embittered / Young Christ / Pierced by righteous insults.'¹⁷

Developing the ideas from the significant sermon given by Fr. John of the Cross Merton has found himself now able to move beyond the self-consciousness of relationship with all the associated psychodynamics, beyond the 'bind' of seeking love and approval from another to seeing Christ, within the other, no matter whom. This possible deeper friendship is so well expressed in Merton's correspondence with the Devon school teacher John Harris in a letter written in 1959:

The important thing is who are you: you are not a 'man with a problem', or a person trying to figure something out, you are Harris, in Devonshire, and that means you are not and cannot be another in a series of objects, you are you and that is the important thing. For, you see, when 'I' enter into a dialogue with 'you' and each of us knows who is speaking, it turns out that we are both Christ. This, being seen in a very simple and 'natural' light, is the beginning and almost the fullness of everything. Everything is in it somewhere.¹⁸

Here the dualistic stress of the 'bind' of how we would like to be and who we are is transcended through Christ, the Christ ever present in each of us, the unique Christ within each person who loves us unconditionally.

Post script: 'Sunk into the world like a hunter into a deep swamp'

Some six months after Fr. John of the Cross left Gethsemani Merton is concerned for his friend, recording in his journal:

Fr John of the Cross has sunk into the world like a hunter in a deep swamp. Rv. Fr. talked to him on the phone in San Francisco. What is said of him does not sound good. If he really goes wrong, he will go terribly wrong. And what is my part in this? Trusting his talent and his wisdom, I encouraged him.¹⁹

Merton wrote to his friend in November 1963 and again in the January of 1964 but there are no further letters recorded. In a letter to Sr. Anita of 1966 he comments: 'I can well understand how Cappy, having batted

around rather rootlessly for several years now, feels discouraged and at loose ends, maybe rather hopeless about everything.'²⁰

From the obituaries published following Fr. John of the Cross' death in late 2008 we can glean the following details about his life after leaving Gethsemani: He moved to Detroit, earned a Master's Degree from the University of Detroit, and taught in inner-city Detroit Public Schools for a quarter century, often celebrating Mass in his apartment and ministering to young people in his neighbourhood. He adopted James, a young African American who took the surname Wasserman as his own and who later married and had children. Though he remained away from the abbey, Fr. John of the Cross refused to request a dispensation from his vows until persuaded to do so by Abbot Timothy Kelly in 1999; at that time he was not required to seek laicization from the priesthood and so was able to remain a priest in good standing until his death. Indeed Fr. John's funeral took place January 5, 2009 in the Guest Chapel at the Abbey of Gethsemani, celebrated by Fr. James Conner, who also delivered the eulogy, and attended by Sr. Anita, Fr. John's brother Robert, his adopted son James with his wife Juanna, and a number of the monks. His ashes were buried in the extern cemetery at Gethsemani.²¹



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Notes

1. Journal entry, December 14, 1957, in Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952-1960*. Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 145-6.
2. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 13.

3. Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, November 9, 1956 in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*. Selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy (London: Collins Flame, 1989), p. 226.
4. Letter of November 6, 1953 in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom, Letters in Times of Crisis*. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 180-181.
5. Letter of June 10, 1955 in *Witness to Freedom*, p. 184.
6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five, 1963-1965*. Edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 9-10.
7. Carl Jung, *The Essential Jung, Selected Writings*. Introduced by Anthony Storr (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 94.
8. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 14.
9. Journal entry, February 19, 1958 in *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 171-172.
10. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 172.
11. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 317-318.
12. Journal entry, Palm Sunday, March 30, 1958 in *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 186-187. In this entry Merton records his detailed recollections of Fr John of the Cross' sermon, and his reflections on it.
13. Journal entry, March 1, 1959 in *A Search for Solitude*, p. 265.
14. Journal entry, June 30, 1959 in *A Search for Solitude*, p. 300. Further passages expanding on Merton's choice of Tortola can be found on pp. 298-300 & p. 307.
15. Journal entry, October 13, 1962 in Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Four 1960-1963*. Edited by Victor A. Kramer (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 256.
16. Journal entry, October 30, 1962 in *Turning Towards the World*, p. 261.
17. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen poems*, quoted on [http://fatherlouie.blogspot.com/2018/08/posted August 4th 2018](http://fatherlouie.blogspot.com/2018/08/posted%20August%204%202018).
18. Letter dated January 31, 1959 in *The Hidden Ground of Love, The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, Selected and edited by William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1985), p. 387.
19. Journal entry, July 26, 1963 in *Turning Towards the World*, p. 347.
20. Letter dated August 1, 1966 in *Witness to Freedom*, p. 192.
21. *The Blade* Dec. 27, 2008, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/toledoblade>
The Detroit News Jan. 18, 2009, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/detroitnews>.

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