THOMAS MERTON

Love and Living

EDITED BY
NAOMI BURTON STONE
&
BROTHER PATRICK HART

BOOKS BY THOMAS MERTON

The Ascent to Truth
The Courage for Truth
Disputed Questions
The Hidden Ground of Love
The Last of the Fathers
Love and Living
No Man Is an Island
The Road to Joy
The School of Charity
The Seven Storey Mountain
The Sign of Jonas
The Waters of Siloe

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not reshape themselves in some worse form, peopling our solitude with devils disguised as angels of light. Love, simplicity, and compassion protect us against this. He who is truly alone finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that but all men. He sees them all in the One who is the Word of God, the perfect manifestation of God’s Love, Jesus Christ.

Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?

We speak of “falling in love,” as though love were something like water that collects in pools, lakes, rivers, and oceans. You can “fall into” it or walk around it. You can sail on it or swim in it, or you can just look at it from a safe distance. This expression seems to be peculiar to the English language. French, for instance, does not speak of “tomber en amour” but does mention “falling amorous.” The Italian and Spanish say one “enamors oneself.” Latinos do not regard love as a passive accident. Our English expression “to fall in love” suggests an unforeseen mishap that may or may not be fatal. You are at a party: you have had more drinks than you need. You decide to walk around the garden a little. You don’t notice the swimming pool . . . all at once you have to swim! Fortunately, they fish you out, and you are wet but none the worse for wear. Love is like that. If you don’t look where you are going, you are liable to land in it: the experience will normally be slightly ridiculous. Your friends will all find it funny, and if they happen to be around at the time, they will do their best to steer you away from the water and into a nice comfortable chair where you can go to sleep.
Sometimes, of course, the pool is empty. Then you don't get wet, you just crack your skull or break your arm.

To speak of "falling into" something is to shift responsibility from your own will to a cosmic force like gravitation. You "fall" when you are carried off by a power beyond your control. Once you start you can't stop. You're gone. You don't know where you may land. We also speak of "falling into a coma" or "falling into disgrace," or "falling into bankruptcy." A thesaurus reminds us one can "fall into decay," "fall on the ear," and even "fall flat on the ear." A certain rudimentary theology regards the whole human race as "fallen" because Eve tempted Adam to love her. That is bad theology. Sex is not original sin. (A better view is that the love of Adam for Eve was originally meant as a communion and a diversity-in-oneness which reflected the invisible God in visible creation for "God is love."

The expression to "fall in love" reflects a peculiar attitude toward love and toward life itself—a mixture of fear, awe, fascination, and confusion. It implies suspicion, doubt, hesitation, in the presence of something unavoidable—yet not fully reliable. For love takes you out of yourself. You lose control. You "fall." You get hurt. It upsets the ordinary routine of life. You become emotional, imaginative, vulnerable, foolish. You are no longer content to eat and sleep, make money and have fun. You now have to let yourself be carried away with this force that is stronger than reason and more imperious even than business!

Obviously, if you are a cool and self-possessed character, you will take care never to fall. You will accept the unavoidable power of love as a necessity that can be controlled and turned to good account. You will confine it to the narrow category of "fun" and so you will not let it get out of hand. You will have fun by making others fall without falling yourself.

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

Love is, in fact, an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness of life. We do not live merely in order to vegetate through our days until we die. Nor do we live merely in order to take part in the routines of work and amusement that go on around us. We are not just machines that have to be cared for and driven carefully until they run down. In other words, life is not a straight horizontal line between two points, birth and death. Life curves upward to a peak of intensity, a high point of value and meaning, at which all its latent creative possibilities go into action and the person transcends himself or herself in encounter, response, and communion with another. It is for this that we came into the world—this communion and self-transcendence. We do not become fully human until we give ourselves to each other in love. And this must not be confined only to sexual fulfillment: it embraces everything in the human person—the capacity for self-giving, for sharing, for creativity, for mutual care, for spiritual concern.

Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another. We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated meditations. The meaning of our life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, by the one we love. And if this love is unreal, the secret will not be found, the meaning will never reveal itself, the message will never be decoded. At best, we will receive a scrambled and partial message, one that will deceive and confuse us. We will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love—either with another human person or with God.
Hence, our attitude toward life is also going to be in one way or another an attitude toward love. Our conception of ourselves is bound to be profoundly affected by our conception—and our experience—of love. And our love, or our lack of it, our willingness to risk it or our determination to avoid it, will in the end be an expression of ourselves: of who we think we are, of what we want to be, of what we think we are here for.

Nor will this be merely something that goes on in our head. Love affects more than our thinking and our behavior toward those we love. It transforms our entire life. Genuine love is a personal revolution. Love takes your ideas, your desires, and your actions and welds them together in one experience and one living reality, which is a new you. You may prefer to keep this from happening. You may keep your thoughts, desires, and acts in separate compartments if you want: but then you will be an artificial and divided person, with three little filing cabinets: one of ideas, one of decisions, and one of actions and experiences. These three compartments may have much to do with each other. Such a life does not make sense, and is not likely to be happy. The contents of the separate filing cabinets may become increasingly peculiar as life goes on. Our philosophy of life is not something we create all by ourselves out of nothing. Our ways of thinking, even our attitudes toward ourselves, are more and more determined from the outside. Even our love tends to fit into ready-made forms. We consciously or unconsciously tailor our notions of love according to the patterns that we are exposed to day after day in advertising, in movies, on TV, and in our reading. One of these prevailing ready-made attitudes toward love needs to be discussed here. It is one that is seldom consciously spelled out. It is just "in the air," something that one is exposed to without thinking about it. This idea of love is a corollary of the thinking that holds our marketing society together. It is what one might call a package concept of love.

Love is regarded as a deal. The deal presupposes that we all have needs which have to be fulfilled by means of exchange. In order to make a deal you have to appear in the market with a worthwhile product, or if the product is worthless, you can get by if you dress it up in a good-looking package. We unconsciously think of ourselves as objects for sale on the market. We want to be wanted. We want to attract customers. We want to look like the kind of product that makes money. Hence, we waste a great deal of time modeling ourselves on the images presented to us by an affluent marketing society.

In doing this we come to consider ourselves and others not as persons but as products—as "goods," or in other words, as packages. We appraise one another commercially. We size each other up and make deals with a view to our own profit. We do not give ourselves in love, we make a deal that will enhance our own product, and therefore no deal is final. Our eye is already on the next deal—and this next deal need not necessarily be with the same customer. Life is more interesting when you make a lot of deals with a lot of new customers.

This view, which equates lovemaking with salesmanship and love with a glamorous package, is based on the idea of love as a mechanism of instinctive needs. We are biological machines endowed with certain urges that require fulfillment. If we are smart, we can exploit and manipulate these urges in ourselves and in others. We can turn them to our own advantage. We can cash in on them, using them to satisfy and enrich our own ego by profitable deals with other egos. If the partner is not too smart, a little cheating won't hurt, especially if it makes everything more profitable and more satisfactory for me!

If this process of making deals and satisfying needs begins to speed up, life becomes an exciting gambling game. We
meet more and more others with the same needs. We are all spilled out helter-skelter onto a roulette wheel hoping to land on a propitious number. This happens over and over again. “Falling in love” is a droll piece of luck that occurs when you end up with another person whose need more or less fits in with yours. You are somehow able to fulfill each other, to complete each other. You have won the sweepstake. Of course, the prize is good only for a couple of years. You have to get back in the game. But occasionally you win. Others are not so lucky. They never meet anyone with just the right kind of need to go with their need. They never find anyone with the right combination of qualities, gimmicks, and weaknesses. They never seem to buy the right package. They never land on the right number. They fall into the pool and the pool is empty.

This concept of love assumes that the machinery of buying and selling of needs and fulfillment is what makes everything run. It regards life as a market and love as a variation on free enterprise. You buy and you sell, and to get somewhere in love is to make a good deal with whatever you happen to have available. In business, buyer and seller get together in the market with their needs and their products. And they swap. The swapping is simplified by the use of a happy-making convenience called money. So too in love. The love relationship is a deal that is arrived at for the satisfaction of mutual needs. If it is successful it pays off, not necessarily in money, but in gratification, peace of mind, fulfillment. Yet since the idea of happiness is with us inseparable from the idea of prosperity, we must face the fact that a love that is not crowned with every material and social benefit seems to us to be rather suspect. Is it really blessed? Was it really a deal?

The trouble with this commercialized idea of love is that it diverts your attention more and more from the essentials to the accessories of love. You are no longer able to really love the other person, for you become obsessed with the effectiveness of your own package, your own product, your own market value.

At the same time, the transaction itself assumes an exaggerated importance. For many people what matters is the delightful and fleeting moment in which the deal is closed. They give little thought to what the deal itself represents. That is perhaps why so many marriages do not last, and why so many people have to remarry. They cannot feel real if they just make one contract and leave it at that!

In the past, in a society where people lived on the land, where the possession of land represented the permanence and security of one’s family, there was no problem about marriage for life: it was perfectly natural and it was accepted without even unconscious resistance. Today, one’s security and one’s identity have to be constantly reaffirmed: nothing is permanent, everything is in movement. You have to move with it. You have to come up with something new each day. Every morning you have to prove that you are still there. You have to keep making deals.

Each deal needs to have the freshness, the uniqueness, the paradisal innocence of closing with a brand-new customer. Whether we like it or not, we are dominated by an “ethic,” or perhaps better, a “superstition” of quantity. We do not believe in a single lasting value that is established once for all—a permanent and essential quality that is never obsolete or stale. We are obsessed with what is repeatable. Reality does not surrender itself all at once, it has to be caught in small snatches, over and over again, in a dynamic flickering like the successive frames of a movie film. Such is our attitude.

Albert Camus in one of his early books, The Myth of Sisyphus, praised Don Juan as a hero precisely because of his “quantitative” approach to love. He made as many conquests as he possibly could. He practiced the “ethic of quantity.”
But Camus was praising Don Juan as a “hero of the absurd” and his ethic of quantity was merely a reflex response to the “essential absurdity” of life. Camus himself later revised his opinion on this matter. The “ethic of quantity” can take effect not only in love but in hate. The Nazi death camps were a perfect example of this ethic of quantity, this “heroism of the absurd.” The ethic of quantity leads to Auschwitz and to despair. Camus saw this and there was no further mention of the ethic of quantity in his books after World War II. He moved more and more toward the ethic of love, sacrifice, and compassion.

Anyone who regards love as a deal made on the basis of “needs” is in danger of falling into a purely quantitative ethic. If love is a deal, then who is to say that you should not make as many deals as possible?

From the moment one approaches it in terms of “need” and “fulfillment,” love has to be a deal. And what is worse, since we are constantly subjected to the saturation bombing of our senses and imagination with suggestions of impossibly ideal fulfillments, we cannot help revising our estimate of the deal we have made. We cannot help going back on it and making a “better” deal with someone else who is more satisfying.

The situation then is this: we go into love with a sense of immense need, with a naïve demand for perfect fulfillment. After all, this is what we are daily and hourly told to expect. The effect of overstimulation by advertising and other media keeps us at the highest possible pitch of dissatisfaction with the second-rate fulfillment we are actually getting and with the deal we have made. It exacerbates our need. With many people, sexual cravings are kept in a state of high irritation, not by authentic passion, but by the need to prove themselves attractive and successful lovers. They seek security in the repeated assurance that they are still marketable, still a worth-

while product. The long word for all this is narcissism. It has disastrous affects, for it leads people to manipulate each other for selfish ends.

When you habitually function like this, you may seem to be living a very “full” and happy life. You may seem to have everything. You go everywhere, you are in the middle of everything, have lots of friends, “love” and are “loved.” You seem in fact to be “perfectly adjusted” sexually and otherwise with your partner(s). Yet underneath there may be a devouring sense that you have nevertheless been cheated, and that the life you are living is not the real thing at all. That is the tragedy of those who are able to measure up to an advertising image which is presented to them on all sides as ideal. Yet they know by experience that there is nothing to it. The whole thing is hollow. They are perhaps in some ways worse off than those who cannot quite make the grade and who therefore always think that perhaps there is a complete fulfillment which they can yet attain. These at least still have hope.

The truth is, however, that this whole concept of life and of love is self-defeating. To consider love merely as a matter of need and fulfillment, as something which works itself out in a cool deal, is to miss the whole point of love, and of life itself.

The basic error is to regard love merely as a need, an appetite, a craving, a hunger which calls for satisfaction. Psychologically, this concept reflects an immature and regressive attitude toward life and toward other people.

To begin with, it is negative. Love is a lack, an emptiness, a nothingness. But it is an emptiness that can be exploited. Others can be drafted into the labor of satisfying this need—provided we cry loud enough and long enough, and in the most effective way. Advertising begins in the cradle! Very often it stays there—and so does love along with it. Psychol-
ogists have had some pretty rough things to say about the immaturity and narcissism of love in our marketing society, in which it is reduced to a purely egotistical need that cries out for immediate satisfaction or manipulates others more or less cleverly in order to get what it wants. But the plain truth is this: love is not a matter of getting what you want. Quite the contrary. The insistence on always having what you want, on always being satisfied, on always being fulfilled, makes love impossible. To love you have to climb out of the cradle, where everything is "getting," and grow up to the maturity of giving, without concern for getting anything special in return. Love is not a deal, it is a sacrifice. It is not marketing, it is a form of worship.

In reality, love is a positive force, a transcendent spiritual power. It is, in fact, the deepest creative power in human nature. Rooted in the biological riches of our inheritance, love flowers spiritually as freedom and as a creature response to life in a perfect encounter with another person. It is a living appreciation of life as value and as gift. It responds to the full richness, the variety, the fecundity of living experience itself: it "knows" the inner mystery of life. It enjoys life as an inexhaustible fortune. Love estimates this fortune in a way that knowledge could never do. Love has its own wisdom, its own science, its own way of exploring the inner depths of life in the mystery of the loved person. Love knows, understands, and meets the demands of life insofar as it responds with warmth, abandon, and surrender.

When people are truly in love, they experience far more than just a mutual need for each other's company and consolation. In their relation with each other they become different people: they are more than their everyday selves, more alive, more understanding, more enduring, and seemingly more endowed. They are made over into new beings. They are transformed by the power of their love.

Love is the revelation of our deepest personal meaning, value, and identity. But this revelation remains impossible as long as we are the prisoner of our own egoism. I cannot find myself in myself, but only in another. My true meaning and worth are shown to me not in my estimate of myself, but in the eyes of the one who loves me; and that one must love me as I am, with my faults and limitations, revealing to me the truth that these faults and limitations cannot destroy my worth in their eyes; and that I am therefore valuable as a person, in spite of my shortcomings, in spite of the imperfections of my exterior "package." The package is totally unimportant. What matters is this infinitely precious message which I can discover only in my love for another person. And this message, this secret, is not fully revealed to me unless at the same time I am able to see and understand the mysterious and unique worth of the one I love.

This mutual revelation of two persons in their deepest secret is something entirely private. It is their possession, and it cannot be communicated to anyone else until it is embodied in the child who becomes, as it were, a living word, a physical manifestation of their shared secret. Yet in the person of the child the secret remains a mystery known only to the love of the two who participated in the creative surrender which brought the child into being.

Love, then, is a transforming power of almost mystical intensity which endows the lovers with qualities and capacities they never dreamed they could possess. Where do these qualities come from? From the enhancement of life itself, deepened, intensified, elevated, strengthened, and spiritualized by love. Love is not only a special way of being alive, it is the perfection of life. He who loves is more alive and more real than he was when he did not love.

That is perhaps one of the reasons why love seems dangerous: the lover finds in himself too many new powers, too
many new insights. Life looks completely different to him, and all his values change. What seemed worthwhile before has become trivial: what seemed impossible has become easy. When a person is undergoing that kind of inner cataclysm, anything might happen. And thank God, it does happen. The world would not be worth much if it didn't!

The power of genuine love is so deep and so strong that it cannot be deflected from its true aim even by the silliest of wrong ideas. When love is alive and mature in a person, it does not matter if he has a false idea of himself and of life: love will guide him according to its own inner truth and will correct his ideas in spite of him. That may be dangerous, but the danger is nothing new and the human race has lived with it for a million-odd years. The trouble is, though, that our wrong ideas may prevent love from growing and maturing in our lives. Once we love, our love can change our thinking. But wrong thinking can inhibit love. Overemphasis on the aspects of need and fulfillment, and obsessions which encourage a self-conscious and narcissistic fixation on one's own pleasure, can easily blight or misdirect the growth of love. That is why the advertising imagery which associates sexual fulfillment with all the most trivial forms of satisfaction—in order to separate the buyer from his dollar—creates a mental and moral climate that is unfavorable to genuine love. Unconsciously the power that should go into creative and positive love for the other person is being short-circuited by images of infantile oral fulfillment and other narcissistic symbols. The lover then becomes the beautiful glowing icon of self-satisfaction, the desirable, slick, and infinitely happy package, rather than the warm presence of one who responds totally to the value and being of the beloved. Even the advertising images of those beatified couples, for whom the years of early middle age are an unending ball, do not convince us of the reality of