

The Transformative Power of Love

Patricia Higgins

At the end of September I attended a study day on the theme 'Thomas Merton and the transformative power of love' at the Meditatio Centre in London led by Sophronia Scott. Sophronia, a patron of the Thomas Merton Society, is a novelist, essayist, and leading contemplative thinker. Her book *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* won the 2021 Thomas Merton 'Louie' Award from the International Thomas Merton Society.

Sophronia's stated aims for the day were twofold: to do a brief foray into Thomas Merton's writings on love, and to invite the participants to reflect on their own lives and the way in which they think love has transformed their lives. It was recognised that the concept of love is used in such a myriad of ways as to render the term almost meaningless.

She gave us two quotes from *Love and Living* by Merton to give us some sense of the understanding of love we were trying to investigate:

Love is not a problem, not an answer to a question. Love knows no question. It is the ground of all, and questions arise only insofar as we are divided, absent, estranged, alienated from that ground.

But the precise nature of our society is to bring about this division, this alienation, this estrangement, this absence. ... Hence we live in a world in which we say, 'God is dead,' and do so in a sense rightly, since we are no longer capable of experiencing the truth that we are completely rooted and grounded in His Love.

How can we rediscover this truth?

But the question of love is one that cannot be evaded. Whether or not you claim to be interested in it, from the moment you are alive you are bound to be concerned with love because love is not just something that happens to you: *it is a certain special way of being alive.*

Sophronia introduced us to her first encounter with Thomas Merton at the start of a graduate programme in Dec 2011 on creative writing. The lecturer Robert Vivien quoted an extensive passage from Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, taken from the section titled 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', which begins with 'How the valley Awakes.' This

quote, according to Sophronia, set her world on fire. After having heard the passage she wanted to be outside early in the morning with nature listening for all the sounds and asking that God tell her that it was time to 'be'.

From 2011 onwards Thomas Merton continued to be a trusted companion on her spiritual journey of discovery. She was particularly attracted to his journals which revealed to her a flawed human being who was making a determined and serious attempt to understand and discern the will of God in his life. For Sophronia his honesty and preparedness to reveal his inner life made him a wonderful spiritual companion. The question that arises from his writings and his life is: how do we learn to love and trust each other in a society that fosters so many divisions and uncertainties and keeps us from experiencing the love we all surely need?

There was some hesitance from the participants to share their personal experiences of the transformative power of love in their lives. The conversation was a general discussion about love in terms of what it might be understood to mean and the many difficulties that it can entail. Our fears of rejection, of exposure of our weaknesses, fragility and vulnerability are particularly exposed in these intense relationships. What the responses clearly demonstrated was that what may seem like a relatively easy question may be quite difficult to explain and to share with other people in a public space.

Sophronia talked about a dear friend of hers who had died of cancer. This friend and her genius for friendship had given her a profound sense of security and trust. In this context she introduced Anam Cara, the Celtic concept of 'soul friend' popularised by the Irish writer and Benedictine John O'Donahue. It is not a friendship which pits the platonic against the romantic but something much longer and more transcendent. This love between friends, between 'soul friends', is often undervalued and its importance in our lives underestimated. There is such a heavy weight of expectations on romantic love that everything else tends to pale in comparison.

In this context we looked at the topic of Thomas Merton and his relationship in 1966 with M, the young nurse who cared for him while he was undergoing an operation for his back in the hospital in Louisville. There are those who think it exposes his humanity, loneliness and vulnerability, his need for love and the way in which this event helped him to reflect on his relationships with woman and what it might mean to truly love and be loved. There are others who see it as irresponsible, feckless, and a deep betrayal of his monastic vows. In *Love and Living*

Merton says 'We will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love — either with another person or with God.' It would seem that Merton experienced both. His diaries are a powerful reminder of the struggle that this involved for him and, I think it would be true to say, for all human beings in whatever form it takes.

This debate was aired in *The Tablet* in 2020 in the article 'Thomas Merton in Love' by Greg Hillis. It reared its head again in *Harper's Magazine* where Garry Wills reviewed the book *On Thomas Merton* by Mary Gordon, in which he referred to him as 'a little more than a disgruntled and shallow ascetic'. Greg Hillis points out that we only have Merton's view of the relationship which, according to Hillis, demonstrates a considerable level of self-absorption and selfishness. Nevertheless, it also shows him as always, trying to deal with his own evident shortcomings with humility and honesty.

Through her analysis of the relationship and all its complexity Sophronia believes, along with Greg Hillis, that it grounded Merton, and was a demonstration of his capacity to try to be honest and humble in the face of a relationship that revealed to him his many needs and desires.

It was wonderful to see how Merton's writings have been, and continue to be, such a source of inspiration and solace in Sophronia's ongoing spiritual journey. Someone indeed transformed by the power of love.

Patricia Higgins is a retired teacher living in London. She is member of the World Community of Christian Meditation and is actively involved in the Palestine Solidarity Committee and in environmental issues. She serves on the committee of the Thomas Merton Society.