

The True Self

Thomas Merton

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.

THOMAS MERTON,
NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION

During an American Poetry course in college, I was introduced to Walt Whitman. Our young professor was something of a Whitman devotee and scholar: she had written a well-received biography of the poet. One day she said that if we were ever accused of contradicting ourselves we should quote the following lines from “Song of Myself”:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

With those lines, Whitman could easily have been speaking about Thomas Merton—another poet, as well as a mystic, a monk, an artist,

a peace activist, a priest, a spiritual master, an ecumenist, a Zen practitioner, and a saint.

Merton's contradictions are his most endearing features. A man in love with the world around him who chooses to become a cloistered monk: a Trappist, Fr. M. Louis, OCSO (for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance). A peripatetic man and an inveterate traveler who takes a vow of stability, choosing to remain at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, in the secluded hills of Kentucky. A man who freely takes a vow of obedience but who spends much of his religious life butting heads with his order's superiors. A man in love with his vocation but constantly questioning it. A devout Catholic convert fascinated by Eastern religions. A famous writer who professes to hate (or tries to convince himself that he hates) the trappings and "business" of fame. A man who could write one day of his desire never to write another sentence, only to write a few days later of his joy in seeing another of his books published. (In one memorable journal entry, he reveals a barely hidden satisfaction that the burlap covering his new book is the same fabric used in the chic Manhattan supper clubs of the day.)

These paradoxes, these Whitmanesque multitudes, helped make Thomas Merton one of the protean figures of twentieth-century Catholicism. His open and honest 1948 memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which details his journey to the Trappist monastery, was a publishing phenomenon that even the savvy Merton was unable to foresee. It introduced contemplative prayer to millions of readers and heralded a postwar renewal in monastic life in the United States. His writings on peace presaged Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"). His continuing zest for life helped recast Christianity for a jaded America.

His book helped recast me as well.

It's not a stretch to say that *The Seven Storey Mountain* changed my life. But to understand how, you might have to understand something about my life before I encountered Thomas Merton.



At seventeen, I began undergraduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. Why I decided to study business is difficult to explain and, at this writing, difficult even for me to understand.

The simplest explanation is this: during my junior and senior years in high school, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in life. Certainly there were plenty of subjects I enjoyed studying in high school—English, French, history, art—but none seemed practical enough for a career. I loved French, for example, but I couldn't figure out what to do with it.

Enter the idea of studying business. At the time, I had a vague idea that a business major would enable me to land a job in the “business end” of any number of fields, such as the “business end” of English (publishing) or the “business end” of art (managing a museum or gallery). At the very least, a business degree would likely lead to a high-paying job after graduation, and this, I reasoned, would make me happy.

On this point, everyone—my family, my friends, my high school guidance counselor—agreed.

The problem was that whenever I considered “earning a living,” I thought mostly about the “earning” and nothing about the “living.” I hadn't the slightest notion what living in the business world would mean. Would I find it fulfilling? Enjoyable? Would it be a good use

of my skills? Was it something that I wanted to do? These were questions that—perhaps not surprisingly at age seventeen—I failed to reflect upon.

Ultimately, I decided to study business in college—finance, to be exact.

While I can't say I enjoyed the courses at Wharton in the same way that I enjoyed seeing a good movie or downing beers with friends, there were some courses that I was able to master—accounting, for one. Besides having some excellent accounting professors, I appreciated the way that everything fit together in accounting: like a difficult but ultimately satisfying puzzle whose individual pieces locked together neatly and sensibly. Still, tallying up balance sheets, reviewing income statements, and poring over cash-flow reports weren't activities I wanted to do in my spare time.

On the other hand, there were a few courses at Wharton that I loathed. My Probability and Statistics professor, certainly the dull-est teacher I've ever had, employed the same example throughout one entire semester to illustrate each of his probability theorems: "Imagine two urns," he would say in a nasal monotone, facing a class of one hundred glassy-eyed business students. "One contains green balls and one contains red balls. We will select a ball from each urn and . . ."

I am unable to remember the pedagogical point of the urns and balls, since I was usually passed out on my desk, catching up on sleep and drooling on my notebook. For much of the semester, I simply had no idea what was going on in Probability. So after years of landing at the top of my class through elementary school, junior high school, and high school and evincing horror at even a B, I received my first-ever C. This time I couldn't be horrified. Upon opening my report card, I confessed to my roommate, "I deserved this C. Actually, I

deserved a D.” I made a mental note not to apply for a job in the probability industry.

Fortunately, Probability marked the exception, and I did well overall in school. And when interviewing season rolled around in the fall of senior year, I looked forward to plucking some attractive fruits off the job tree.

Wharton’s reputation in the corporate world made finding a job ridiculously easy. At the beginning of senior year, hundreds of corporate recruiters flocked to the school to conduct interviews: in a few months I had received a number of excellent offers. After narrowing them down to three or four, I settled on a corporate training program at General Electric in New York City.

Once again, almost no reflection was involved in my decision. To use some accounting terminology, I simply went along with “generally accepted principles.” For example, what should you do at the end of business school? Interview for jobs. Which job offer should you accept? The one with the highest salary. The more important questions were the ones that no one asked me, or rather, that I failed to ask myself: What do you desire in life? And what does God desire for you?



It’s difficult to say when, exactly, I understood that I was in the wrong place. Looking back, I can say that the realization dawned gradually, as the joy was slowly leached out of my life. After a few years in the corporate world, I found myself working almost around the clock, witnessing daily examples of callous behavior from management, and finding myself on a tedious path that seemed to have a single goal: making money.

Eventually I realized that my life at work had no real meaning. But there was an even bigger problem—I couldn't see a way out.

One night, after a long day, I came home and turned on the TV. I remember the evening vividly. At the time, I was sharing a house with two other GE employees. It was around 9:00, and I was dead tired after a miserable day. I had just thrown some leftover pasta into the microwave and plopped down on the ratty beige couch in front of our TV.

Flipping through the channels aimlessly—past stale sitcoms, dull movies, and boring reruns—I stumbled across a public-television documentary called *Merton: A Film Biography*. On the screen appeared a variety of people, some of whom I recognized, some of whom I didn't, who spoke about the effect that one man had had on their lives. Apparently, he was a Catholic monk, or, more specifically, a "Trappist" (I had no idea what that meant), who had left his previous life (whatever that had been), and had written an influential biography (that I had never heard of). Though I caught only the last few minutes of the program, something about their comments made me want to know more about Thomas Merton. I was drawn by something else, too: the look on his face in the still photographs. It seemed to radiate peace.

The next day, I tracked down his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in a local bookstore. Late that night, I began reading. In just a few pages, it captivated me as no other book had before, or has since. Thomas Merton struck me as someone I might like to have known—bright, funny, creative, a fellow who would have made a good friend. He struggled with some of the same things I did—pride, ambition, selfishness. And he struggled with the same questions I was wondering about: What are we made for? Who is God? What is the purpose of our lives? Merton seemed full of wonderful contradictions—a man who sought humility while struggling with an overweening ego, a man in

love with the world who decided to, in a sense, flee it. To me Merton's contradictions, his "multitudes," as Whitman would say, revealed his deep humanity. As I read the book, his search became my search, and I longed to know where his life would lead.



On January 31, 1915, in a small town in the French Pyrenees called Prades, Thomas Merton was born. His father, Owen, a New Zealander, was a painter of some renown. "My father painted like Cézanne," wrote Merton with evident pride, "and understood the southern French landscape the way Cézanne did." Ruth, Merton's American-born mother, was also something of an artist: his parents met while studying at a studio in Paris.

Merton enjoyed a lifelong appreciation of French art, language, and culture. He wrote feelingly about France in the early pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as "a setting for the best of the cathedrals, the most interesting towns, . . . and the greatest universities."

In many ways, France would always represent home for the rootless young Merton. Years after he left the country he returned in a roundabout way: by joining the Trappists, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, a religious order founded in Cîteaux, France. (The word *Cistercian* is a version of the town's original Latin name, Cistercium.) His background had practical applications, too: as a young monk at Gethsemani, Merton was asked to translate numerous documents from the order's headquarters in France.

But for most of his early life Thomas Merton found himself without a real home: his childhood was, by almost all accounts, sad. Tom's mother died when he was six. Thereafter his father moved the

family from place to place, town to town, and country to country while he pursued his artistic career. For a time the family (which included Tom's younger brother, John Paul) lived with Ruth's family in Douglaston, New York and then, for a while, in Bermuda. During their stay in Bermuda, Owen, hoping to sell some of his paintings in New York, left Tom in the care of a woman author he had just met. (His father's casual passing off of his child to a recent acquaintance still seems shocking to me.) Later, Tom, Owen, and John Paul returned to France, taking up residence in a town called Saint-Antonin, where Merton enrolled in a nearby secondary school.

One summer, with his father traveling once again, Merton boarded with the Privats, a Catholic family in Murat. This proved a "great grace" for the boy. Tom Merton was moved by the affection shown him by this elderly couple and their young nephew, who became his friend. The passages in his autobiography describing his stay with the Privats are among the tenderest he ever set down on paper. "I owe many graces to their prayers," he writes, "and perhaps ultimately the grace of my conversion and even of my religious vocation. Who shall say? But one day I shall know, and it is good to be able to be confident that I will see them again and be able to thank them."

In 1929, Merton was sent off to a boarding school called Oakham, in Rutland, England. He hated it. (The chapter relating his experiences at this time is entitled "The Harrowing of Hell.") Around this time, his father fell ill, suffering from the effects of a brain tumor. Visiting Owen during a summer holiday, Tom was startled to find his father's London hospital bed covered with drawings "unlike anything he had ever done before—pictures of little, irate Byzantine-looking saints with beards and great halos." In 1931, a few days before Tom's sixteenth birthday, his father died.

A bright and articulate young man, Merton won a scholarship to Clare College, at Cambridge, and began his university studies. But it was an even less congenial place for Merton than Oakham had been; he referred in his autobiography to the university's "dark, sinister atmosphere." Tom spent much of his day carousing with, as he described them, "a pack of hearties who wore multicolored scarves around their necks and who would have barked all night long . . . if they had not been forced to go home to bed at a certain time."

While in England, according to some later biographers, a dissolute Tom fathered a child. Many years later, when Merton was about to enter the Trappists, his guardian undertook an unsuccessful search for the woman and her child. The mother and child, it seems, were killed in the Blitz during the Second World War. Some sources contend that the Trappist censors responsible for vetting Merton's manuscripts removed this episode from *The Seven Storey Mountain* so as not to offend the presumably delicate sensibilities of the time. As I read Merton's biography, unaware of this part of his life, I was puzzled by his frequent expressions of self-disgust and his oft-stated fear that his past would be an impediment to his entrance into religious life. Later biographers would provide a fuller account of this difficult chapter in Merton's life.

The childhood and adolescence described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* were lonely and aimless, as Tom failed to make close friends. He suffered separation from his only brother, missed his parents deeply, and behaved in ways that disgusted him—drinking, smoking, partying, and always showing off. Tom seemed forever to be searching for something, while remaining unaware of what he was searching for. One thinks of both St. Augustine's rambunctious youth as described in his *Confessions* and Dorothy Day's description many centuries later of her "long loneliness."

After considering Tom's experiences in England, Tom's guardian suggested that he return to the States to continue his education. Merton accepted this advice with alacrity: "It did not take me five minutes to come around to agreeing with him."

Columbia University and New York City proved more agreeable for Merton. He met many companionable young men (though it would be some time before he established healthy relationships with women) who remained his friends for life. He found his studies enjoyable. Tom also came under the influence of the popular English professor Mark Van Doren, whom Merton admired for his sense of "vocation," and his "profoundly scholastic" mind, which helped prepare Merton to receive "the good seed of scholastic philosophy." With characteristic self-absorption Merton concluded, "I can see that Providence was using him as an instrument more directly than he realized." Of course this was true, but as described it sounds as if the sole reason that Professor Van Doren was placed on earth was to help Thomas Merton understand Thomas Aquinas.

One passage in the autobiography about Merton's college years stopped me cold. Almost as an aside, Merton notes that he became a cartoonist and, later, art editor of the university's humor magazine, the *Jester*. I had to read this twice to make sure I hadn't misunderstood. As it happened, my only extracurricular activity during college (other than smoking pot and drinking beer) was being a cartoonist and, later, art editor of the university's humor magazine, the *Punch Bowl*. This was a small coincidence, but how many art editors of Ivy League humor magazines are there? Reading that passage cemented for me my connection to Tom Merton: for the rest of his story, I was with him, on his side.

His autobiography made it clear that Merton cut a wide figure at Columbia. Just a few years ago I was given confirmation of this. I was

running a book club at a Jesuit parish in New York, and one month we read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. After our meeting an elderly woman, who had remained silent during the evening's lively discussion, asked to speak with me. She told me that her husband had known Merton at Columbia. "My husband was so surprised when he read his book," she said. "All he could remember of Merton was that he was always ready to go out drinking or to a party. My husband said he couldn't believe what was going on inside of Merton."



The first paragraph of this excerpt from Merton's book *No Man Is an Island* changed my life. When I first read it, at age twenty-six, it stopped me in my tracks and then started me on the path that would lead to the Jesuits:

Why do we have to spend our lives striving to be something that we would never want to be, if we only knew what we wanted? Why do we waste our time doing things which, if we only stopped to think about them, are just the opposite of what we were made for?

We cannot be ourselves unless we know ourselves. But self-knowledge is impossible when thoughtless and automatic activity keeps our souls in confusion. In order to know ourselves it is not necessary to cease all activity in order to think about ourselves. That would be useless, and would probably do most of us a great deal of harm. But we have to cut down our activity to the point where we can think calmly and reasonably about our actions. We cannot begin to know ourselves until we can see the real reasons why we do the things we do, and we cannot be ourselves until our actions correspond to our intentions, and our intentions are appropriate to our own situation. But that is enough. It is not necessary that we succeed in everything. A man can be perfect

and still reap no fruit from his work, and it may happen that a man who is able to accomplish very little is much more of a person than another who seems to accomplish very much.



What was going on inside of Merton was the slow process of conversion: from an old way of life to a new one, or, more specifically, from no particular religious affiliation to a wholehearted embrace of Roman Catholicism. His autobiography reveals that his transformation happened in a number of ways. The first way was through a sort of gradual intellectual progression, as Merton searched for a system of beliefs to satisfy his natural curiosity. Professor Van Doren really did prepare his mind for scholasticism, so that when Merton came across a text called *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, by Étienne Gilson, its scholastic approach to the question of God's existence made a "profound impression" on him. So Merton's first way to God was through the intellect.

Merton's second path to conversion was through the senses and, especially, through art. This too happened gradually. The son of two artists, Merton was acutely aware of his surroundings, and during Merton's early life God spoke to him through the physical world—and Merton gradually became *aware* that God was doing so. As a boy, for example, Merton flipped through a picture book of monasteries and, captivated by their beauty, was "filled with a kind of longing." Years later, during an extended trip through Europe, he was "fascinated" by the Byzantine mosaics and religious art in Rome. God drew him closer in this way as well. "And thus without knowing anything about it," he wrote, "I became a pilgrim. I was unconsciously and unintentionally visiting all the great shrines of Rome, and seeking out their sanctuaries with some of the eagerness and avidity and desire of a true pilgrim, though not quite for the right reason."

Finally, God drew Merton in through his emotions. From his relationship with the Privats, to his stolen prayers in a church in Rome, to a surprising moment beside the bed of his dying grandfather, when he felt the urge to fall to his knees and pray, Merton was drawn inexorably closer to God through the intimate workings of his emotional life.

Thomas Merton's conversion occurred gradually, yet in my first reading of his book it seemed to happen all at once: Merton discovered Scholastic philosophy; he attended a Mass at a nearby church; and—*bang!*—a few pages later, he was baptized as a Roman Catholic at Corpus Christi Church near Columbia University. In what I saw as his straightforward approach to changing his life, Merton appealed to me immensely. Desperate at the time to escape the bonds of my life in corporate America, I found in Merton someone who knew what to do and was able to do it quickly.

His life changed even more rapidly and decisively in the years after his baptism. Once Merton graduated from Columbia and began working on a master's degree in English, he also began considering a vocation to the priesthood. He quickly ran through a number of religious orders: the Dominicans were rejected because they slept in common dormitories. The Benedictines were rejected because "it might just mean being nailed down to a desk in an expensive prep school in New Hampshire for the rest of my life." The Jesuits were "geared to a pitch of active intensity and military routine which were alien to my own needs." The irony in these rejections is that his eventual entrance into the Trappists would require sleeping in common dormitories more primitive than those in Dominican houses, being "nailed down" to one place for longer than most Benedictines, and living a "pitch of active intensity and military routine" far outstripping that of most Jesuits.

Only the Rule of St. Francis of Assisi appealed to Tom. Providentially, his friend Dan Walsh was familiar with the Franciscans

at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, a town in upstate New York. So after finishing his master's degree at Columbia, Tom took a teaching position at the college, and in November 1939, he applied to enter the Franciscans. The following June, however, his application was rejected.

In Michael Mott's superb biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Mott conjectures that Merton's rejection by the Franciscans might have stemmed from several factors: Merton's fathering of a child, his recent conversion, and perhaps "his sense of his own unfitness." Whatever the reason, a disconsolate Tom sought solace in the confessional of a Capuchin church in Manhattan.

His confessor was unduly harsh. "The priest, probably judging that I was some emotional and unstable and stupid character, began to tell me in very strong terms that I certainly did not belong in the monastery, still less the priesthood and, in fact, gave me to understand that I was simply wasting his time and insulting the Sacrament of Penance by indulging my self-pity in his confessional." Merton emerged from this ordeal in tears.

Yet with surprising equanimity and uncharacteristic freedom, Merton accepted the decision of the Franciscans and decided to return to St. Bonaventure to work with the friars. He settled into life as a teacher and, despite the Franciscans' rejection, was increasingly drawn to living as if he were in a religious order: he prayed regularly, taught classes, and lived simply. A few months later, casting about for a place to make an Easter retreat, Tom recalled Dan Walsh's comment about a Trappist monastery in the Kentucky hills, called Our Lady of Gethsemani.

At this point in his tale, my pulse quickened: I had to keep myself from racing ahead in the book. Merton seemed on the brink of finding what he had long been searching for. I wondered why I felt that I had done the same.

Merton arrived at Gethsemani late one night and was greeted by the monastery's porter, or doorkeeper. "Have you come here to stay?" asked the blunt Trappist brother.

"The question terrified me," wrote Merton. "It sounded too much like the voice of my own conscience."

"What's the matter?" answered the porter. "Why can't you stay? Are you married or something?"

"No," answered Merton, "I have a job."

But as soon as Merton stepped into the halls of the monastery it was clear where he had arrived. "I felt the deep, deep silence of the night," he wrote,

and of peace, and of holiness enfold me like love, like safety.

The embrace of it, the silence! I had entered into a solitude that was an impregnable fortress. And the silence that enfolded me, spoke to me, and spoke louder and more eloquently than any voice, and in the middle of the quiet, clean-smelling room, with the moon pouring its peacefulness in through the open window, with the warm night air, I realized truly whose house that was, O glorious Mother of God!

Merton had come home.

It took Merton a few months before he decided to enter the order. For him the monastery was the "center of all the vitality that is in America," and it exerted on him an immediate and irresistible pull.

He returned to St. Bonaventure, stunned by the force of his visit to Gethsemani, and began leading a life patterned even more closely on that of a religious community. He rose early in the morning, prayed for three-quarters of an hour, attended Mass, and did a great deal of "spiritual reading." Around this time he received a "big

present . . . in the order of grace.” He met, through her writings, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. And he discovered that “the Little Flower really was a saint, and not just a mute pious little doll in the imaginations of a lot of sentimental old women. And not only was she a saint, but a great saint, one of the greatest: tremendous! I owe her all kinds of public apologies and reparation for having ignored her greatness.”

In a burst of enthusiasm he added: “It is a wonderful experience to discover a new saint. For God is greatly magnified and marvelous in each one of His saints: differently in each individual one.”

It was almost comical to read this as I was discovering Merton.

By this point, Merton had little doubt about what he had to do. But there was a final consideration. Some months earlier Merton had been rejected by the draft board for health reasons (as a young man he had had numerous problems with his teeth). With war approaching, however, the rules were relaxed, and Merton received another letter from the draft board. He made a decision. As Michael Mott puts it in his biography, “If Gethsemani will not have him, Merton is resigned to go into the army. He is firm on one point: he will not kill, but he will serve.” Merton was also resigned to doing God’s will. If God wished for him to enter religious life, he would enter. If not, he would join the army. Merton had given up trying to run his life according to his own plan, preferring to let God do so instead.

In the end, to the wonder of his friends, he resigned his position at St. Bonaventure and entered the Trappists on December 10, 1941.

The remainder of *The Seven Storey Mountain* details his life in the monastery. In short order, Merton received his novice’s habit; learned about the Trappist Rule; made his temporary profession of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; wrote poetry; participated in the rich liturgical life of the monastery; began his exploration of the world


of contemplative prayer; and, in the process, discovered the peace he had desired all his life. “The months have gone by,” he writes to God toward the end of the book, “and You have not lessened any of those desires, but You have given me peace, and I am beginning to see what it is all about. I am beginning to understand.”

The Seven Storey Mountain is a beautiful book, and near the end of it I began to taste some of the peace Merton had felt. Without leaving anything behind, or leaving anything at all, I felt as if I had come home. When I finished the book late one night and set it on my nightstand, I knew with certainty that this was what I wanted to do with my life—maybe not exactly what Merton had done, and maybe not as a Trappist monk or even in a monastery, but something very nearly like it.

For me, Thomas Merton’s description of religious life was an invitation to a new life. The monastic world seemed such a perfect place—peaceful and serene, full of purpose and prayer. Even then, I suspected that that was an idealized picture. (Merton later admitted as much.) And I realized that since I was desperately searching for an escape route from my current situation, any alternative would have held some appeal. Yet I also knew that, for some reason, the life that Merton described exerted a clear pull on my heart.


That’s what the “call” was for me. Today many people, even believers, think that a call to the priesthood or religious life is something of an otherworldly experience—hearing voices, seeing visions. But for me it was merely a simple attraction, a heartfelt desire, a sort of emotional pull—and the happy inability to think of anything else. And once I started down that road and allowed myself to ask questions that I should have asked years ago, everything changed.

Considering those questions, which had long lain dormant in my soul, led to some surprising answers, and within two years of reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I entered the Jesuit novitiate.



When I feel a sense of despair creeping into my days (a sure sign that one needs help in the spiritual life), I often turn to this beautiful passage from *No Man Is an Island*, from a chapter entitled “Mercy.”

How close God is to us when we come to recognize and to accept our abjection and to cast our care entirely upon Him! Against all human expectation He sustains us when we need to be sustained, helping us to do what seemed impossible. We learn to know Him, now, not in the “presence” that is found in abstract consideration—a presence in which we dress Him in our own finery—but in the emptiness of a hope that may come close to despair. For perfect hope is achieved on the brink of despair when, instead of falling over the edge, we find ourselves walking on the air. Hope is always just about to turn into despair, but never does so, for at the moment of supreme crisis God’s power is suddenly made perfect in our infirmity. So we learn to expect His mercy most calmly when all is most dangerous, to seek Him quietly in the face of peril, certain that He cannot fail us though we may be upbraided by the just and rejected by those who claim to hold the evidence of His love.



I discovered the contours of the next several years of Merton’s life in his book *The Sign of Jonas*. In some ways it is a more enjoyable work than *The Seven Storey Mountain*, since his starry-eyed fervor had worn off and he could more clearly describe the reality of religious life. The excerpts from his journals tell the tale of the first years after his entrance into the monastery until the time of his ordination, which he described as the “one great secret for which I had been born.”

For the rest of his life Thomas Merton (now Father M. Louis, OCSO) wrote numerous books on the contemplative life, on nonviolence, on

Cistercian life, on Christian doctrine, and on Zen, serving as a spiritual guide for millions around the world. He filled volumes with his poetry. He maintained an extensive correspondence with writers, activists, and religious leaders of almost every stripe. He served as master of students and, later, master of novices for his abbey. He was visited at Gethsemani by peace activists, writers, poets, artists, musicians, priests, sisters, brothers, and those who simply appreciated his outlook on the modern world. He fell deeply in love with a woman—a nurse he met while recuperating in a local hospital—but chose to break off the relationship and remain a monk. Eventually he was given permission to become a hermit and live in a small house on the grounds of the monastery.

And, of course, he continually explored his inner life and deepened his relationship with God.

Thomas Merton continued to be a man of contradictions, and it was these contradictions that drew me to him. One can stand back and say, “Yes, this man of opposites, this proud and boastful monk, who was sometimes unwilling to listen to advice, sometimes overly self-absorbed, sometimes overly spiteful, was also holy. He was dedicated to God and to the church; he was helpful to so many; he was generous with his talent, time, and prayers; and he wished peace to all he met.” Seeing that someone so human could be holy gives me great hope. Especially with Merton one sees both the sins and the sanctity. And I wonder if this isn’t something like the way God sees us.



A final paradox: in 1968, after years of butting heads with his religious superiors, Merton was granted permission to leave the monastery for an extended trip to Asia. On his way he stopped in

a place called Polonnaruwa, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he paused before immense statues of the Buddha. He was overwhelmed by a feeling of grace, of contentment, unlike any he had ever known. “Looking at these figures,” he wrote, “I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean of the habitual, half-tired vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the robes themselves, became evident and obvious.” The devout Catholic monk had enjoyed a mystical experience in front of a statue of the Buddha.

A few weeks later, on December 10, 1968, in Bangkok for an ecumenical conference, Merton was taking a bath when he slipped in the bathroom, grabbed an electric fan, and was electrocuted.

And so the man who took a vow of stability in a Kentucky monastery died miles and miles away in Bangkok, called home by the One he sought in contradictions.



Since first reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I had hoped to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani one day. Just a few summers ago the opportunity presented itself, through an unexpected turn of events.

In May, a Jesuit friend named Kevin mentioned that he would be spending his summer at an internship program for spiritual directors. The five-week program, at a retreat house in Ohio, sounded ideal: an opportunity to direct retreatants through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. “Why don’t you check it out?” he said.

The following morning I called Bill, a Jesuit and one of the program’s directors, who said that there was still room. Even better, Bill said that another good friend of mine, Dave, had been accepted into the program. After completing a brief application, I was accepted,

too. It seemed that God wanted me to go; at the very least, God was making it easy to do so.

Boarding the plane to Cincinnati, I realized I would be spending the summer somewhere near Kentucky. But how near? At the airport, I was met by Dave and Sr. Martha, an Ursuline nun and the program's codirector. Martha said that she was a Louisville native, and though I didn't know exactly where that was, I knew it was in Kentucky, and possibly near Gethsemani.

"Are we anywhere near, um . . . Kentucky?" I asked.

Martha laughed. "We're *in* Kentucky!" she said as we passed a sign: Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky Airport.

The next two weeks at the Jesuit retreat house in Milford, Ohio, were busy ones. Kevin, Dave, and I spent the mornings with Martha and Bill in classes focusing on the Spiritual Exercises, retreat ministry, and spiritual direction. "Team meetings" with the other directors on the retreat took place at noon. Afterward came a hurried lunch of traditionally lousy retreat-house fare, then three or four hours of giving spiritual direction. Mass was at 5:00 p.m., where we were sometimes expected to preach.

After dinner, we were left to ourselves, and Kevin, Dave, and I happily spent the time seeing movies (we saw everything that summer, no matter how cheesy), renting videos, and consuming an inordinate amount of ice cream at a Cincinnati hangout called Graeter's, which was justly renowned for its product. All in all, Kevin and Dave were the perfect companions for the summer: bright, prayerful, hardworking, and fun.

If the nights were relaxing, the days proved to be a riot of activity. One morning Bill said, in a solemn tone, that if we were to be good spiritual directors, we needed to be contemplative. Later that day, after we choked down our lunch, Kevin, Dave, and I ran to meet with

our retreatants. As we sprinted down the hallway of the retreat house, Kevin laughed. “This is so *contemplative!*”

The next morning I half jokingly told Bill that I was looking forward to returning to New York, where life was more relaxed.

Midway through the Spiritual Exercises, our retreatants were given a “break day,” something that St. Ignatius built into the retreat, knowing that thirty straight days of silent prayer is strenuous even for the most dedicated spiritual athletes. Happily, this meant that we interns would get a break, too. So Kevin, Dave, and I decided to take a road trip to nearby Gethsemani. After we settled on an overnight visit, I offered to make the arrangements.

The guest master at the abbey, however, said that staying for only one night during a weekend was impossible. The monastery was sponsoring a three-day retreat, and we would be taking away rooms from people who might want to stay the entire weekend. Did we, he asked, want to sign up for the entire three days? That would be a lot simpler.

“Well, what does *that* mean? Are we going to be on retreat? Will we be able to *talk?*” asked Dave, giving voice to the same worry that Kevin and I had.

Our break from the retreat was seeming more and more like *another* retreat. In the end we decided to go anyway and trusted that whatever awaited us at Gethsemani—retreat, break, weekend get-away—would be what God intended for us.



This is my favorite prayer by Merton, taken from his book *Thoughts in Solitude*, and one that I have found anyone can pray:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will

end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.



A week later, we piled into Bill's beat-up car and said a prayer to Our Lady of the Way before starting out. (Our piety seemed to increase each day of the retreat.) The ride took us past Louisville and through the bluegrass horse country of Kentucky. In a few hours we were wending our way through what is known as the "knob" country of Kentucky because of the small round hills dotting the landscape.

A few miles after Bardstown, the tall steeple of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani came into view, rising over the grassy countryside like a ship's mast over a green ocean. The abbey was surrounded by a low gray wall, which was in turn surrounded by lush fields that stretched toward the horizon.

When we emerged from the car, we were bowled over by the heat. I remembered a passage in *The Sign of Jonas* where Thomas Merton talks about the summer in the monastery. It is an entry from August 8, 1947: "Hot, sticky weather. Prickly heat. Red lumps all over your neck and shoulders. Everything clammy. *Paenitentiam agite!* It is better than a hairshirt."

We carried our luggage into the monastery's guesthouse. Over the doorway was a single word, in big block letters, carved into the stone

lintel: *Pax*. Opposite the entrance, across a plaza, was the entrance to the monastery cloister. It too had a legend engraved above the doorway: “God Alone.” The guesthouse interior was refreshingly cool; there seemed little danger that anyone inside would get prickly heat. Seated at the desk was the porter, in the traditional Trappist habit of a white alb and black scapular, which is a kind of relic for me. For no matter how many times I see it, it fills me with a kind of joy, as if I am closer to the possibility of a life of pure contemplation and more connected to the real-life Thomas Merton.

The monastery’s porter pulled out a guest list. “Let’s see,” he said, “Fr. Martin, you’re in this room.” He pointed to a room on the top floor of the monastery residence and handed me a key.

“Fr. Dave,” he said. Dave made a face at Kevin and me. He was not ordained but was too polite to correct the porter. “You’re here, also in the monastery.”

“And Fr. Kevin,” he said. “There was no more room in the monastery proper, so we put you in the guesthouse, which is just next door. There’s air conditioning there.”

Dave and I looked at each other. That meant there was *no* air conditioning in our rooms. “It’s very pleasant in the guesthouse,” said the porter. “You have your own bathroom, too.”

“Vespers is at 5:30,” he said, “followed by supper at 6:00. The rest of the schedule is posted outside the chapel. Would any of you like to concelebrate at Mass?” At this point, Kevin and Dave informed the porter that I was the only priest in the bunch. I said that I would love to concelebrate tomorrow.

“Mass is at 6:15 in the morning,” he said. “Just fill out a card in the dining room, and an alb and stole will be waiting for you tomorrow.” Kevin, Dave, and I decided to drop off our bags in our rooms and meet at the guesthouse a few minutes later.

My spartan quarters were like most other retreat-house rooms—there was a bed, a wooden desk, and a sink—with one exception. Owing to the oppressive heat, a large overhead fan seemed stuck in overdrive: it was spinning madly, like an airplane propeller, and a blast of hot air greeted me when I opened the door.

Downstairs, in the guesthouse, Kevin surprised me. “I want you to have my room,” he said. “It’s really nice and it has air conditioning. You’ve been wanting to come here for so long, so you should have it.”

I was touched by Kevin’s offer and reminded of how grateful I was to have so many generous friends. But immediately I thought, *Hmm . . . what would Thomas Merton do?* The most charitable thing would be to let Kevin have it. And maybe God wanted me to have the room I had been given for some special but as yet unforeseen reason. So I decided I would give up Kevin’s room, as an ascetic test.

“No, you keep it,” I said, feeling super-holy.

“No, *you* should have it.”

“No, you take it.”

Dave rolled his eyes. “If one of you doesn’t stop being so damn holy, *I’ll* take it!”

In the end, Kevin kept his room. (Weeks after the trip Kevin confessed that while Dave and I were kept awake by the heat, he didn’t sleep because he was unable to adjust the air conditioning and was actually too cold.)

After our extended room discernment, we visited the chapel. It was a long, narrow building with a simple design and an impressively high ceiling. The abbey’s original chapel had been an ornate affair, but after the Second Vatican Council the community hired the architect William Schickel to simplify its look. Schickel stripped away the decorative columns and cornices to reveal the bare brick,

now painted white, and dark wooden beams that crisscrossed the ceiling and supported the walls behind the altar.

Near the entrance of the chapel was a small area for guests to sit, marked off by a low metal gate. Beyond the gate, wooden stalls for the monks lined the walls. At the far end of the pebbly floor, simple metal chairs surrounded a plain wood altar. Wonderfully cool, the chapel smelled like incense and, improbably, new carpeting. I peered down the aisle toward the sanctuary and imagined Thomas Merton kneeling before his abbot and pronouncing his vows, or lying prostrate on the floor, during the long ordination ceremony.

After our visit to the chapel, we wandered around the side of the guesthouse to the cemetery. Row after row of low metal crosses, painted white, punctuated the green grass. After a few minutes we found what I had hoped to see. The bronze plaque read: “Fr. Louis Merton, Died Dec. 10, 1968.”

As I stood in the broiling sun, I thought of all the monks who had gathered decades ago around this spot, probably pondering Merton’s contradictory life and his strange, almost literary, death. (The accidentally electrocuted Merton had ended *The Seven Storey Mountain* with the words “That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.”) I thought also about how my vocation to the Jesuits really began here at Gethsemani.

It was nearing the time for Vespers, so we filed into the chapel, picking up a small booklet with the hour’s prayers. Presently twenty or so people took their places on the metal chairs beside us. A bell sounded, and in a few moments the monks silently filed in from side doors. As they entered, they dipped their fingers in the stone holy water fonts and slowly made the sign of the cross. The sight of so many Trappist monks in their distinctive habit, in the church in which Merton spent so much time, was surprisingly moving. After

having read so much about his life and this place, I had a difficult time believing that I was there.

The prayers were a surprise. I had expected something out of a Gregorian chant CD—lush polyphony and well-trained voices, perhaps accompanied by the deep tones of an organ. Instead we heard something simpler: the sound of sixty-six men, many elderly, singing the psalms plainly. (“Oh yes,” said Martha when we returned, “the Benedictines are much better singers than the Trappists.”) But it was still lovely, and I marveled that monks had been praying like this since long before I was born, and would do so long after I was gone.

In the courtyard outside the chapel we checked out the schedule for Saturday prayers:

Vigils	3:15 a.m.
Lauds	5:45 a.m.
Terce	7:30 a.m.
Sext	12:15 p.m.
None	2:15 p.m.
Vespers	5:30 p.m.
Compline	7:30 p.m.
Mass	6:15 a.m.

Supper followed Vespers. There were two dining rooms for the retreatants: the main room, where silence was kept, and a smaller room where people were allowed to speak. We three spiritual athletes chose the silent room. After the bland fare of the Jesuit retreat house, I was delighted by the abbey’s fantastic cooking—fresh vegetables, wonderful bread, and, since it was Friday, plenty of fish. And the best cheese I had ever eaten: fresh from the farm. In his journals, Thomas

Merton mocked the “cheese industry” at Gethsemani. For once I disagreed with him.

There was a conference after dinner for retreatants, where we were surprised and pleased to hear an elderly monk declaim verses from the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and speak feelingly about his poetry and life. Then it was time for Compline, the final prayer of the day (so named because it “completes” the day). Compline closed with both monks and retreatants filing up the aisle to receive the abbot’s blessing for the night. Afterward, Kevin, Dave, and I gathered outside the chapel and teased one another about who would make it to tomorrow’s first prayer, Vigils, at 3:15 a.m. (Only Dave, as it turned out—and mainly, he said, because it was too hot to sleep.)

After a shower (to cool off) and my own prayers, I decided to visit the chapel again. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I was happy to find it empty—and completely silent. Kneeling at the visitors’ gate, I wanted to offer some quick prayers before bed. I was beat after a long day. But suddenly I thought about the course of my life. How was it that I had been drawn into religious life? Looking back, it seemed that I had been forcibly pulled from a life of unhappiness and placed into one of joy. I wondered over the amazing way God had worked in my life, leading me to places that I couldn’t have seen for myself. I thought of how happy I was to be there, to be spending the summer doing something I loved, with great Jesuit friends who kept me honest, prayed with me, and made me laugh. I was filled with gratitude for being a Jesuit. This happiness seemed almost too much for my heart to contain, and I wept for a time in the chapel, grateful yet unable to express this gratitude completely.

In the early morning, after Lauds, I wandered into the spacious sacristy, where a monk handed me a soft white alb and a gold stole made of crinkly raw silk. At Mass, when I was not listening to the

priest, my eyes wandered to the spot where Merton was ordained. I knew it well from old photographs.

Saturday breakfast was wonderful. Along with the best cheese I've ever eaten, the abbey also boasts the best oatmeal I've ever eaten. Kevin, Dave, and I walked through the fields across the street after breakfast. I told them how much I was enjoying myself. Kevin laughed. "Are we going to have to leave you here?"

That day we played hooky from our retreat and drove into nearby Bardstown, where many Catholics settled in the early 1800s, fleeing religious persecution in the East. Consequently, in the middle of Kentucky, towns have improbably Catholic names: St. Mary, St. Francis, Loretto. Even the Jesuits made it to Bardstown, founding St. Joseph College in the middle of town. (Those same Jesuits later moved to New York to begin Fordham University.)

We raced back in time for Vespers and supper. We decided to eat in the "speaking" dining room that night, although we worried that by doing so we would make the Jesuits look bad. "Who's going to know?" I asked.

Along with my meal I ate my words. Two of the monks were hosting guests in that dining room. "Great," whispered Kevin. "Now they'll tell the other monks how the Jesuits couldn't keep silent for two days." After dinner came another conference, this time on the gift of silence, and then Compline.

At the end of our three days, having followed the rhythm of the Trappists, I was starting to feel that perhaps the life of a monk would not suit me. It seemed as if we were in the chapel constantly (which was, of course, the point). As was customary on many of my retreats, my appreciation for the value of the "active" life had grown.

The next morning after Lauds at 5:45, we dragged our bags down to the guesthouse. Before we left, I remembered one more thing I

had to do, or rather, say. Something I had forgotten. I hurried over to Merton's grave, around the side of the monastery.

I looked down at the bright green grass and thought about Merton's strange, complicated, and contradictory life. And about my favorite lines from Walt Whitman, which come near the end of "Song of Myself":

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

I thought of everything I would like to say to Thomas Merton: That there was probably no other person other than Jesus so responsible for my vocation. That, thanks to his writings, I still carried within myself the pull toward the monastic life in the midst of an active world. That his life of contradictions and complexities helped me see that all of us, no matter how crazy our lives seem, can be holy. That he helped me understand what he called my "true self," the person I am before God, and the person I am meant to be. And that, though obviously flawed, he remained one of my great heroes.

But nothing seemed right. So I said simply, "Thanks," trusting that he knew all that I meant. And then I ran off to join my friends.