

In Nell,  
with love, John

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Sunday, midnight, November 8, 1970 Gethsemani

R returned to the hermitage this evening. The drive from Louisville during the early evening was beautiful - the sky blazing over the silhouetted knobs.

Met Brother Patrick at the gate and we came up here where Father Tarcisius was preparing supper for us. Pleasant, short meal. They have installed a gas heater, thermostatically controlled in the sleeping room, so the cabin is a comfortable 70 while outside it is in the forties. I went to bed at eight, right after their departure, but could not sleep. It is too exciting to be plunged back into such silence, such isolation, back into this solitary existence in these woods. Finally, after hours of sleeplessness, I turned on the light to see it was 11:30 and I was hungry, so I got up and soft boiled a couple of eggs and drank some pineapple and apple juice.

Now, I have just finished boiling the water (to make it safe) so all I have to do for coffee in the morning is just heat it up.

Am sore from the long trip but feel splendid otherwise.

Too sore though, I now realize, to sit up and type.

So I will go back to bed, and this time I feel I can sleep.

Monday- 11/9/70

An unbelievably beautiful morning - wind roaring in the trees, the sky brilliant in the east before the sun has risen. I see now that the screens have been removed for the winter and the windows are so clean they look as though there were no glass in the frames. It is almost cold, so I have lighted the fire in the fireplace. It flames fragrantly and warms my back. The trees are almost bare and those remaining leaves are brilliant. The full-foliaged pines and cedars look almost black in this dawn light.

I drink coffee and wait for time to come to a halt so that I can drift into the natural activity that is based not on hours, but on sleeping and waking and the gathering and ~~havingmoderenergy~~ waning of energies.

Two new photo magazines:

Terra

P. O. Box 1653

Cincinnati, Ohio 45201

Impressions

P. O. Box 915

Postal Station A

Toronto, Ont. Canada

Tuesday, Nov. 10th

Father Stan arrived last evening and came up to join us for Mass and supper at 6 p.m. It was a dark and rainy and stormy evening, we had a good fire going and ~~it was~~ a good supper and an evening of great peace and joy. How wonderful to see this old friend again, to hear all the news of the Basilians. He will return with Father Tarcisius this evening to concelebrate.

It is now four a.m. and I have a long day's work ahead of me. The fire blazes to my back, the coffee is good and hot, the silence is profound and healing. These hours before dawn are a total blessing. Never do I feel so well, so unharried and unhurried.



I stepped outside for a moment. Water drips steadily into the rain barrels at the edges of the porch. As well as I could make it out, the thermometer reads in the low forties, almost on forty - but the air is still, the darkness ~~dark~~ thick - not even a hint of the masses of forest, the fragrance of this fire like pinon on the moist air, mingling with colder odors of wet pine and cedar. Although I know the monks are up down at the monastery, I can see no lights, and with such a murky weather, I have the impression no one is about, no one wanders in these woods, no one is near. I am walled into this circle of firelight by the mist, the cold, the forest (felt but not seen) and the animal and insect and floral life in those deep woods.

Coming awake, coming to life and work in such surroundings is like some musical theme that slowly unfolds itself in fragments - a hint here and another there until hours later the full theme is finally joined in its elements. At this hour, it is all intuitive. Out of bed I heat up water for the coffee - that is the first thing, the important thing. While this happens I come into this work room and light the fire, trembling with the cold but knowing that soon it will warm the ~~the~~ cabin and warm my back. Then put my head out the door to see (or hear and smell) what the weather is doing (always the acceleration of gladness when I hear it rain because rain is a glory in these woods and it seems to isolate the cabin even more beautifully). Then a moment in the chapel before the reserved Sacrament - no prayers, just being there and letting things happen (the flicker of the votive lamp on the white stone walls, the hints of gold in the ikons, the smell of the cedar altar, but most of all the feeling of some remote life in the ikons (especially in that faint white light) as though they secretly watched, as though they have never in all these ~~centuries~~ centuries slept for a moment.) Then in the adjoining kitchen to make the coffee and come to the desk to make the notes (or to begin them) typing a little, resting long times between, feeling the hot coffee in me and the warmth from the fire penetrate the chill of my back until muscles relax into comfort. Later the medication, later the breakfast when the need is felt, later brushing teeth, all those things happen in their own time but are not just up and done with. And the same with the work. It goes steadily, but with frequent interruptions to do these other things, and it goes with no sense of hurry.

I fit the happenings to my body and the way it works. In the morning I cannot see enough to read, so I write, do those things for which reading is not required, until the medication clears the vision, begin the preliminaries for supper - tonight we will have chicken cooked in white wine, zucchini with ~~minced~~ vinaigrette, boiled potatoes and crepes. So already I have made the crepe batter and salted the chicken. With only a 2 burner hotplate, you have to give things time. So, though it is now only five a.m., I have done that preparation and taken my medication.

Later -

Bells from the monastery announcing the call to Mass. So it is 5:45. I stepped outside on the porch to hear them. The sound clear in the night air. The sky appears to be cloudy, but I saw one star.



Later - almost seven, and the sky is grey enough before sunrise to ~~hmmmm~~ tree masses and the distant hills and I hear a first squawking bird. Have read Jean Leclercq's splendid informal preface to Tom's forthcoming Contemplation In A World of Action (Doubleday) in galleys. Have dictated ~~momentaneous~~ extensive notes from it.

Also read a review for A HIDDEN WHOLENESS that appeared in The Michigan Catholic - wholly favorable, written by a person obviously devoted to Tom and his work, but what a contrast to the preface by Leclercq. How can anyone review a book without having read it (or having read it make so many mistakes)? The reviewer obviously "saw" it and that is about all. The two most obvious blunders are: 1) "...he left a vast literary legacy in the hands of his friend and executor, John Howard Griffin." (So that wipes out nicely The Merton Legacy Trust! Dear Lord, what could I have written that would give anyone such an impression? Must check back.) 2) "These examples of his photographs, illustrated by brief quotations from his writing, provide a unique expression of the world of Thomas Merton." She seems to have read the initial quote from Hagia Sophia (she quotes fragments of it) and just deduced the rest. Surely she does not think the ~~thmmmm~~ outlines are "brief quotations from his writing".

The squirrel is back. I glance up from this desk and see him there on the porch in the dim light, consuming the bread I put out for the birds. He stayed away during the summer when the wood stack was not on the porch, apparently finding it too risky. But now that there is a large stack of wood (in which he can hide if necessary) he is back and bold as ever. He looks splendid - fat and sleek and much bigger than last spring when I used to hve his visits. (Or hers, perhaps. I do not know if he is a she or a he.)

Brighter sky now, densely overcast, and not a leaf stirs - an air of stillness and expectancy hangs over the forest. I go to the Journals and that eye-straining fascination.

Later - almost noon. Father Tarcisius is to bring my mail and lunch since Brother Pat had to go to the doctor. "orked on the Journals and Contemplation in a World of Action. Now very tired and sore. The fire burns gently behind me, the day remains dark and it gets colder - looks as though it could snow. After lunch I will take a good nap. Am really done in.

Later - almost six

And it is night again, and cold, but the cabin is good and warm and smells of the supper that simmers on the stove - the chicken in wine. A gentle fire keeps the ~~tem~~perature comfortable in here. I wait for Fathers Stan and Tarcisius and the Brothers (perhaps Martin de Porres tonight) to come for Mass. Had a good nap early this afternoon. Feel all right, but will welcome the bed tonight.



Wednesday, Nov. 11, 1970

Up at three and made a new batch of crepe batter for whatever needs might arise. The cabin is warm - 70, but it is cold and absolutely still outside. I have just put out the stale and leftover bread for the squirrels and birds.

Pervasive contentment after a decent rest...the contentment of looking forward to these hours before dawn, relishing them in advance, hours when the silence and the solitude seem to be most profound.

Brother Pat called at 3:15 to check on me as he does every morning - to make sure I have not gone into a diabetic coma or got into any kind of difficulty. But everything is fine and the diabetes seems firmly in control once more.

Later - 6:45

Charlaine Hays is coming out around 2 to bring me some letters Tom wrote his grandmother (Bonnemaman) and she is bringing a young ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Dominican who is here researching his doctoral diss. on Merton. Am eager to see the letters which are now two valuable to entrust to the mails.

For breakfast I decided to try the crepe batter, so I cooked two small crepes on the iron crepe pan I have prepared, filled them with dietetic orange marmalade (which is very good) and had them with a glass of milk. They were great - tender and light. So I will serve some of those with some tea this afternoon when the visitors come. I made the batter this way:

- 1 cup of milk
- 1 cup cold water
- 2 cups flour (beaten in slowly)
- pinch of salt
- 2 whole eggs and then 4 more egg yolks, beaten in one at a time
- 3 tablespoons melted butter
- 3 tablespoons Grand Marnier (dribbled in while beating).

Reserved 2 egg whites, and beat them separately until they were good and stiff. Then stirred them thoroughly into the batter and let the whole thing set for two hours.

This way you don't need any grease in the pan (if the pan has not been washed - if it has, you need to glaze it by rubbing in oil, heating very hot and wiping off the excess with a paper towel and then letting the pan cool before reheating to cook the batter.) I put in just a little oil and when it began to smoke (on high heat) removed the skillet, poured in the batter (which is about the consistency of thick cream) while rolling the pan so the batter would flow out to form a circle in all directions (or roughly a circle), put it back on the high burner for a minute until holes formed and the batter lost its glaze, then I flipped it over, let it set on high heat a moment, transferred the pan to a low heat burner to finish it off. Returned the empty pan to the high burner till it began to smoke and repeated. This goes very fast and it is just right to get the underside of the crepes a golden color and keep them light.

Now, the sky is beginning to lighten - full of fog and haze, and one of the squirrels is there on the porch, not six feet from me. He eats and I type and we watch one another. This is a much smaller squirrel than the one yesterday, must be that one's youngster. He looks grey in this dim light, with a white belly. He grabs each piece of bread, sits upright and nibbles it rapidly. He looks right into the



window, standing on the woodpile now. I could almost touch him if the window glass didn't separate us.

Later

Continue working on the journals, reading and dictating the important dates, etc. Calm, quiet, dark morning, but still light enough for me to work here without the electricity.

A moment ago I took a break to fix some coffee and decided I had better wash my pajamas and undershirt - washed them in soap powder and clorox. Soaked them rather - quite a while. Now they are hanging over chairs right in front of the fireplace, steaming a little. They add to the air of the room a slightly humid odor of clean wet clothes and remind me of the winters when I would visit my grandmother's "wash house" where black ladies did our washing in a nice large separate one-room, white-washed and cement floored. They would boil the clothes in great tubs over fires and scrub them with Octagon soap and a washboard and then hang them out in the sun if there was sun, or on lines inside the room if the weather was bad. That same clean damp odor is here in the room with me this morning.

Later - there are moments here when suddenly even in the calm and silence, the work comes to a temporary pause and I find myself overwhelmed by a renewal of the silence, the serenity, as though it came in a new wave to flood me with the full perception of it - sometimes it lasts only a moment, sometimes several moments. Always it is unexpected. It comes to surprise my spirit with a deeper felicity, a sudden glowing wonderment, a focusless love that is intense and without any object or any impediment, clear as spring water. It has a distant religious connection somewhere beyond my thought, though it has no object, as I mentioned, no name, no word comes in connection with it: it is as though everything - every tree and leaf and blade of grass and stone combined into prayer that has no words, no form and no need for anything of that nature, and swept me into it, transforming the quality of my being, like a modulation from one soundless harmony to another ~~HOME~~ - and the harmonic silence modulates in my body - and an unfelt change takes place from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. I have only had this occasionally at the moment of reception of communion in the past - never at any other time or in any other circumstance. It comes to me here fairly often - especially after I have got my system back into the natural rhythms of this hermit-life, when things flow as nature wills, when the clocks have stopped hounding the mind.

I do not try to understand this really. H I only know that for quite some time now I have been given a kind of happiness that seems to me to be supreme, beyond which a man cannot go. ~~xxxxx~~ I have never experienced it before in this sustained manner, and never dreamed a man could have it. I realize that it occupies the very center of my being and it grows there, virtually untouched by what happens - by my dread of the surgery, my dread of the physical things that happen to me. It is pure gift, beyond my volition, incomprehensible to me (I do not touch it, do not attempt to comprehend it because I feel I should not tamper with it or try to understand anything about it. Always I bite back the question "Why" and I bite back my protests that I do nothing to deserve it. The only thing I do not bite back is my awe and gratitude that it exists, having nothing really to do with me, and will go on existing or will stop existing as God ~~whhhh~~ wills.)



All is still, grey, hushed, attentive in the surrounding forest and within this cabin. Only the fire speaks, in its warmth to my back, in the hardly audible whispers of its burning.

I do small things - sweep the ashes from the hearth back into the fire, things that will not alter the intensity of the hush. I step outside to breathe the ~~stagnant~~ sanity of thin white smoke from the outside chimney that drifts southward. I hear the rattle of water and go to the edge of the porch to investigate. Beyond a vermilion screen of thorn-bush foliage, I glimpse a doe urinating into dead leaves. Her footsteps crackle as she moves away, disappearing without haste.

Thursday, Nov. 12, 1970

Much colder this morning. Difficulty coming awake, though I have had plenty of sleep. Up, the coffee made and a fire built and the lights on, all of them; the bread put out for the squirrels, and still I am in a deep drowse and filled with inclinations to return to that warm bed.

Father Stan came up at last night for Mass and supper, a Mass of perfect simplicity in that primitive little chapel, a Mass attuned to the silences and the forests. Father Tarcisius lives the Mass, simply, directly, undramatically, and allows us to live it - not just play-act it. He does not just rattle off the texts as so many do, he has no rhetorical inflections either, he says them with such a simplicity and such a sincerity that they sound new and fresh, as though he were conversing and these were the words that came naturally from his mind and heart.

Later: Now the sun is up, pale but visible through the white haze of a low ground fog. It causes the few remaining yellow, orange and scarlet leaves to appear ~~translucent~~ translucent against the green foliage of pine and cedar.

Late afternoon: It has been really a ravishingly beautiful autumn day, with the sun full out and temperature up to 60. But now, at 4:30 the sky is once more overcast, the haze is thin over the countryside, and the stillness perfect. Utter quietness of all sights and sounds, given a note of special cheer by the birds, however, for I am roasting a leg of lamb and cooking garlicked white beans to go with it for supper (Father Timothy is coming to celebrate with Frs. Stan and Tarcisius, and our old friend, the philosopher John Ford is coming for Mass and supper - they will be here around six, and much as I am looking forward to that evening with them in the cabin here, I relish the moments left before they come, the moments when the silence and the stillness dig deep into me, to bring healing, to bring balm and blessing in uniting me to them.

I have not accomplished much today, though I have done work. I feel such a weakness in my legs, and such pain in them when I get up that I have spent much more time in bed than I usually do, reading and dictating rather than sitting up and typing. Strange this frequent conjunction of physical misery and radiant happiness: my spirit is filled with joviality, with a silent laughter, so that I have the impression that I am groaning and laughing simultaneously - the wounds groan, the rest of me is aware of that but it does not touch the core of jubilation within me, does not diminish it in any way. I never cease to be astonished by how little I actually suffer from what others view as my "sufferings." It is doubly odd, because I empathize with pain in others - let someone get a hangnail and I go into shock - but there is none of that in the pains of this body of mine. I just do not suffer.



Later - well, the test tape shows almost black, which means the blood sugar is sky high again, so I guess that explains the weakness. I don't know what could be causing it. I have taken no sweets at all, and have been very careful about the diet. I will have to increase the DBI - that will knock it down fast.

Six p.m. And now it is chilling fast and twilight becomes night. The great silence changes. It remains as silent, and as still, but with the arrival of company, I reluctantly alter the atmosphere to something less stark (because others do not like the pure silence as I do - it depresses others, perhaps, or at least makes them uncomfortable, even the monks - some of them; though not the ones who come up here. In any event I change it - I light a new fire in the hearth and put up the phonograph (which Brother Pat brought up two days ago and which I have not used, because even music is not necessary here - though ~~phenomenum~~ it is necessary everywhere else where the silence is less perfect or not perfect at all.) I put on Marie-Claire Alain playing the organ works of Bach - beautifully sledded and played on that ravishing Marcussen organ. And so, when they arrive, they will arrive at a cabin in the forest to be greeted by a fire in the fireplace, by marvelous music and the odors of good mutton (lamb) and garlic and beans.

And now, in the dim light, I see Father Tarcisius coming from the woods on foot, to help me prepare the table and do the "walking" - he is clad in gloves and a woolen cap and warm jacket. God bless him.

Later - Good evening. Hope to see more of Jack Ford who is certainly an extraordinary man. Father Stan is leaving to return to Windsor tomorrow. Don't know if I'll get to see him before he goes.

Friday, November 13, 1970

Feel better. The diabetes is back down to normal this morning - no sugar showing in the test. Slept very well, and am not yet really awake. A long quiet day ahead of me in which to work.

An intriguing item from Dr. Paul Cameron, psychologist at the University of Louisville, who conducted a scientific survey among 3,416 people to find out what they think about. Young adults (under 25) think about sex at least once in any 10 minute period, religion once ever 25 minutes. Middle-agers think about sex every 35 minutes, about religion every 15 minutes. Those over 65 had sex on their mind only once an hour, but religion every 10 minutes. Dr. Cameron said he did not think his survey had any immediate scientific significance, he was just curious.

Breakfast - a piece of toasted trappist bread and a cup of very good tea. I can imagine nothing better.

Noon - all morning on the Journals and on Gordon Zahn's preface to the Peace book. Also returned to the Leclercq preface. A wealth of splendid details but I still struggle with the bigger lines of the biography - the summation by year. I suppose that will all come when I have each year's notes in the files and can go over them that way, a year at a time. The Zahn preface is a great help, but most of all the Leclercq helps me to see the large divisions and how they might form the structural basis for the biography. Most of the journal notes I copy in this kind of notebook page, but without making any carbon. I note that Tom, attracted to really feminine women, susceptible to them, responds with a kind of glee to his reading references to "momism" - he responded to The Silver Chord, (?) more than I thought that study would interest him; and to Stern's Flight from Woman, etc. And he mentions that the astronauts were really away from Mother up there in space.



Evening now. And I feel better. Strange day. I had a weak spell after lunch and could hardly leave the bed until I slept an hour. But the weakness remained. Finally, I got up and took a little walk around the hermitage. Got chilled, came back to bed and covered up with blankets. Got up at four, took hot tea and toast, built the fire, and now my feet are warm, the work has resumed, I have shaved, the sky has turned dark and already I have to have the lights on inside in order to type. It is the kind of day that Tom liked up here. How often he describes it in his journals. I not only have the lights on and a good fire going, but I have put on the marvelous records of Bach played by Alain, so the atmosphere within this cabin is full and robust with sound, while outside the forest stands in the stillness of late dusk. I cook the remains of the lamb into a ragout - so the rich odors of lamb, onions, mushrooms and white wine scent up the cabin joyfully. But, how odd, I know that I am deliberately sacrificing the silence that is so tremendous at this hour and I feel a regret about that, though I love, too, what this glorious music does to the interior of this cabin. It bounces into every room, into the chapel to surround the reserved sacrament with its marvelous rhythms and harmonies. I have gone into the chapel - that small room, without other light than the flickering vigil candle and the white, white walls and the smell of cooking and the health of Bach's infinite amiability.

Journal notes: Christmas day(1965) (Ledger 295)

....Last night when I woke up to go down for Midnight Mass, I found it storming with rain and high winds in the dark woods. The walk down was exciting. Coming back the rain had stopped. I came up through the field and was glad to get into the silence of the hermitage which made more sense than ever. I made my thanksgiving quietly, said Lauds and had a snack and some wine (the last of what Brother Clement gave me a couple of months ago) and so went back to bed for a couple of hours. Got up again, said Prime and read.... It is the kind of day I like, and like Christmas to be too: dark, cloudy, windy, cold with light rain blowing now and then. I have had wonderful Christmases (Xmas weeks) here with this kind of winter weather, & unforgettable. Days not too bad for walking out on the wooded knobs, cold and lonelier than ever and full of apparent meaning. They talk to me of my vocation.

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Blast - now I am shot again. These moments of energy are followed by total letdown and shakiness.

So I turn off the phonograph, turn off the lights, wheel my chair around to put my feet on the hearth and let that warmth and the surrounding silence heal this weakness.

Note how frequently Merton speaks of the birds that come here. (1965, Ledger 207, April 17) "Warm bright spring day. Saw a Palen (?) warbler in the small ash tree behind the hermitage, with his red-brown cape and bobbing tail. He is on his way to the North of Canada! Why do they call him Palen (sp?) warbler?"

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Again: April 23, 1965, ledger 209) "A pine warbler was caught in the novitiate scriptorium beating against the window, and I got a good look at him letting him go out. A couple of Tonbees (sp?) are all around the hermitage."



A morning of such natural glory I can hardly contain my enthusiasm. Have been making notes from the notebooks (Merton) all morning, and now at 8 a.m. I stop to take the medication, brush teeth, etc. I got right out of bed and went to work at 3:15 with hot coffee - but not too much because I ran out. Will have to drink tea the rest of the day. Now, with the light of a dark day, the rain falls gently, almost slowly, straight down. The bare branches of nearby trees are lined with water crystals that catch light and shine against the background of dark green cedar and pine. It falls steadily, making the lightest drone on the roof and gurgling into the rain barrels at the edge of the porch.

I have a good hot fire burning gently behind me in the fireplace. It is cold outside - in the low forties - seeming colder because of the monochrome light and the dampness, but in here it is dry and warm and the delight with all this is pure and without blemish.

Already I make the long plans for bathing a little later in the morning. Keep the fire built so it will heat up the bathroom and then get the shampoo ready and the soap and the towel on the cement floor (which is always cold). In the meantime I cannot leave this desk where the view is so entrancing - the downfalling rain, the puffs of white smoke from my chimney ~~and~~ drifting southward low under the towering pines.

Now the breeze has come to stir the very tops of the tallest trees causing them to weave in slow motion with all kinds of inner individual motions of the branches, as though they were moving from muscles within, in a dance, rather than being moved from without by the wind.

It gets colder. Will I have the courage to bathe? Of course, it is worth the discomfort of bathing in the cold room to dry quickly there and then come in and finish drying in front of the fire.

Later - four p.m.

Tremendous day. The rain has slowed to almost nothing but the day remains dark and the temperature is plunging downward - into the 30's now. The wood fire goes splendidly at my back and a cup of hot tea warms me. Something intensely exciting about this cold and rain and silence and isolation. The work simply flows better than at any other time. I have some crepe batter mixed to fix crepes for supper, and am slowly heating up the lamb stew.

Later - Now, finally, with the temperature plunging, I went ahead and took the bath and washed my hair. And I sit here letting the firelight dry me off, "naked as a pagan Italian" as one of my old Southern aunts used to say, pronouncing it "Eye-talian".

Although it is not night yet, it is almost as dark as night at almost five p.m. Beautiful. I have the lights off in here, too, and type by the light from the fire.

Houghton Mifflin Co. put a beautiful and tasteful ad (1/2 page) in last Sunday's N.Y. Times, with quotes from Max Giesmar and Eric Fromm. Also, there was a splendid review in the Oct-Nov. Catholic Worker by Sister Donald Corcoran, O.S.B.

I noted that the paper is addressed to Fr. Louis Merton, OCSO. So they have kept him on their mailing list, though they above all people, knew of his death and mourned it.