

Missing in Action

The Relationship between Thomas & John Paul Merton

Fiona Gardner

Not only had my brother disappeared, but – and bear with me here – a part of my very being had gone with him. Stories about us could, from then on, be told from only one perspective. Memories could be told but not shared.

John Corey Whaley¹

April 2023 is the 80th anniversary of the death of John Paul Thomas Merton's younger and only sibling. He joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1941, at a time when the United States was not yet at war, and he was sent into action in England. On April 16th 1943, the bomber plane he was in lost altitude and crashed. John Paul's back was broken, but he was taken aboard a dinghy with some survivors. He died the next day, the Saturday of Passion Week, and was buried at sea. The others were rescued on Holy Thursday, and Thomas Merton learned of his brother's death on Easter Tuesday. Thomas Merton responded with the poem, 'For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943'.²

The relationship between the brothers was one characterized by separation and loss – the loss of their parents, the loss of a stable homelife, the loss of growing up together with long separations during childhood. We glimpse the relationship that actually existed between them only from short extracts written by Thomas Merton, so any interpretation about what John Paul experienced can only be supposition and creative license.³

Childhood and adolescence

The sibling bond has been defined as a connection between the selves at both the intimate and the public level of two siblings – as a fitting together of two people's identities. It can be warm and positive, but can also be negative. There are powerful mutual influences between siblings that affect each child's development, and that is different and separate

from the influence of the parents; it is also through the sibling that a child gets the sense of being a distinct individual, plus a sense of constancy through knowing a sibling as a predictable person. This can give sustenance and a sense of self-esteem.

Constancy was there for the early part of both boys' lives. John Paul was born Nov. 2, 1918; an early picture shows him being held by his mother Ruth with Thomas aged 3, known as Tom as a child, standing in front and looking down. There is a second photo some months later



John Paul & Thomas c.1922

where Tom, aged 4, is looking away as the nine-month-old John Paul sitting on his paternal grandmother Gertrude's lap and looking towards Owen, his father, is clearly the centre of attention. Writing about John Paul's arrival, the adult Merton writes: 'He was a child with a much serener nature than mine with not so many obscure drives and impulses. I remember that everyone was impressed by his constant and unruffled happiness.'⁴

Some have suggested that the arrival of a new sibling is a universal trauma, with long-lasting psychic implications where the – in this case – older brother is

faced with the realization that they are not unique or irreplaceable which effects the sense of selfhood. There are mixed feelings of both loving the baby, but also having to deal with at times overwhelming feelings of displacement and replacement – perhaps this is evidenced in the photos. Sibling rivalry, sometimes shown through increased aggression by the elder child, either toward the new arrival and/or mixed with aggression towards the mothering person, is part of the inevitable competition that Tom would have felt for attention and love. As a way of reducing this rivalrous feeling siblings develop different personal qualities, and select

different interests. Merton is eager to distinguish himself from his apparently sweet natured brother who sang to himself in the crib, this in contrast to Merton who protested and fought when resisting bedtime.

The predictability of the brothers lives together ended with the untimely death of their mother. Merton writes:

If we had continued as we had begun, and if John Paul and I had grown up in that house ... we would have turned into good-mannered and earnest sceptics, polite, intelligent, and perhaps even in some sense useful. We might have become successful authors, or editors of magazines, professors at small and progressive colleges. The way would have been all smooth. ... But oh, how many possibilities there were ahead of me and my brother in that day!⁵

Instead, everything changed with intermittent and irregular reconnection during childhood. Merton went away 'missing' with his father, and John Paul was looked after by his maternal grandparents in Douglaston in New York City. This history of the loss of each other, and clearly of their mother, would have been ever present for each child – but in the encouragement to 'get on with it' and pursue 'normal' lives, their grief seems to have become 'disenfranchised', not openly acknowledged or validated.

In 1923 when his father went again to France, Merton returned to live with John Paul and his grandparents, and there are clear accounts of the brothers' relationship deepening, often in creating trouble and confusion together in the Douglaston household – unsurprising given the further experience of the loss of their father. Merton writes that his most vivid memories of that time fill him with poignant compunction, as he disidentified with John Paul by rejecting him from the games Merton played with another older boy as they constructed huts in the woods:

John Paul ... standing in a field, about a hundred yards away ... is this little perplexed five-year-old kid ... standing quite still, with his arms hanging down at his sides, and gazing in our direction, afraid to come any nearer on account of the stones, as insulted as he is saddened, and his eyes full of indignation and sorrow. And yet he does not go away. We shout at him to get out of here, to beat it, and go home, and wing a couple more rocks in that direction, and he does not go away ... he stands ... angry and unhappy and offended and tremendously sad. ... The law written in his nature says that he must be with his elder brother, and do what he is doing; and he

cannot understand why this law of love is being so wildly and unjustly violated in his case.⁶

While Merton sees this as a pattern and prototype of all sin, and it certainly displays sibling cruelty fuelled by rivalry, direct aggression and hostility, it also shows John Paul's attitude of mingled admiration and more openly intense competition toward Tom. The difficulty for the brothers was that there was no implicit acknowledgement of a common ultimate parental authority over both siblings, with grandparents seemingly taking physical care of the boys, but from the account offering little emotional parenting. The sequel to the account above is when Merton and his three friends felt threatened by a rival and larger 'gang'; but John Paul braved the 'gang' to walk calmly and coolly to where his elder brother was. Merton adds that this time he was not chased away.

After two years together, the brothers were again separated when Owen Merton returned from abroad to take Tom with him to France, and once again John Paul was left behind with his grandparents. The sibling relationship was seriously fractured; they did not live together again until some years after their father's death, and when Merton returned to the US in 1934 to go to Columbia University, although there were annual summer vacation get-togethers. By adolescence their differing and disruptive experiences would have changed their relationship: John Paul in the US school system, and Merton living as a European. For example, on one summer get-together, Merton writes that the brothers nearly came to blows over:

whether the English had stolen the tune of *God Save the King* from *My Country 'Tis of Thee* or whether the Americans had cribbed *My Country 'Tis of Thee* from *God Save the King*. By this time, since I was on father's British passport, I considered myself English.⁷

Here they are clearly acting out their mutual sense of missing out and dislocation from one another. It seems that the summer opportunities for reconnection and family bonding unsurprisingly left memories of strife and irritation.

In January 1931 Owen Merton died in London – John Paul had visited him with Tom and the grandparents the previous summer. Merton writes of that visit: 'The sorrow of his great helplessness suddenly fell upon me ... the tears sprang to my eyes. Nobody said anything more. I hid my face in the blanket and cried. And poor Father wept, too. The others stood by.'⁸

Some children who lose their parents or suffer from insufficient or

inconsistent parenting find a protective and reparative relationship with their sibling – but that too the brothers were denied. For most of the central events of late childhood and adolescence the brothers were apart, both missing in action from one another. John Paul was additionally exposed to the confusion of his father's decision to repeatedly leave him behind and take Tom; thus, depriving him of any solid attachment to either his father or his elder brother.

Adulthood

The brothers next spent time together in John Paul's late teens when Tom was in his early twenties, and home from studying at Columbia. Merton writes: 'We had nothing to do but go swimming and hang around the house playing hot records. And in the evening, we would wander off to some appalling movie where we nearly died of boredom.'⁹ They also went camping together. Merton writes about John Paul's first year at Cornell University turning out to be sadly similar to his own first year at Cambridge; he appreciates that both suffered from their losses that impacted on their ability to feel securely part of something, in this case student fraternities:

Now his intelligence seemed a little fogged with some kind of obscure, interior confusion, and his happiness was perverted by a sad, lost restlessness. Although he maintained all his interests and increased them, the increase was in extent, not in depth, and the result was a scattering of powers, a dissipation of the mind and will in a variety of futile aims.¹⁰

The accounts of John Paul's student years are of incomplete and failed courses; he was placed on probation twice by Cornell, and in 1937 dropped from the university. He overspent buying 'cameras, radios, rifles, fishing tackle, fancy razors, microscopes, and, later on, movie cameras and cars – all on the instalment plan'.¹¹ He managed to get readmitted to Cornell after time out, and in 1938-9 pursued more courses, but failed to graduate. Merton writes:

The bored, lost, perplexed expression that wrinkled his forehead, the restlessness of his walk, the joyless noisiness of his laughter told me all I needed to know about my brother's college career. I recognized all the tokens of the spiritual emptiness that had dogged my own steps from Cambridge to Columbia.¹²

Following the death of the grandparents, John Paul had found a family, the Miscalls, who informally adopted him, but he was looking for

something more. Mott writes that at this time John Paul talked about a good many plans, all of them conflicting, and he seemed to think that Tom as older brother had all the answers while he had none. 'Every time he said something to this effect, giving a loud, nervous laugh, Merton winced. ... John Paul was floundering.'¹³ In May 1941 John Paul turned up to see his brother at St Bonaventure and they went to the cottage at Olean. He had learnt to fly a plane, been in the Naval Reserve and spent time in Mexico, but still appeared restless. Ed Rice, a close friend of Merton, said, 'When I knew him, in 1940 and 1941, he was a wild blond kid, tremendously likable and probably further out than any of us.'¹⁴ During this visit in 1941, the brothers discussed John Paul becoming a Catholic. Merton writes: 'But I could tell from the tone of his voice that he was as indefinite as he was sincere. He meant well, but he would probably do nothing.'¹⁵

And forevermore, brother, hail and farewell!¹⁶

The 1941 conversation about Catholicism presages the final meeting between the brothers in 1942, before John Paul who had by then been trained in the Canadian Air Force was ready to be sent overseas. Merton's account of his brother's visit to Gethsemani conveys a sense of urgency

and energy. For Merton this was the real action that had been missing in their relationship – his aim to convert John Paul to Catholicism, for him to be baptized and confirmed, and for Merton to share with his younger brother what he, Merton, had experienced and found:

He was my brother and I could talk to him straight, in the words we both knew, and the charity that was between us would do the rest. ... It was so clearly present that there was no necessity to allude to it, this sorry, complicated past, with all its confusions and misunderstandings and mistakes ... real and vivid and present.¹⁷



John Paul in his Air Force uniform.

What is this meeting all about? For Merton it seems an attempt to heal and redeem the past. Merton sees in his brother a similar confusion and lostness that he too had felt before entering the Abbey of Gethsemani, because they had shared the same history of loss and separation.

'Once you have grace,' I said to him, 'you are free ... you will be free forever, because your strength will be given you, as much as you need.' ... From then on his impatience to get to the Sacrament was intense.... By Saturday afternoon, I had told John Paul everything I knew. ... I was exhausted. I had nothing left to give him.¹⁸

Both brothers had sought somewhere to belong, something to connect with, where the past could be managed, and where they would take on, at the very least, the outer appearance (a uniform for the air force and vestments for the monastery) of being part of something more than themselves. The pain of the past was still present, when, before taking communion together, John Paul was marooned high up in the gallery at the back of the church with Merton at the altar: 'High up in the empty Tribune, John Paul was kneeling all alone, in uniform. He seemed to be an immense distance away, and between the secular church where he was, and the choir where I was, was a locked door.' This recalled to Merton 'all the scores of times in our forgotten childhood where I had chased John Paul away with stones.' The brothers received communion together, and 'the work was done.'¹⁹

Mott writes that this experience was a greater mystery than reconciliation; one where Merton had finally been helped to help his brother, whereas before, 'they had been little more to one another than orphans of the same parents.'²⁰

After hearing of John Paul's death and remembering the poem of Catullus, 'Hail and Farewell' to a brother dead in a distant campaign, Merton wrote his own: 'For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943'.

Acknowledgement

Photographs used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Notes

1. John Corey Whaley, *Where Things Come Back* (New York: Atheneum, 2012), p. 175.
2. Thomas Merton, 'For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943', in *The*

- Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 35.
3. I would like to acknowledge the unpublished *A Law of Love, The Life of Thomas Merton's Brother John Paul Merton* by William J. Meegan, which contains much detailed research.
 4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK, Centenary edition, 2015) , p. 8. The first photo is used by William J. Meegan, and the second can be found in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984).
 5. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 11.
 6. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 23.
 7. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 47.
 8. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 82.
 9. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 148.
 10. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 151.
 11. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 103.
 12. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 287.
 13. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 152.
 14. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970), p. 63.
 15. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 335.
 16. Translation by James Green of the final line of 'A Fraternal Farewell' by Catullus.
<https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2019/05/27/catullus-101-a-fraternal-farewell>
 17. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 396.
 18. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 397.
 19. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 398-9.
 20. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 221.

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