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Douglas E. Christie

*Loyola Marymount University*, DEchristie@lmu.edu

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## The Work of Loneliness: Solitude, Emptiness, and Compassion

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE\*

*This essay considers the meaning of solitude in the spiritual life, especially as it comes to expression in the Christian monastic tradition, from the witness of the ancient desert monks to the life and works of Thomas Merton. It argues for a vision of solitude that understands deep vulnerability and uncertainty as significant elements in the process coming to know God, and that sees solitary struggle as leading to a profound resituating of the self in relation to human community. Transformed by solitude, the self becomes a bearer of compassion, a witness to the mysterious presence of God in the lonely places of human existence.*

Solitude for you resides in everything,  
and everything for you resides in solitude.

Luis Cernuda

Solitude. The undeniable allure to be alone in a garden or on a mountaintop or in a desert. Or perhaps alone in a room, reading a book, writing a letter, sewing, playing the piano. Who among us does not dream of being this person, untroubled by the cares of life, free, happy, serene, content with ourselves, even if only for a short while? The dream of solitude. What is this dream about? Why is it so persistent, so elusive? And do we really understand all that we dream for, all that is embedded in the longing for solitude? I suspect we do not. But how could we? Solitude is labyrinthine. It knows no bottom. It is not only a refuge from trouble, but trouble itself, a place where we risk losing ourselves forever.

The ancient Christian monks thought of solitude as a kind of paradise, a place where the full mystery of God became manifest. But they

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\* Douglas Burton-Christie is Professor of Christian Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is Editor of the journal *Spiritus*. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a keynote address at the International Thomas Merton Society Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia in June 2003.

also knew it as a place of the demonic, where the terrors lurking deep within us could be unleashed with a nearly uncontrollable power and fury. Antony of Egypt, who spent a lifetime in the solitude of the Egyptian desert, said: “[For the one] who wishes to live in solitude . . . there is only one conflict . . . and that is with the heart.”<sup>1</sup> For Antony, and for those who joined him in this experiment in solitude, the conflict was real and deep and often terrifying. The demonic was palpable and close. One cannot help but wonder what drove them to remain there, to struggle through long years in that wild, desolate solitude. Only a deep hunger could have kept them there, a sense of something mysterious and beautiful at the heart of that loneliness. God.

Yet to utter this word—God—and to suggest that, finally, it is God who sustains and fills the hearts of those who struggle in solitude is to risk missing something crucial. I mean the sense of God’s absence and the accompanying feelings of loneliness and alienation that are, for many, so deeply woven into the experience of solitude. Without an honest reckoning with the desolation of solitude, with the real sense of abandonment that so often colors this experience, we risk losing who and what God can become for the one who ventures into this lonely place.

Thomas Merton’s experiments in solitude, and his reflections upon those experiments, are instructive in this regard. In many of his published works, especially those appearing toward the end of his life, there is a sense of solitude as a balm, as a place of freedom, where the human person can be reconstituted as a child of God. Solitude is for Merton a kind of paradise where we rediscover our true identity. It is also a place where the reconstituted person can begin to reimagine the meaning of community, can perhaps even help to re-create community. Solitude is thus a place of tremendous creativity. It also makes possible a certain clear-eyed, prophetic critique of those cultural and spiritual patterns that undermine a true and authentic personhood and community. All of this is beautifully expressed in Merton’s classic essay “Rain and the Rhi-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated and with a foreword by Benedicta Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1975). Antony 11. This quotation represents a conflation of two versions of the saying attributed to Antony. One speaks of solitude, the other of the desert; and in one of the sayings, the word “heart” (*kardia*) is rendered as “fornication” (*porneia*), an intriguing comment on the ambiguity and complexity of the struggle with the heart in early monastic experience.

noceros.”<sup>2</sup> It is without question one of his most mature reflections on the meaning of solitude in human experience. Written in light of his life as a hermit at the Abbey of Gethsemani, it reflects an honest, even sober sense of what it means to face oneself in solitude. Still, for all this, it is largely celebratory, even optimistic, in tone. Missing from this essay, almost completely, is the sense of struggle—the struggle of actually being alone in that place, the struggle with himself.

It is not that Merton refuses to speak of these matters: he does so, endlessly, in his journals. However, the picture of solitude that he presents in this particular essay represents a carefully constructed image that emphasizes its playful and paradisaical dimensions while obscuring the difficult and painful aspects of the experience. There is little surprise in this, really. The essay is an artistic expression of a larger, more complex experience. Like all art, it selects and, in selecting, tells a particular story. Here the story is about the recovery of freedom in the face of blind conformity and totalitarianism. It is an important and necessary story and fits well with the increasingly well-honed image of himself that Merton chose to project during this period of his life—a solitary artist-contemplative-prophet standing against and offering a penetrating critique of a corrupt and spiritually vacuous culture. The message, of hope and freedom, is consistent with the image of the messenger: a man sitting alone in the woods amid the rain and the trees, celebrating the simple joy of existence. It is in many ways a beautiful and compelling image. It reminds us of the reality of a deeper, truer self, filled with the divine, accessible to us if we will only pause and listen and look.

However, the image is incomplete. It says little of the loneliness and desolation of solitude, the unraveling of the self that one sometimes experiences there, the terror, the fear, the emptiness. These too are part of the wildness of solitude, necessary and persistent dimensions of the experience, apart from which the solitary will never understand its deeper promise of freedom. It is here in this loneliness, known not only to the hermit but also to the woman lying alone in the cancer ward, the man suffering from a deep, intractable depression, the child left orphaned by war, that we bump up against the terror of

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 9-23. For a thoughtful analysis of “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” which first appeared in *Holiday* 37 (May 1965): 8-16, see Christopher C. Burnham, “Out of the Shadows: Merton’s Rhetoric of Revelation,” *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996): 55-73.

solitude. I do not mean by these examples to equate solitude with what we sometimes call “misfortune.” Rather, I want to point to those moments in our experience when we come face to face with our fragility and vulnerability, when we see ourselves for who we really are: mortal creatures. It is no wonder that we recoil from such moments of recognition, flee from them, seek to inoculate ourselves against them. Yet to give in to such fears is to risk losing something that can come to us in no other way, no other place. What this “something” is can be expressed in so many different ways—a renewal of self, an honesty about “the Real,” about God. These expressions of course only approximate what actually emerges from such naked solitude. But they suggest something of the promise of this solitude, a promise that exists not only for the individual, but also for the larger community.

In this essay, I want to explore this promise by examining two main questions. First, what does it mean to struggle honestly and deeply in solitude? Or, to put it in slightly different terms, how can we find a way to include as a more central part of our religious imagination the struggle of facing ourselves, our demons, and God in the exacting arena of solitude? How can we learn to do this without moving too quickly or prematurely to the “end” of the process where all is resolved? I do not mean to suggest by such questions that we somehow are in need of more suffering and loneliness in our lives and that we ought to cultivate these things actively and intentionally. Rather, I mean to suggest that we consider what it might mean to cultivate a practice of attention that enables us to dwell deeply within the mysterious, often painful ambiguity of our lives. A second, and related, question is this: how can a serious discipline of solitude help us to forge something beautiful and creative from our experience? How, in other words, can we learn to see solitude—in all its ambiguity and loneliness—as a rich source of artistic expression? Here, I believe, the vocations of the poet and the contemplative converge. Seen in this way, the solitary life becomes not a special calling of a few rare souls, but the vocation of all who seek to “make something” of their lives. Nor is it simply an individual, personal project. Set within a communal context, it can be understood as contributing to a larger cultural project of reimagining our deepest values and commitments.

### *The Struggle of Solitude: The Ancient Monastic Witness*

In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Thomas Merton signals his own interest in this larger cultural project through his inclusion of Henry

David Thoreau, Eugène Ionesco, and Philoxenos of Mabug as kindred spirits. For each of these figures, the relationship of solitude to identity was understood as part of a larger set of concerns that involved politics, social mores, and ethical and spiritual values. So too for Merton, the life of the solitary has an inescapably social dimension. His mention of the SAC planes flying overhead, the guns booming at Fort Knox, the electrical wires soon to be connected to his hermitage, is telling: he is part of a world in which militarism, technology, and consumerism are central driving forces. He is part of that world, complicit in it. Yet he also stands apart from it in important ways, questioning the values that underlie and give meaning to these cultural and economic forces, wondering about the possibility of other ways of living and being. His commitment to solitude is essential to this work of critical, prophetic witness. So is his creative adaptation of diverse cultural resources—including ancient Syrian monasticism, American transcendentalism, and the contemporary theater of the absurd—to the project of rethinking human identity.

As Isabel Colegate's recent book on hermits, solitaries, and recluses makes clear, the allure of solitude has proven to be deep and widespread in both Eastern and Western cultural traditions.<sup>3</sup> If we were to locate Merton against the backdrop of this larger story, it would mean situating him within a gathering of women and men that includes Lao-tse, Madame Blavatsky, Seraphim of Sarov, J. D. Salinger, Benedict of Nursia, Julia Butterfly Hill, Charles de Foucauld, Julian of Norwich, Gilbert White, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Everett Ruess, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Clearly, within this diverse range of seekers, explorers, and artists, the attraction of solitude, not to mention its meaning, cannot be reduced to any single thing. It is escape, solace, source of creativity, place of fearful encounter. It is strange, beautiful, wild, empty. Above all else, it is necessary—for the persons concerned, and for the larger community.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Isabel Colegate, *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries, and Recluses* (New York: Counterpoint, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of solitude is always both personal and communal. While much of its meaning often depends on the kind of personal concerns, often mysterious and not easily accessible even to the person concerned, that lead a person to hunger for and seek out solitude, it also depends for its meaning on the cultural, social, and political context that gives rise to such hunger and to which the life of solitude is itself a response. For insightful reflections on this complex interaction between the personal and communal dimensions of solitude, see Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return*

But what is this necessity? Why must we preserve solitude, seek it out, cherish it? To address this question, and to understand better the particular contribution Merton makes to our understanding of solitude, I want to consider briefly another figure in this immense host of solitaries—Antony of Egypt. Antony stands at the very beginning of the Christian tradition of disciplined solitude. For Merton, the example of Antony and the company of desert monastics that grew up around him in fourth-century Egypt was crucial to his efforts to recover a long-missing dimension of monastic life: the wild, trackless world of the solitary. In several of his later writings—his small book *The Wisdom of the Desert*, his dialogue with D. T. Suzuki in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, his essay “The Day of a Stranger,” and of course “Rain and the Rhinoceros”—he draws upon this ancient monastic wisdom, either directly or indirectly, to articulate his own emerging understanding of monastic spirituality.<sup>5</sup> Key to this understanding are elements that were also central to the early monks: a clear moral and spiritual vision (what the monks called purity of heart), an authentic freedom, and a capacity to stand against and offer critical resistance to the most corrupt values of the prevailing culture. Merton became convinced that contemporary monastic life—and by extension all Christian spiritual life—would be able to renew itself only if it recovered the impulse at the heart of this ancient monastic world, namely a willingness to probe the depth of one’s life before God in the demanding crucible of solitude. Needless to say, he did not see this as entailing a renunciation of cenobitic monastic life. But he did recognize that monasticism from the beginning, while radically

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to the Self (New York: Ballantine, 1998), and Sue Halpern, *Migrations to Solitude* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960); *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); “Day of a Stranger,” *Hudson Review* 20:2 (Summer 1967) [also published as *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981)]. See also *The Solitary Life* (Lexington, Ky.: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1960); “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,” in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960); *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2005). An older but still useful discussion of Merton’s enduring interest in solitude can be found in John Teahan, “Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton’s Life and Writings,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (Dec. 1982): 521-538.

communal, had always drawn nourishment from the wild, empty terrain of solitude.<sup>6</sup> This is a terrain Antony of Egypt knew intimately.

Much of the enduring power of Antony's *Vita* lay in its mythic structure and resonance. With admirable compression, Athanasius relates the story of a young man's conversion, his long, trying ordeal in the desert, and his eventual reintegration into the larger community as a healing, reconciling presence—an "alter Christus." It is a hero's journey of sorts and it satisfies in just the way such tales so often do, by leading us through the hero's struggle to find himself. Seen within the context of the Christian spiritual tradition, it is of course more than a hero's journey. It is a journey toward God, a paschal journey modeled on the example of Christ, expressing in its own language the indispensable elements of such a journey: call, trial, and resolution. Or, to express this threefold movement in terms closer to that of the story itself, *anachoresis*, *askesis*, and *agape*.<sup>7</sup>

*Anachoresis*, which can be translated roughly as "withdrawal," refers to Antony's initial sense of call (his grounding religious experience) and his response to that call (his withdrawal into the desert). *Askesis*, which can be translated as "training," refers to the long years of arduous struggle with the demons that Antony is said to have endured in the solitude of the desert. *Agape*, or love, refers to that moment in Antony's story when, after long years of solitary struggle, he emerges from solitude to embrace the human community again and is experienced by that community as a powerful healing presence. This is the basic structure of Antony's story as told by Athanasius. Its evocation of a life utterly grounded in the reality of God, purified by long solitary struggle, and transformed by that struggle was to prove irresistible—for Antony's contemporaries and for generations of seekers to come. It is ultimately a hopeful story, one that suggests that a human life can be deepened beyond our wildest imaginings and that this deepening can become a source of life for the human community.

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<sup>6</sup> On the tension between solitude and community in ancient Christian monastic life, see Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. with intro. by Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980) [hereafter VA]. For an excellent account of the theological, political, and ecclesial context of the *Life of Antony*, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), esp. 201-272.



Still, the way into those depths could be terrifying, something one might not guess at from the simple structure or pattern described above. Athanasius's detailed account of Antony's struggle with the demons makes it clear that there can be no transformation without the deep, purifying struggle in solitude.<sup>8</sup> And that this purification is costly. The psychological acuity of Athanasius's account is striking. He describes Antony's initial encounter with the demons in solitude. The devil

attempted to lead [Antony] away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasures of food, the relaxations of life, and finally, the rigors of virtue, and how great the labor is that earns it. . . .

We recognize immediately the doubts and fears arising in the mind of a person not yet fully resolved upon this new course of life. The mention of "memories" suggests the profound interior depths at which these concerns are working on Antony. They are not merely peripheral concerns, but touch upon the things Antony cares and worries about the most, the places within him where he is most vulnerable. The devil, Athanasius tells us, "raised in [Antony's] mind a great dust cloud of considerations," and in doing so, sought to undermine Antony's resolve.<sup>9</sup>

But this is only the beginning. As Antony's time in the desert lengthens and as he continues making progress in the life of virtue, so do his struggles increase and deepen. Athanasius tells us that Antony's progress provoked the enemy to such an extent that "approaching one night with a multitude of demons he whipped him with such force that he lay on the earth, speechless from the tortures. [Antony] contended that the pains were so severe as to lead one to say that the

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<sup>8</sup> James Goehring rightly notes that the solitary character of Antony's struggle deep in the heart of the Egyptian desert is in some respects a literary creation on the part of Athanasius. This is not to say that solitude did not figure importantly into the experience of the early Christian monks. It did. But Antony's story, which became paradigmatic for subsequent generations of monks and which came to stand for the early Christian monastic story, must be placed alongside many very different stories, in which Christian monastic practice was less radically solitary, more communal. See James E. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993): 281-296.

<sup>9</sup> VA 5.

blows could not have been delivered by humans since they caused such agony.”<sup>10</sup> This is a telling, and chilling, comment about the psychological and spiritual challenges of the life of solitude: in opening oneself to the cleansing power of solitude, one’s soul becomes porous and vulnerable. One finds oneself newly sensitive not only to the renewing power of God, but also to the debilitating power of the demonic.

For Antony and the early monks, to speak of confronting the demonic in solitude was another way of talking about confronting the self. It meant facing up to all those anomalous forces at work in the depths of the psyche, forces which are usually kept at bay by the noise and distractions of everyday life but which, in the space of solitude, make their presence felt with alarming intensity. Historian Peter Brown suggests that the monk in the desert was, above all, a person grappling with his own personality. For the monks, he says, the demonic was “sensed as an extension of the self. A relationship with the demons involved something more intimate than attack from the outside: to be “tried by the demons” meant passing through a stage in the growth of awareness of the lower frontiers of the personality. The demonic stood not merely for all that was hostile *to* [the human person]; the demons summed up all that was anomalous and incomplete *in* [us].”<sup>11</sup>

This intensely interior understanding of the encounter with the demons is confirmed by the monks’ own testimony. They knew full well how intimately bound up the demonic was with their own complex, conflicted inner lives. One day Abba Abraham asked Abba Poemen: “How do the demons fight against me?” Poemen responded: “The demons fight *against* you? . . . Our own *wills* become the demons, and it is these which attack us in order that we may fulfill them.”<sup>12</sup>

Antony’s story can be understood in similar terms, as the story of a person shaken to the core of his being, stripped bare by the rigors of solitude, brought to the very edge of his capacity to say or understand what is happening to him. In this, Antony’s experience captures

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<sup>10</sup> VA 8.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 89-90. For a thoughtful analysis of the complex social, ecclesial, and spiritual dimensions of demonic temptation in ancient Christian monastic experience, see: David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Poemen 67, quoted in Ward, *The Desert Christian*, 176.

something essential to that of many of the early monks and of many seekers since then—the sense of profound uncertainty and doubt that comes from confronting oneself in solitude. We should not, I think, underestimate the power and depth of the unraveling that can occur in solitude. There is a strong sense in the early monastic literature that the solitary did not always understand where he or she was going. The mysterious, unfinished character of the experience is part of what makes it so compelling: there is no happy ending written into the script, only a solitary human person standing naked before God seeking to be remade in God's image.

Athanasius includes this struggle as part of Antony's story. But he mutes it considerably. The reason is clear: Athanasius wanted and needed a heroic Antony to help carry the banner of the Nicene theological cause. Thus he notes continuously that it was Christ living in Antony that led the ascetic to overcome the devil. The light that pours down into his monastic cell suggests nothing less than the presence of the divine—the Nicene Christ whom Athanasius fought for, "light from light, true God from true God"—lifting and sustaining the weary monk.<sup>13</sup> Athanasius's hero must win in the end and win he does. Antony's emergence from solitude as a transformed being is, as I noted earlier, an important part of the story. It suggests the *telos* or end toward which the entire ascetic project points. However, it also suggests something about how difficult it is for us to sit long with the unresolved and the unfinished. We miss something crucial about this experience, I think, if we pass too quickly from the image of this fragile human being, who "lay upon the earth, speechless from the tortures." Much of the power of this story and its capacity to teach us lie in that image—the image of a human being brought to the very edge of his capacities, frightened, alone, mute, deeply uncertain about the meaning of his experience and about where he is going.

This too is part of the experience of solitude, a central part of the experience, which we ignore at our peril. It is often in the midst of this excruciating pain, suggest the ancient monastics, that we are remade—beyond our ability to say how or by whom. It may well be that in retrospect we will be able to say "God was in that place." But at the moment when the experience is unfolding, we rarely speak with such

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<sup>13</sup> On Athanasius's theological and ecclesial motives in the writing of the *Vita Antonii*, see the classic study by Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1981).

confidence. We know only that something tremendously difficult is being asked of us. Often we feel a profound uncertainty about how or even whether we will emerge from such an experience.

*Interlude: Quarantine*

It is difficult to know how or why the ancient monastics chose to set out upon such a difficult and painful path. One of the reasons they themselves give is that this was the way of Jesus in the desert. To follow the monastic path was to follow Jesus, amplifying over the course of an entire life what Jesus experienced during his forty days in the desert. It is an arresting notion, and may well have been one of the impulses behind the ancient monastic desire to enter solitude. Yet, the relatively scant attention the gospel writers themselves give to Jesus' desert experience leaves one wondering what exactly the monks were seeking to emulate. But I wonder whether the difficulty we experience in imagining such an experience is due in part to our habit of moving past that moment in Jesus' life too quickly. I wonder whether here as elsewhere we have been too quick to imagine we know the meaning of the experience—namely that Jesus' temptations in the desert were a necessary, but largely symbolic, part of his preparation for what was to come during the rest of his public ministry, a confirmation of the blessing that came to him in his baptism. Have we underestimated, I wonder, the degree to which Jesus himself struggled in that place?

The gospels give us precious little help in answering this question. But a recent novel by Jim Crace—*Quarantine*—explores this question with a boldness and courage that should give us pause.<sup>14</sup> In Crace's novel, Jesus is one of several persons who have removed themselves to the desert for a quarantine, a period of purification and clarification. Jesus has an idea about why he is there, about what he has come to seek, but it is not fully formed. Nor is he prepared for what begins to happen to him after he secludes himself in a cave and, in a burst of impetuous zeal, hurls his clothes over the edge of the precipice. In that moment, sitting naked in the cave, he feels "both foolish and triumphant all at once. . . . The air and sun were satisfying on his skin. He was a child again, and he had entered into

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<sup>14</sup> Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

Eden.”<sup>15</sup> But not long afterwards, he begins to confront the more mundane and more demanding dimensions of his quarantine.

It was not long before his body grew too hot to stay for long in Eden, and the first of many headaches started. . . . He muttered resolutions to himself, rocking with each word, although his feet were cut and painful. . . . The darkness undermined his appetite for wretchedness and he had reached the point in his fast when he was vulnerable. . . .

Again, particularly at night when he was cold and desperate for voices, Jesus turned back to his prayers. Old friends. He'd force himself to be more disciplined with them. . . . If he could not excel at prayers, then no one could. But no one—not a priest, a saint, a prophet from the hills—could pass the countless moments of the day engaged by prayer alone. There always came a time when the repetitions made his chin drop on his chest, so that he woke with a falling shudder just after a moment's sleep. At other times he simply could not concentrate. His worshipping became more conscientious than spontaneous. The prayers lost weight, like ashes in a fire, and floated off. Sometimes he stopped the verses halfway through and caught himself paying more attention to the dirt beneath his nails or an old woodworking scar across his hand than to the holy words. Sometimes a prayer became a conversation that he half recalled. He called on god to answer him, but all the voices that he heard were from the Galilee, a cousin's voice, a neighbor talking harshly to his wife, a peddler calling out his wares.

Most of all Jesus was disrupted by the silence of the cave, the depth of night beyond the entry, the scrub's indifference. Perhaps this silence was another test, he thought. Like hunger was a test. And boredom, too, and fear. . . .

It was the fourth night of his quarantine and he was weak.<sup>16</sup>

Here we encounter an honest evocation of the gritty, demanding, even fearful character of solitude. It invites us to reconsider what it might have meant for Jesus (or others) to endure such a long stretch of time alone in the wilderness. Above all, it invites us to consider how strange and destabilizing such an experience can be, how it can pierce

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<sup>15</sup> Crace, *Quarantine*, 131.

<sup>16</sup> Crace, *Quarantine*, 131-133.

our habitual ways of thinking about and experiencing the self and God. It also invites us to consider the sense of emptiness, absence, and doubt that often mark such an experience and to ask what part these elements play in the spiritual meaning we ascribe to solitude.

*Thomas Merton's Experiments in Solitude:  
Emptiness and Compassion*

Thomas Merton wrote "Rain and the Rhinoceros" in December of 1964, during a particularly significant moment in his own evolving experiment with solitude. In the autumn of that year, a bed was brought into the hermitage and Merton began sleeping there from time to time. This was a significant shift in his life, and represented the beginning of a deepening engagement with solitude that he had been moving toward gradually over many years. He rejoiced in this change and recognized that it marked an important moment in his life. "[I] lay in bed realizing that what I was, was happy. Said the strange word 'happiness' and realized that it was there, not as an 'it' or object. It simply was. And I was that."<sup>17</sup> Around the same time, he commented: "The liberty and tranquility of this place is indescribable—more than any merely bodily peace, this is a gift of God, marked with His simplicity and His purity. . . . Now all things seem reasonable and possible."<sup>18</sup>

His journal entries from throughout this period are marked with a sense of joy and new possibility. Yet he also recognized that the solitary life would require something significant from him, a serious deepening of his monastic vocation. "I am beginning to see that the question of solitude for me is finally getting to be no longer a question of *wish* but of *decision*."<sup>19</sup> As the new year unfolded, he began to grapple with what this decision would mean for him. "Last night, before going to bed, [I] realized momentarily what solitude really means: When the ropes are cast off and the skiff is no longer tied to land, but heads out to sea without ties, without restraints!"<sup>20</sup> He also

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five, 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 177.

<sup>18</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 200.

spoke of a dimension of the experience that would become increasingly real and painful to him over time: the sense of loneliness he often experienced in solitude.<sup>21</sup> And he acknowledged his dawning awareness that “solitude is not something to play with. It is deadly serious.” He was beginning to realize he had not been serious enough about it and admitted that he was now entering into the project of solitude “in fear and trembling, and often with a sense of lostness.”<sup>22</sup>

One senses little of this lostness in “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” It is the festival of the rain, the sense of joy and freedom that capture our attention. Still, there are hints of a deeper struggle in the essay. Merton notes that “to be awake [and have an identity, a person] has to accept vulnerability and death.” He recognizes that “the contemplative life [is] a confrontation with poverty and the void.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, Merton means this and takes these challenges seriously. Yet it is difficult to get a purchase on their meaning in the context of this essay. What does it mean to “accept vulnerability and death,” confront “poverty and the void?” What does it feel like? And how does the struggle with these realities yield the kind of freedom that Merton celebrates in this essay?

To raise such questions is to confront one of the most complex, challenging, and elusive aspects of the spiritual life—namely, what it means for a human being to look out onto the trackless terrain of the unknown and to seek God there. It is one thing to describe how this ought to be, or how it might be. It is another matter altogether to run one’s hand along the grain of reality and feel the ambiguous, difficult, searing reality of it. This is precisely what Thomas Merton does, with an astonishing degree of precision and transparency, in his journals and letters. In the remainder of this essay, I want to examine his testimony concerning solitude and consider two aspects of his experience that seem particularly noteworthy and instructive: first, his willingness—like Antony and the Jesus of Crace’s novel—to face the most painful and anomalous elements of his own inner life, and, second, his attempt to allow his experience of loneliness to be transformed into compassion.

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<sup>21</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 211.

<sup>23</sup> Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” 15-17.

How often it happens that issues of intimacy and sexuality turn out to be the places of the most severe testing of one's spiritual identity and commitments.<sup>24</sup> The stories and sayings of the ancient monks reveal that it was often so for them.<sup>25</sup> And clearly it was so for Merton. In early February 1966, not long before he met and fell in love with "M," the nurse who cared for him in a Louisville hospital that spring, Merton was beginning to sense acutely the depth of his own emotional woundedness, and the role that solitude might play in helping him attend to these wounds. "A basic conviction grows more and more clear to me," Merton wrote. "That I am called into solitude by God's will in order to be healed and purified. That there are deep wounds in me which would cause me despair if I saw them all at once—but I see them gradually and retrospectively."<sup>26</sup> This is an eerily prescient self-assessment, suggesting the kind of vulnerability that would soon overcome him as he lay alone in a hospital bed in Louisville, recovering from back surgery and beginning to open himself to what would become one of the most important experiences of intimacy in his life. Here he acknowledges honestly and clearly both the depth of his own woundedness and why solitude is so necessary for attending to it and perhaps healing it. It is not a particularly optimistic assessment of his situation; Merton recognizes that the roots of these wounds run deep and may never be completely healed. But even in the midst of intense pain and uncertainty, he places his hope

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<sup>24</sup> See Constance Fitzgerald, O.C.D., "Impasse and Dark Night," in Tilden H. Edwards, ed., *Living with Apocalypse* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper and Row, 1984). Fitzgerald points out that John of the Cross considered desire to be *the* locus of purification.

<sup>25</sup> Contemporary scholarship on ancient Christian monasticism has paid considerable critical attention to the significance of sexuality within ancient Christian ascetic practice, helping us to see more clearly than ever before the complexity and ambiguity of sexual renunciation and spiritual practice. See, for example Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Late Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1998); Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Six, 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 358.



in the healing power of solitude, not as an escape but as a means of honest confrontation with an aspect of his own experience that has long bedeviled him.<sup>27</sup>

His assessment of the depth of his wounds proved accurate. Almost a year earlier, in June of 1965, Merton had been startled by the sudden and unexpected upwelling of erotic feelings from his past:

The other day after my Mass, I suddenly thought of Ann Winsor, Andrew's little sister. She was about twelve or thirteen when I used to visit him on the Isle of Wight, in that quiet rectory at Brooke. She was the quietest thing on it, dark and secret child. One does not fall in love with a child of thirteen, and I hardly remember even thinking of her. Yet the other day I realized that I had never forgotten her and with a sort of Burnt Norton feeling about the part of the garden I never went to, and that if I had taken another turn in the road I might have ended up married to Ann. Actually, I think she is a symbol of the true (quiet) woman I never really came to terms [with] in the world and because of this there remains an incompleteness in me that cannot be remedied.<sup>28</sup>

There is much that could be said about this passage regarding Merton's longing for—and his ultimate failure to achieve—the kind of intimacy he sought in his life. But I wish to focus here on something else: the way solitude worked to clear a space in his consciousness where the deep wounds of his life could surface and be confronted. Whether or not Merton ever resolved these questions or saw these wounds healed seems less important than his having learned to face

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<sup>27</sup> Merton's love affair in 1966 remains difficult to interpret and it is not my aim here to offer an interpretation. Still, it is important to note its paradoxical and ambiguous character and its significance. Clearly the experience had a powerful impact on Merton's evolving sense of himself and God, opening up within him a capacity for intimacy and relatedness that had long eluded him. However, it seems also to have revealed and even exacerbated patterns of immaturity and self-absorption in Merton's character that hindered him from coming to grips with the meaning of love in his life. For one reading of this relationship, seen through the lens of Merton's *Eighteen Poems*, see Douglas Burton-Christie, "Rediscovering Love's World: Thomas Merton's Love Poems and the Language of Ecstasy," *Cross Currents* 39:1 (Spring, 1989): 64-82. Also helpful is a recent essay by Belden C. Lane that considers the role of the hermitage in shaping and providing a context for Merton's struggle with the meaning of love during this period of his life: "Merton's Hermitage: Bachelard, Domestic Space, and Spiritual Transformation," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4:2 (Fall 2004): 123-150.

<sup>28</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 259.

himself honestly. The surfacing of memory, a recurring theme in his late journals, is a sure sign that he was beginning to plumb the depths of his life. This may account for his growing sense of solitude as an absolute necessity—not as an escape from his life but precisely as a means of engaging it more deeply and honestly.

One sees this in the way he speaks about solitude during this time. In July of 1965, he writes: “The solitary life should partake of the seriousness and incommunicability of death.”<sup>29</sup> In August, he confronts what he calls the “[d]eep sense of my own poverty. . . . I do not see how the really solitary life can tolerate illusion and self-deception.”<sup>30</sup> In October, he notes: “I find more and more the power—the dangerous power—of solitude working on me. The easiness of wide error. The power of one’s own inner ambivalence, the pull of inner contradiction.”<sup>31</sup> He acknowledges a growing awareness that here in the hermitage “the work of loneliness really begins, and I feel it.”<sup>32</sup>

This note of loneliness is striking and touches on what will become a recurring issue for Merton, especially during the spring and summer of 1966 as he struggles to come to terms with his feelings for “M.” Solitude gradually comes to be identified for him with loneliness, which he increasingly recognizes as an inescapable and necessary facet of his existence, of all human existence. But now it includes loneliness for *her*, the one whom he has come to love. They meet only occasionally, in furtively arranged trysts that, as the year unfolds, increasingly take on a comic-absurd-tragic character. The result, Merton writes, is an “awful loneliness, deprivation, desolation of being without each other.”<sup>33</sup> But a deeper, more pervasive sense of loneliness also begins to surface in him during this time, a loneliness that he begins to recognize as part of his path: “I am lonely for her,” Merton acknowledges, “but that is only a partial loneliness and it does not alter the fact that it is part of a general loneliness that I have chosen. Or that has chosen itself for me. I can never be anything else than solitary. My loneliness is my ordinary climate.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 264.

<sup>30</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 277-278.

<sup>31</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 310.

<sup>32</sup> Merton, *Dancing*, 286.

<sup>33</sup> Merton, *Learning to Love*, 329.

<sup>34</sup> Merton, *Learning to Love*, 319. It seems clear that Merton’s sense of existential loneliness, which he eventually came to see as a fruitful and necessary dimension of his spiritual experience as a whole, was sharpened and deepened through his

It is not easy to know what to make of such a statement. Does it represent a pessimistic assessment of his own inability to connect or relate maturely with another human being in love? Or is it simply an honest response to a particular dimension of his experience (and all of human experience) that he no longer feels able to hide from or evade? Or, does it, perhaps, include elements of both? Whatever particular meaning we give to his words, what strikes me as interesting and significant is what Merton *makes* of this loneliness, or at least attempts to make of it. There is no question that much of his energy and attention during this period remains focused upon himself and his desire to seek healing for his own deep emotional wounds. However, one also sees clear evidence of his growing awareness of the need to think about the solitary life and the experience of loneliness in relation to the needs and concerns of the larger community. The ache of loneliness he feels, which is bound up for him with ecstatic longing, seemed to break open within him a new space of vulnerability, a deepened capacity for intimacy and compassion. During the summer of 1966, as he struggles with intense feelings of absurdity amid what seems to him an ill-fated relationship and his own failure to make sense of it or respond to it fully, he also begins to come to terms with the beauty and possible meaning of this absurdity. He ponders the possibility that this experience of seeing all the barriers come down, of finding oneself standing naked and vulnerable, might have its own creative purpose—and not only for the one who experiences it, but also for others:

What does the lonely and absurd man have to teach others? Simply that being alone and absurd are not things to be feared. But these are precisely the two things that everybody fears. . . . Everybody remains secretly absurd and alone. Only no one dares face the fact. Yet facing this fact is the absolutely essential requirement for beginning to live freely.<sup>35</sup>

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relationship with "M," especially in the alternating pattern of presence and absence issuing from his choice to continue living as a monk of Gethsemani Abbey (and thus apart from her). This proved to be for Merton a devastating and painful encounter with something that Anne Carson has argued is characteristic of all erotic experience: "all human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles. . . . Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it." Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>35</sup> Merton, *Learning to Love*, 322.

One sees here the seed of an intuition that was to grow and develop within him as he approached the end of his life. During the summer of 1968, while preparing for his trip to Asia, Merton found himself struggling with the question of how he might live out his monastic vocation with greater depth and integrity. Part of this question involved the issue of whether at this stage in his life he should leave Gethsemani and find a place of deeper solitude. The increasing number of visitors who came to see him at the monastery, the growing noise (gunshots in the next valley), and the general business of the place left him wondering about whether or not the time had come for him to “disappear,” drop off the map. However, during June of that year, while reading Sautideva on solitude, he began to arrive at a different realization:

What impresses me most at this reading of Sautideva is not only the emphasis on solitude but the idea of solitude as part of the clarification which includes living for others: dissolution of the self in “belonging to everyone” and regarding everyone’s suffering as one’s own. . . . To be “homeless” is to abandon one’s attachment to a particular ego—and yet to care for one’s own life (in the highest sense) in the service of others. A deep and beautiful idea.<sup>36</sup>

This was not a new idea for Merton. He had worked to maintain a creative balance between solitude and engagement with the larger community for most of his monastic life. Yet the idea spoke to him now with new force, and seemed to capture what he himself ought to be about as he gazed out onto the horizon of his life unfolding before him. Some months later, during his travels in Asia, he found the truth of this insight confirmed: “The *rinpoches* all advise against absolute solitude and stress ‘compassion,’” he noted, clearly thinking about the application of this idea to his own life.<sup>37</sup>

### *Solitude, Emptiness, and Compassion*

Merton’s writings express an enduring desire to live out of an authentic solitude—a solitude not rooted in fear or a desire to flee from

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Seven, 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 135.

<sup>37</sup> Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 252.

the challenges of relationship, but rather arising from a desire to face oneself honestly, to be remade in the image of God, and to arrive at a deeper sense of how to live in authentic relationship with others. At the beginning of such a journey, one sometimes feels the romance of the quest, of the dream. But dreams, if we listen to them carefully, have their own truth to tell, and often it is a hard truth. Merton discovered this in his own way during his long, often painful, never dull, and ultimately grace-filled experiments with solitude. What emerges from his testimony is an immensely valuable lesson about the power of solitude to change and deepen us—if we will risk it.

It also suggests what can emerge from that deepening and what it can mean—not only for the person concerned, but also for the larger community. There is, in other words, a kind of economy to solitude that includes not only the individual struggling with his or her own demons, but also the community, those on behalf of whom the solitary struggles. During the most painful moments of the summer of 1966, when Merton felt himself lost and alone, deeply uncertain about everything—his monastic vocation, his capacity to love, everything—he found himself thinking in a new way about the meaning of “[t]he absolute aloneness of Christ . . . the total loneliness of Christ.”<sup>38</sup> This image became part of an emerging sense of his own vocation as a monk and a Christian. “[T]he way one begins to make sense out of life,” he said, almost as if trying to convince himself, “is taking upon oneself the lostness of everyone.”<sup>39</sup> Apparently, he *did* convince himself, at least to a certain degree.

Less than a month before he died, while traveling in Asia, Merton met Chantral *rinpoche*, whom he described as “the greatest *rinpoche* I have met so far.” His encounter with Chantral was electrifying for Merton.

[We spoke of] *dharmakaya*—the Risen Christ, suffering, compassion for all creatures, motives for “helping others”—but all leading back to *dzogchen*, the ultimate emptiness, the unity of *sunyata* and *karuna*, going “beyond the *dharmakaya*,” and “beyond God” to the ultimate perfect emptiness. He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained to perfect emptiness and I said I hadn’t either.

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<sup>38</sup> Merton, *Learning to Love*, 303-304.

<sup>39</sup> Merton, *Learning to Love*, 324.

The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it.<sup>40</sup>

It is difficult to miss the sense of momentousness in his account of this meeting. Clearly, Merton felt recognized and understood in this encounter in a way that was both rare and deeply moving for him. And he sensed his own deepest aspirations resonating in the life of another human being. What seems to resonate most profoundly here is the notion that the long, difficult discipline of solitude can, and sometimes does, yield something beautiful and mysterious—a human life clarified, deepened, capable of a pure expression of compassion. It is a vision of existence not unlike that to which Merton points in his essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” Here is the festival. Here is joy. Yet if we listen carefully, we will hear the echo of other dimensions of reality here—the loneliness, the woundedness, all that remains incomplete and unresolved. These too are part of the festival. The testimony of those who have ventured deeply into solitude reminds us again and again: we must face ourselves, the whole of ourselves. To learn how to let go of illusions, to learn how to love, to stand against all that threatens life and happiness, we must let ourselves go into the wild and desolate solitude of our lives.

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<sup>40</sup> Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 278.



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