In a time when spiritual memoirs are long on dysfunction, anger and tragedy, Tim Muldoon’s *Longing to Love* offers a refreshing contrast. Though not a story absent a tragedy of its own, it is primarily a memoir of falling in love and staying in love. It is a compelling portrait of what many college-aged young men experience but rarely write about: negotiating the demands of romance and practicality while falling headlong into love. While Muldoon recalls his earliest forays into dating and relationships, the main object of his narrative is Sue, the woman who would become his wife. Muldoon, a Catholic theologian and spiritual director at Boston College, recounts the joys and travails of their budding romance (including a long-distance separation), his growing certainty about their future together and the difficulties of their young marriage.

One is drawn by Muldoon’s passion and self-effacing honesty. Describing the first days of his marriage, he affirms: “My heart was full. Never before had I known such a pervasive sense of rightness, of being at home in this world. Never before had I felt so right in my own skin, this flesh made word to her....” Yet the author’s passion is tempered by his accompanying awareness of a lack of sensitivity to the affective needs of the woman to whom he has committed his passion and his life. He humbly shares his repeated failures to appropriately attend to her concerns. But from the first to the last we see his increasing awareness of this shortcoming, and are pleased by his growing ability to both recognize the error and set about correcting his course.

Tragedy enters in when the two realize that their dream of having children together may not be possible. Muldoon admits his stubbornness in accepting what Sue seemed to know even before all their options had been investigated and exhausted. He also shares his reluctance to embrace the possibility of adoption, even as his wife eagerly does so.

A part of me has wanted to keep the subject at bay but since last autumn I’m committing myself to praying about it. I suppose I could have taken a hard line, strong-armed our conversations:

“We’re not about to raise someone else’s child!” But I cannot utter that sentiment, no matter how often it lingers in the back of my mind. It wouldn’t be the best me talking, the me that she deserves.

It takes time for him to come around, but his love again urges him on: “I cannot imagine her—God’s beloved, and mine—living without being a mother to a child. I’m beginning to believe now that our challenge is first to learn where that child lives.”

Answering that question eventually took the Muldoons to China. It is there that we, having shared in the young couple’s struggles, see Muldoon’s passion enflamed anew:
I am falling in love. Even in spite of the many ways I have prepared for this experience, I am surprised and amazed at how it is happening. But the simple truth is that this child has captured my heart; I am smitten and out-of-control in love with her. The only comparison I can draw is falling in love with Sue eleven years ago.

He falls in love once more, after returning to China to adopt a second daughter. Settled now with his surprising family, he concludes, “I have learned to attend to the whisperings of desire to find the places where God might be inviting me to grow, to change, and to stretch toward the freedom of the real me, the person who can share joy with the women he loves most.”

The book, appropriately, includes “discussion points” for young couples. This is a fine addition, except that the marginal notes on some pages are distracting and interrupt the flow of Muldoon’s emotionally absorbing narrative. The book’s brevity is no doubt deliberate. But as a reader I wanted to hear more about the author’s experience of his daughters beyond the early days after adoption. (Perhaps that is a future book.)

Besides simply appreciating its introspective honesty, its practical attractions for me—a single person—were twofold: It heightened my sensitivity toward the challenges of married life; and, as a priest called upon to prepare young couples for marriage, I also knew early on in my reading that I would encourage them to read this book. Every young couple could benefit from the glimpse into the passions, the practicality and the piety required of marriage and family life that Muldoon offers. His account, while inspiring and beautiful, also can serve as a “reality check” for couples contemplating marriage.

The Muldoons’ is a story of how longing and learning to love—and more than a little faith—can sustain two people devoted to each other, especially when, as often happens, things do not turn out quite as planned or imagined. Indeed, Longing to Love serves as a poignant reminder to the young and old, single, married or otherwise committed, of the importance of love in everyone’s life.

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