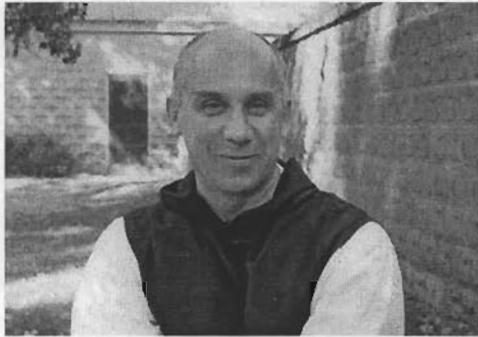
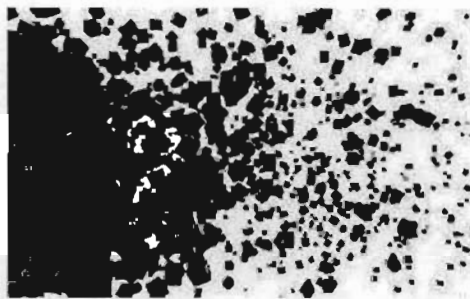


Thomas Merton



The Commotion



and the Long Art of Contemplation



Contemplative Outreach of Central Florida
Divine Mercy Catholic Church
February 28, 2015

Presented by Gray Matthews



Contemplative Outreach of Central Florida

Thomas Merton, The Commotion and the Long Art of Contemplation

February 28, 2015

Schedule of the Day

9:00	Gathering/Coffee
9:30	Centering Prayer
9:50	Welcome, Opening Remarks, Introductions
10:00	Conference One: Attention
11:00	Break
11:15	Conference Two: Breakthrough
12:15	Lunch
1:15	Centering Prayer
1:35	Conference Three: Silence
2:30	Break
2:40	Conference Four: Liberation
3:30	Go in Peace

GOLD

The Long Art



COMMOTION

**Considering
Contemplation
In the Prayerful
Centering of
Our Lives
In God's
Life**

BLUE

Thomas Merton, the Commotion and the Long Art of Contemplation

Four Conferences in Cultivating Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958)

Introduction: We Must See Clearly

"There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished in us by our vital relation with realities outside and above us. When our life feeds on unreality, it must starve. It must therefore die. There is no greater misery than to mistake this fruitless death for the true, faithful and sacrificial 'death' by which we enter into life.

The death by which we enter into life is not an escape from reality but a complete gift of ourselves which involves a total commitment to reality. It begins by renouncing the illusory reality which created things acquire when they are seen only in their relation to our own selfish interests.

Before we can see that created things (especially material) are unreal, we must see clearly that they are real.

For the 'unreality' of material things is only relative to the greater reality of spiritual things" (p. 17)

NOTE: The long art of contemplation is can be likened unto this complete gift of ourselves in total commitment to reality that we must learn to see clearly. We reduce our lives and reality itself when we attempt to control our lives by our own measures and actions; we live deadening lives in commotion, not living lives in reality, when we stubbornly persist to heal ourselves by our own delusions and false programs of gaining power over life itself. For Merton, the question of living in reality is ultimately a spiritual question of truly being alive: How to be awake, aware, alive to the Life of our lives?

BLUE

Conference I: Attention

"Let us embrace reality and thus find ourselves immersed in the life-giving will and wisdom of God which surrounds us everywhere. First, let us be sure that we know what we are doing. Faith alone can give us the light to see that God's will is to be found in our everyday life.... To keep ourselves spiritually alive we must constantly renew our faith. We are like pilots of fog-bound steamers, peering into the gloom in front of us, listening for the sounds of other ships, and we can only reach our harbor if we keep alert. The spiritual life is, then, first of all a matter of keeping awake. We must not lose our sensitivity to spiritual inspirations. We must always be able to respond to the slightest warnings that speak, as though by a hidden instinct, in the depth of the soul that is spiritually alive. Meditation is one of the ways in which the spiritual man keeps himself awake" (p. 47)

"Thoughts in Solitude" - book

From "Thoughts in Solitude"

Conference Two: Breakthrough

"All good meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*. One cannot enter into meditation, in this sense, without a kind of inner upheaval. By upheaval I do not mean a disturbance, but a breaking out of routine, a liberation of the heart from the cares and preoccupations of one's daily business. The reason why so few people apply themselves seriously to mental prayer is precisely that this inner upheaval is necessary, and they are usually incapable of the effort required to make it. It may be that they lack generosity, and it may also be that they lack direction and experience, and go about it in the wrong way. They disturb themselves, they throw themselves into agitation by the violent efforts they make to get recollected, and finally they end in hopelessness. They compromise, in the end, by a series of frustrated routines which help them to pass the time, or else they relax into a state of semi-coma of contemplation" (48-49)

BLUE

Conference III: Silence

"Solitude has to be objective and concrete. It has to be a communion in something greater than the world, as great as Being itself, in order that in its deep peace we may find God. We put words between ourselves and things. Even God has become another conceptual ^{unreality} reality in a no-man's land of language that no longer serves as a means of communication with reality. The solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things. In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. And yet we find that the nakedness of reality which we have feared, is neither a matter of terror or shame. It is clothed in the friendly communion of silence, and this silence is related to love....When we have really met and known the world in silence, words do not separate us from the world nor from other men, nor from God, nor from ourselves because we no longer trust entirely in language to contain reality" (85, 86)

Conference IV: Liberation

"The solution of the problem of life is life itself. Life is not attained by reasoning and analysis, but first of all by living.... When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively, no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is full of prayer. The world of silence in which I am immersed contributes to my prayer. The unity which is the work of poverty in solitude draws together all the wounds of the soul and closes them. As long as we remain poor, as long as we are empty and interested in nothing but God, we cannot be distracted. For our very poverty prevents us from being 'pulled apart' (dis-tracted).... You pray best when the mirror of your soul is empty of every image except the Image of the Invisible Father..... The greatest of God's secrets is God Himself.... When this is learned, then our love of other men becomes pure and strong. We can go out to them without vanity and without complacency, loving them with something of the purity and gentleness and hiddenness of God's love for us" (p. 78, 93, 110, 124)

BLUE

The Merton Prayer

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and
In the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me
To face my perils alone.

--*Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 83

THE COMMOTION

A Contemplative Critique

Definitions:

1. **A metaphor for the Modern Era** [1650-Present], in particular the post-modern or Hyper-modern period of the second and third industrial revolutions.
2. **Externalization of the agitation of the soul**; modern shift away from the contemplative, inner life to the more immediately satisfying active life; from self-control to world control.
3. **Compulsive deadening and draining of life** through hyperactive inattentiveness; shallow subjectivity maintained by a self-absorption and a rejection of self-affectivity (life sensing its life)
4. **Cultural sacrifice of silence** through via unyielding counterproductive symbolic distractions and diversion by destructive rhetorical forces; rejection of silence in relation to stillness, solitude and simplicity.
5. **The fury & flurry of a culture of noise**; the consequences of continuous active busy-ness in all areas of living; non-stop clamor, mental traffic jams, social mediation, severe diminution of attentiveness.
6. **Anti-contemplative and anti-relational mass hyperactivity**; system of adaptation and addiction to illusions of independent control through connecting/disconnecting at will; flattening automation of mystery.

Additional Characteristics:

1. Impervious to critique, absorbs all criticism, objection and complain
2. Self-perpetuating system maintained by the rhetoric of inevitability
3. Accelerated adaptation processes of progress triumphant over perfection
4. Uncontrollable discontent inherent in restless, systematic consumption
5. Habitual distortion of human nature by neglect & benumbed hollowing

Relevance of this Critique to the Practice of Centering Prayer:

This contemplative critique of *The Commotion* is a critique of our modern culture's propensity to manufacture what Thomas Keating calls "false programs for happiness," forms of "cultural over-identification" in which we have placed "immense emotional investment" at the expense of being "without the true source of happiness, which is the experience of the presence of God" (*The Human Condition*, 34-35, 9). Keating notes: "The key is not in the grass; it was not lost outside ourselves. It was lost inside ourselves. That is where we need to look for it" (10).

WHITE

The Contemplative Journey of Thomas Merton [1915-1968]

I. Early Years: Purgation

- 1915 Born January 31, in Prades, France (family moves to NY in 1916)
- 1918 His brother, John Paul, is born November 2
- 1921 His mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton, dies of cancer October 3
- 1925 Tom and his father, Owen Merton, move to St. Antonin, France
- 1928 Tom moves to England (stays with his aunt) and attends school
- 1931 Owen Merton dies of a brain tumor after long illness
- 1933 Now age 18, Tom travels to Italy, U.S. for the summer, and returns to England to attend Clare College, Cambridge University
- 1934 Leaves Cambridge and a quiet scandal (illegitimate son)
- 1935 Enters Columbia University (John Paul enters Cornell)
- 1937 Merton reads Eitenne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*; editor of school yearbook and art editor of the *Columbia Jester*
- 1938 Received into the Catholic Church, November 16 (Corpus Christi Church)
- 1939 Receives M.A. degree in English (thesis on William Blake); enrolled in Ph.D. program intending to write a dissertation on Gerard Manley Hopkins
- 1940 Teaches English at Columbia Extension School in the Spring and at St. Bonaventure in the Fall; applies to the Franciscans, is accepted then advised to withdraw because of past personal history
- 1941 Visits Gethsemani during Holy Week; enters monastery on December 10

II. Monastic Years: Illumination

- 1942 Merton breaks from journal writing in October (resumes Fall 1946); received into the novitiate February 21, given the name Fr. M. Louis
- 1943 His brother, John Paul, is reported missing-in-action (baptized in '42)
- 1944 Merton takes simple vows; first publication (*Thirty Poems*)
- 1947 Takes solemn vows
- 1948 Publishes autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (submitted in 1946), which became a best-seller; Dom James Fox is elected Abbot of Gethsemani
- 1949 Ordained to priesthood, May 25; begins orientation classes for novices
- 1951 Appointed Master of Scholastics; becomes an American citizen
- 1952 Publishes *The Sign of Jonas* after settling issues with censors
- 1953 Continues writing; permitted to use tool shed ("St. Anne's") for hermitage
- 1955 Appointed Master of Novices (continues until '65); publishes *No Man is an Island* (title as reference to a line by the poet John Donne)

WHITE

described in *Conjectures of a
guilty Bystander*

III. Turn Toward the World: Union

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- 1958 "Fourth and Walnut" experience in downtown Louisville, KY; publishes *Thoughts In Solitude* (from notes written in '53 and '54)
- 1959 Begins work on "The Inner Experience" (to be published finally in 2003)
- 1960 Significant publications (6 books); monastery begins building a retreat center, which later becomes a hermitage
- 1961 Begins circulation of the "Cold War" letters; publishes *New Seeds of Contemplation* (some editions printed in '62)
- 1962 Forbidden by the abbot general to publish about war & peace
- 1964 Visits D.T. Suzuki in NYC; peace movement leaders meet at Gethsemani
- 1965 Becomes the first American Trappist to be a hermit, August 20th
- 1966 Publishes *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*; enters hospital for surgery and falls in love with student nurse, "M"
- 1967 Meets with leaders of women religious from contemplative orders (again next Spring)
- 1968 Publishes *Cables to the Ace, Faith & Violence, Zen and the Birds of Appetite*; travels to Alaska, California and Asia; dies of accidental electrocution in Bangkok, December 10—twenty-seven years to the day after entering Gethsemani; body flown home on SAC plane

Consider...

Merton's Life -- 1915-1968-- in the dramatic context of the mid-20th century: From the roaring twenties through the riotous sixties, five decades of war, turbulence and revolutionary cultural changes.

- Global Village at war: WWI, WWII, Korean, Vietnam
- Growth of mass media communications: Radio, motion pictures, television
- Advancements in technology: AC, transportation, NASA, computers
- Assassinations of JFK, RFK, Malcolm X and MLK Jr.
- Vatican II and religious reforms
- Rise of social movements: Civil Rights, Women, Student, Peace
- Baby Boom and population explosion
- Urban sprawl via suburbs while inner cities decline and rural areas shrink
- The advent of postmodern philosophies and perspectives

CONTEMPLATION

in the Writings of Thomas Merton

A. Books on Contemplation

Merton's writings on the subject of contemplation developed over time as he continued to seek ways to describe and explain the meaning of the contemplative life. His views continued to take shape with increasing solidity as his experiences with and ideas about contemplation evolved, and as his understanding of the world outside the monastery, and his own relationship to that world, changed.

1. Primary writings on contemplation

1948 – *What is Contemplation?*

1949 – *Seeds of Contemplation*

1951 – *Ascent to Truth*

1962 – *New Seeds of Contemplation*

1969 – *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, later titled: *Contemplative Prayer*

1972 – *Contemplation in a World of Action*

2003 -- *Inner Experience* (first written in 1959)

B. Defining Contemplation

1. Two main dimensions or aspects (not dualistic, but a *seeming* dichotomy):

(a) Passive: It is a gift from God; a grace; supernatural (a gift of understanding)

(b) Active: It is a way of opening ourselves to God; natural, a capability

2. Easier to describe than define, but essentially:

“Contemplation, by which we know and love God as he is in Himself, apprehending Him in a deep and vital experience which is beyond the reach of any natural understanding, is the reason for our creation by God” (*Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 144; also in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962) p. 225).

3. There are at least four types of contemplation (from *The Inner Experience*):

(a) Passive, or Infused: pure grace given by God only

(b) Active, or Masked: accomplished through human action

(c) Natural: intuited insights gleaned from reflecting on nature, art, beauty

(d) Mystical (theology): experiential contact with God, union

4. Active contemplation (for those who, while leading active lives, seek to know the will of God) involves three endeavors (William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation*, 2000, St. Anthony Messenger Press):

(a) It means being alive to the signs of the times—being in tune with what is most genuine in the movements of the day.

(b) It means confronting reality with a sense of awe.

(c) It means being in touch with one's own inner life, directing that life according to our inner truth and striving for unity

Key Terms & Concepts by Thomas Merton Concerning Identity, Balance, and Monastic Renewal

- Monastic Image:** Ideal: place of simplicity, no agitation or confusion, inner peace
Real: neurotic anxiety—like everywhere else—is in the monastery too
- Modern World:** Modern thought need not oppose monastic thought, but because modern man is not in agreement with himself, monks have a responsibility to confront (post)Modern Man as he is in his desperation and despair, in order to restore hope in/of being a person; process begins with monk himself and then extends to the world.
- Identity:** One's witness to truth in one's life; own authentic convictions as person; in contemplative life, lack of identity is a disaster
[see *True Self* and *False Self* for more description]
- Alienation:** Finding one's center in someone/something else; on a social level; alienation is a systematic process of existing for someone else
The Problem: Universal confusion and frustration that leads to a collapse in interest in real life; Man is alienated from his true self, and loses himself in despair, mindless conformity or pseudo-identities.
Alienated Postulant tends not to experience realities directly but secondhand; the systematic frustration of the quest for authenticity will lead a postulant to doubt his vocation or call, which may be derived from one of two kinds of identity problems:
 1. haven't grown up (adolescent problems still unresolved)
 2. ID crisis is on a deeper spiritual level
to which the monastery may fail postulant (or novice) if they :
 - a. refuse to genuinely listen to him
 - b. or misinterpret ID problems as disobedience or rebellion
- Renewal:** Grassroots participation in a living tradition (spirit and life), as opposed to top down model of change of "Reform" of human customs (invalid/dead)
Renewal is a return to the sources; requires discipline, spirit of openness
 1. necessity of solitude, alone with God
 2. apostolic vocation: open to the needs and anguish of the world
- Discipline:** Training for deepening and expanding one's capacity for experience, awareness and understanding; to become aware is to become transformed;
{ self-transcendence ---> transformation in Christ }
True discipline is interior and personal, more than a form of conduct, and is effective if it uncover errors and illusions (no phony contemplation), providing spiritual guidance for traveling the road of contemplation.

Openness:

Love and encounter, readiness for exchange through dialogue

1. being aware and responsive to the real situation of people
2. being more accessible to people of flesh and blood
3. being able to leave cloister on occasion to obtain info/experiences that can enhance contemplation
4. must develop within the monastery community itself—natural relationship, real communication

Real purpose of openness: “to renew life in the Spirit, life in love.”

“A greater love and understanding of people is no obstacle to a true growth in contemplation, for contemplation is rooted and grounded in charity”

(*Contemplation in a World of Action*, 1971, p. 140).

The World:

We and the world interpenetrate; we find the real world inside of us too; world rejection and world affirmation are extreme stereotypes to avoid.

We are the world, the world is not somewhere else: “In fact, I am the world just as you are! Where am I going to look for the world first of all if not in myself? As long as I assume the world is something I discover by turning on the radio or looking out the window I am deceived from the start...The world is a problem insofar as everybody in it is a problem to himself” (*Contemplation in a World of Action*, 1971, 143).

False Self:

Our illusory shadow self; the old man or sinful self; constructed and projected via masks, costumes and roles; ego-centered and self-possessed seeking to exist autonomously outside of God; unreal & inauthentic.

True Self:

Our real, whole authentic self created by and hidden in the mercy of God; the center of our soul, untouched by sin, where God lives in pure truth giving us life; the New Adam, the new man; we discover our identity, our true self, when we accept our place in the midst of time, people and things without having to completely understand everything; when we become obedient to the reality of our life.

“Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence. Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1962, pp. 35-36)

SALMON

The Hidden Ground
of Love (1985)

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poverty of spirit and listen to His commands which come from the depths of His love, and work that men's hearts may be converted to the ways of love and justice, not of blood, murder, lust and greed. I am afraid that the big powerful countries are a very bad example to the rest of the world in this respect.

Yes, you are right that the Catholic clergy are usually so caught up with tasks and rituals that they do not have time or interest to get involved in deeper contacts with those who are not members of the Church. The great trouble today is that with the increase of communications and the greater number of people there is so much to be done that few have time to do anything properly, at least in the West. At least I hope to devote myself more fruitfully to the opportunities I have at present. Without ceasing to write letters, I hope to get in three or four hours a day of meditation besides my other Office prayer, and the work I have to do . . .

January 2, 1966

I have your two kind letters of Dec. 1 and Dec. 20th and once again I will try within my capacity to answer at least some of the points you raise, though I may not be able to cover everything in this one letter. I will do what I can, at the cost perhaps of brevity here and there.

First, I deeply appreciate your suggestion for a full-length book on prayer. It accords with my own desires and ideas. I recently told my publisher that I hoped to spend about a year studying and meditating in view of such a book. This will not be possible until I have cleared the way. I have several articles to write, and some other chores. The trouble is that I am always being asked for articles and reviews and I always manage to see the importance of the requests, and this keeps me from getting down to a more continuous piece of writing. Your idea, however, is excellent and I really hope that I will be able to do this. At the same time, I have written such books in the past. I will have a copy of one of them, the *Ascent to Truth*, sent to you. I believe you already have *Seeds of Contemplation*. I will send also a mimeographed work on monastic prayer which contains quite a few typing errors, but you will I am sure be able to make it out . . .

. . . If you have not sent *The Phenomenon of Man*, please do not send it as we have copies here. I have not read it yet, but I have read another book of Teilhard which I like very much, *The Divine Milieu*. I will see if I can send you something by or about him. The market is swamped with books of his now. You might like his *Hymn of the Universe*. I will see about getting a copy for you . . .

. . . The main thing I can tell you without difficulty is the outline of my daily life in the hermitage.

The hermitage is ten minutes' walk from the monastery in a hidden

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To Abdul Aziz / 63

place in the woods. No one comes there so the solitude is very good and appropriate for prayer, especially at night.

I go to bed about 7:30 at night and rise about 2:30 in the morning. On rising I say part of the canonical Office consisting of psalms, lessons, etc. Then I take an hour or an hour and a quarter for meditation. I follow this with some Bible reading and then make some tea or coffee and have breakfast if it is not a fast day. Breakfast consists of bread and tea or coffee, with perhaps a piece of fruit or some honey. With breakfast I begin reading, and continue reading and studying until sunrise. Now the sun rises very late, in summer it rises earlier, so this period of study varies but it is on the average about two hours.

At sunrise I say another Office of psalms, etc., then begin my manual work, which includes sweeping, cleaning, cutting wood, and other necessary jobs. This finishes about nine o'clock, at which time I say another Office of psalms. If I have time then I may write a few letters, usually short (today is Sunday and I have more time). After this I go down to the monastery to say Mass, as I am not yet permitted to offer Mass in the hermitage. Saying Mass requires an altar, an acolyte who serves the Mass, special vestments, candles and so on. It is in a way better to have all this in the monastery. It would be hard to care for so many things and keep them clean in the hermitage. After Mass I take one cooked meal in the monastery. Then I return immediately to the hermitage usually without seeing or speaking to anyone except the ones I happen to meet as I go from place to place (these I do not ordinarily speak to as we have a rule of strict silence). (When I speak it is to the Abbot, whom I see once a week, or to someone in a position of authority, about necessary business.)

On returning to the hermitage I do some light reading, and then say another Office about one o'clock. This is followed by another hour or more of meditation. On feast days I can take an hour and a half or two hours for this afternoon meditation. Then I work at my writing. Usually I do not have more than an hour and a half or two hours at most for this, each day. Following that, it being now late afternoon (about four) I say another Office of psalms, and prepare for myself a light supper. I keep down to a minimum of cooking, usually only tea or soup, and make a sandwich of some sort. Thus I have only a minimum of dishes to wash. After supper I have another hour or more of meditation, after which I go to bed.

> Now you ask about my method of meditation. Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on *faith* by which alone we can know the presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as "being before God as if you saw Him." Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind

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SALMON

this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realizing Him as all. My prayer tends very much toward what you call *fana*. There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer, or meditation. It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible. I do not ordinarily write about such things and I ask you therefore to be discreet about it. But I write this as a testimony of confidence and friendship. It will show you how much I appreciate the tradition of Sufism. Let us therefore adore and praise God and pray to Him for the world which is in great trouble and confusion. I am united with you in prayer during this month of Ramadan and will remember you on the Night of Destiny. I appreciate your prayers for me. May the Most High God send His blessing upon you and give you peace.

December 28, 1966

Your good letter reached me in this season of holy days and I have not failed to keep you in my special prayers. Also when the Night of Destiny comes I hope to be united with you in fervent prayer.

You are right, I have not written since March. That last letter was sent to you just before I went to the hospital for a rather serious operation. Though the operation was successful, I was slow in recovering and I still have some trouble, but of course I can type and so on. However, when I got out of the hospital I was very slow in catching up with correspondence. I also read the book on Al-Junayd in the hospital and was greatly impressed by it. He is surely one of the great mystics. In the hospital I found it rather difficult to read however, and I will go through the book again to get full profit out of it and to know this great mind better. I knew you would not like Zaehner. I do not think he is consciously hostile to Islam, but he is just a characteristic Western academic mind. Such minds are really not attuned to the ancient traditions and you will find in them a certain apparent lack of respect which is not due to ill will but to the scientific atmosphere in which people are trained today. This gives an objective view of things and also a distortion of perspectives, a lack of certain kinds of appreciation which are vital for a true understanding of the saints of Islam. This is regrettable indeed, for he has access to much knowledge.

My life in the hermitage continues to be quiet and simple. In fact I

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find that I can no longer carry on the same kind of routines as I did before. It is frankly impossible for me to keep up consistently with letter writing at fixed times and my correspondence has suffered badly. There are some business letters about writing that I have to take care of and after those I find it almost impossible to write about more or less personal matters, I seem to have nothing whatever to say. In fact this Christmas I am simply having a single letter mimeographed and am sending it to all the many correspondents to whom I cannot reply, they are too many. I will enclose a copy, you can judge my situation from it . . . My time in the hermitage is divided between study and meditation. Since the operation I have not been able to do much manual work. The silence of the woods is perfect. I go to the monastery once or twice a day but not for long. Once in a while I still have to go to the doctor in town, but I think that will stop soon, even if I have to have another operation. But these operations if I have any more will perhaps be less complicated.

Sometimes I see a visitor to the monastery and this autumn I was most privileged to meet an eminent Sufi master from Algeria, Sidi Abdesalam, who is the heir to the tradition of Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawi. We had a very pleasant conversation through his interpreter and I feel he is a true friend. He has of course returned to Algeria. He was in this country briefly, brought here by some university people. If you wish, you can write to Dr. Bernard Phillips of Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa. (that is a sufficient address), who is a professor interested in Sufism and a friend of Sidi Abdesalam. But these professors are not great letter writers. Still, he might be able to give you information you would need about things in this country and put you in touch with out of the way publications. You might ask him for instance about the R. M. Bucke Society in Montreal, Canada, which puts out an interesting newsletter. There are Sufi studies going on there. [See letters to Raymond Prince and Linda Sabbath.]

And now, my friend, trusting your kindness to pardon me for being a bad letter writer, I take my leave of you again with warm good wishes for the future, and may you receive every blessing, peace, and joy. Let us continue in faith and in the service of the All-Merciful One who has designed to look upon us insignificant creatures and to grant us a little of His light. May He be forever blessed and glorified.

January 16, 1968

I was happy to receive your letter of December 18th. Also especially thank you for your greetings for Christmas and New Year and your prayers during Ramadan. I had not expected it so early, and I was not too sure when the Holy Night of Destiny occurred. I did, however, unite my prayers with yours in the days following Christmas as I believe it came about that time.

Yes, I know well the books of the Carthusian Dom Pollien. They are

SALMON

SALMON

SALMON

ALL THE WAY DOWN

(Jonas Ch. 2)

I went down
 Into the cavern
 All the way down
 To the bottom of the sea.
 I went down lower
 Than Jonas and the whale
 No one ever got so far down
 As me.

I went lower
 Than any diamond mine
 Deeper than the lowest hole
 In Kimberly
 All the way down
 I thought I was the devil
 He was no deeper down than me.

And when they thought
 That I was gone forever
 That I was all the way
 In hell
 I got right back into my body
 And came back out
 And rang my bell

No matter how
 They try to harm me now
 No matter where
 They lay me in the grave
 No matter what injustices they do
 I've seen the root
 Of all that believe

I've seen the room
 Where life and death are made
 And I have known
 The secret forge of war
 I even saw the womb
 That all things come from
 For I got down so far!

But when they thought
 That I was gone forever
 That I was all the way
 In hell
 I got right back into my body
 And came back out
 And rang my bell

[1966]

Source:

Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. NY: New Directions, 1977.