

## II. Robert Grip, DIFFERENT PEOPLE, DIFFERENT LEVELS

After four years of waiting, the second volume of the Merton letters, *The Road to Joy*, is finally out. Thanks to Robert Daggy's considerable skill as an editor, and Merton's own cooperation, readers are now able to pry a little deeper into Merton's life and thoughts. I say pry because there is something slightly forbidden about reading someone else's mail: you are eavesdropping, even though in this case Merton made it easy and even expected such an intrusion by making carbon copies of many letters. The most delightful result of all this intellectual snooping is the opportunity to witness Merton's ability to reach different people on different levels, depending on what he sensed they needed.

He is as open as he gets with the Columbia classmate regarded as his closest friend, Bob Lax. His whimsical letters, written in Joyce-like prose, illustrate their exclusive style of communicating. The exception to this playful use of English comes to a striking (but temporary) end when Merton writes a very serious letter just days before leaving St. Bonaventure for Gethsemani.

I cannot explain this except to say it in a lot of different ways: time to get out of the subway and go away to the clean woods; or time to get out of the party full of smoke and pray in a clean bedroom, like before sleeping and resting the way it is sweet. It is time to stop arguing with the seven guys who argue inside my head and be completely quiet in front of the face of Peace. (p. 163)

Because most of the Merton-Lax exchange is so private, it is the most challenging part of the "Road" to travel.

In correspondence with another longtime friend from Columbia, English Professor Mark Van Doren, we see Merton mature from a giddy graduate student to a self-assured young man. In 1959, after Van Doren had received Columbia's Alexander Hamilton Medal for meritorious achievement, Merton acknowledged Van Doren's enormous influence in his life as a literary "foster father": "Love's debts . . . are too great to be paid . . . I hope that I will owe you more and more that I can never repay" (p. 34).

One correspondent clearly infatuated with Merton was Sister Therese Lentfoehr who wrote glowing reviews of his books, typed his notes, and compiled a private Merton collection of her own. Merton responded to her obsession about his health and the number of gifts (including relics) by writing warm, gentlemanly letters. In one, we read about something Merton rarely revealed: details of his personal prayer life. Too detailed to be quoted here, the 1949 letter provides an inkling of the interior life to come, the one described in a 1966 letter to Abdul Aziz in the first volume of Merton letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*.

In another early letter to Lentfoehr, he asks her not to dig too deeply into his past at Columbia because of the "skeletons" she might find: "If you did, then I have no need to assure you that those skeletons are certainly skeletons and there is nothing in those closets to edify a religious. I am only thinking of your sensibilities" (p. 191). Apparently, she was alarmed by his "personal problem" with Margie Smith, and destroyed three of his letters referring to her. We also see, in a 1949 letter to Lentfoehr, evidence of Merton's self-censorship in destroying a section of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which Michael Mott believes might have detailed Merton's hell-raising days in Britain.

Perhaps as a result of a painful and rootless childhood, Merton maintained little contact with his relatives in New Zealand until late in his life. These letters reflect a gentle, almost defensive way of looking at life, a romantic reflection on the role played by his father and a nostalgic view of what were objectively not "the good lod days" for young Tom. Merton found plenty of joy in his friendships with the families of Tommie O'Callaghan and Beatrice Olmstead,

perhaps because of the contrast to monastic life and the chance to enjoy the traditional family life he never had. Merton clearly enjoyed observing all the action and chaos involved in rearing a modern American family, even if, as in the case of the Olmsteads, this was almost entirely done by mail.

*The Road* is especially valuable for putting Merton's writings into context. We can see through his joyful correspondence with and about young people, and his Circular Letters (a monastic mass mailing), what Merton was reading, what contemporary events concerned him and what thoughts he was developing at that particular moment. In a 1967 Circular Letter, you can see the seeds of the thought which eventually grew into the story he quoted just hours before his death, "From now on Brother, everybody stands on his own two feet": "The idea that 'the Church' does all your thinking, feeling, willing, and experiencing for you is, to my mind, carried too far. It leads to alienation" (pp. 102-103).

Similarly, it is clear by the revisions he made to *Seeds of Contemplation*, and later *New Seeds*, that Merton felt confined by the printed word, that the very nature of a book or magazine article froze his thought and prevented its further development. Writing in a 1959 letter, Merton talks of his earlier work:

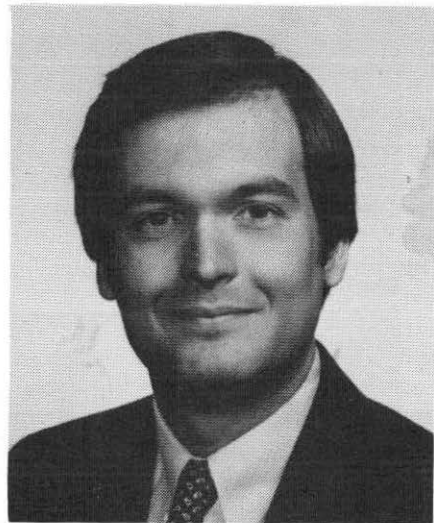
It is all very unsatisfactory to me, in fact a lot of it disgusts me. I was much too superficial and too cerebral at the same time. I seem to have ignored the wholeness and integrity of life, and concentrated on a kind of angelism in contemplation. That was when I was a rip-roaring Trappist, I guess. (p. 233)

Five years later, in the journal which became *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton develops that idea even further in a masterful example of concise writing:

My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center from somewhere else. Hence, I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation. (*A Vow of Conversation*, p. 19)

In addition, for anyone who has ever had difficulty deciphering his poetry, Merton provides clues and outright explanations.

There are some stretches of *The Road* which deserve more detailed explanation. There is a three year gap in the Van Doren letters, from December 1949 to April 1953. Since their correspondence had been fairly consistent, an editor's note here would have been helpful. In the letters to John Howard Griffin, there is mention of an audio tape on which Merton recorded *Cables to the Ace*, *The Geography of Lograire* and other works, about a year after Sister Therese raised the idea. Did Merton's tape to Griffin survive? And what about the three letters concerning Margie Smith which Sister Therese destroyed: why mention them but not say if Merton kept copies (in fact, he did not)? Regrettably, with a few exceptions, there still remains a shroud of silence about a period of his life which may have finally enabled Merton to resolve his longstanding inability to deal with women.



ROBERT GRIP

Finally, there is the obvious difference in size, but not in price, between *The Hidden Ground of Love* and *The Road to Joy*. Were there fewer letters to “New & Old Friends” from which to choose or does this mean this collection of correspondence will have to be supplemented by other volumes in the years to come? Or was this an attempt by the publisher to make this volume more marketable? In one case all the Merton-Lax letters previously published in the now out-of-print *A Catch of Anti-Letters* were deleted. Such an omission interrupts the flow and continuity of their unique correspondence, and should have been retained. Clearly, those interested in the Merton letters are a well defined group of readers. They are more likely to be antagonized by than attracted to a less challenging, less comprehensive book. The way the trend is going, the third volume will be only 218 pages, but still sell for \$27.95.

Do the letters in *The Road to Joy* break new ground in Merton research? Probably not. Much of what is discussed has already come out in different forms: any revelations (if there are any left) will probably come with the publication of the restricted journals. However, Merton and Daggy have given us a deeper, richer understanding of what is already available, and for that, we owe both men a great deal of thanks.

Despite the volume of correspondence and the body of Merton’s works now in print, the monk’s deepest thoughts still remain a mystery. During the ITMS Meeting at Bellarmine College in May 1989, Merton’s longtime friend, W. H. “Ping” Ferry told me that, after spending a week in 1968 driving Merton up and down the California coast, he still didn’t know Merton any better than he did before. That which Merton *intended* to keep private will never be revealed. Even this most public of private men deserves that right, no matter how much prying we do.

### III. Jane Marie Richardson, **STURDY SHELTER**

*A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter:  
one who finds a friend finds a treasure.* (Sirach 6:14)

Three years before his death Merton wrote: “I could fill another page with names of people I have loved to be with and loved to hear from. Lax, above all, and Mark Van Doren and all the old friends, Ad Reinhardt and so on.” It is especially these “old friends” who are celebrated in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*, although readers will certainly be glad for the “new” ones included, the term being used quite broadly. All of these friends, new and old, underscore the kind of spontaneous bonding that Merton could establish so readily. Making and keeping friends came as easily to him as praying.

This gift of identifying so simply and honestly with his correspondents is, of course, characteristic of Merton’s writing as a whole. The personal nature of letters, however, accentuates this trait and accounts so much for Merton’s continuing power to speak to an ever-widening community of earnest searchers. It is this ability to create bonds and to express them, even in letters hastily written, that helps us to realize how deeply integrated into his being was Merton’s awareness of everyone’s fundamental oneness in Christ. In a special way, *The Road to Joy* abounds with glimpses of Merton at his most lovable, sensitive, and vulnerable best.

Merton had many more friends than acquaintances and, in some way or other, the majority of his correspondents would fall into the former category. For this reason, the editor had to make some difficult choices in his actual selection of which letters among the 3,500 extant