

Searching for Merton – In Death and in Life

By Edward C. Sellner

As the forty-fifth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton on December 10, 1968 approaches, I offer these personal reflections as a way, however inadequate, to honor the memory of a monk whose extensive spiritual writings and inter-religious dialogue continue to inspire so many, of every faith, across the globe.

All of my adolescent and adult life I have been influenced – and haunted – by this Cistercian monk and spiritual writer. I first read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*,¹ as a teen-ager, a gift from my mother who had received it from a Catholic book club at the time. It inspired me to pursue the vocation to religious life and to the priesthood. Living with a community in Fort Wayne, Indiana, after I was ordained, I visited Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky where Merton had lived for twenty-seven years before his sudden death in Bangkok, Thailand, on his first and what proved to be his last pilgrimage to Asia. I remember my first visit to the abbey, asking one of the Cistercian monks serving as guest master to visitors where Merton’s grave was, and then, after receiving directions, not being able to find it. Among all the simple white crosses, each looking exactly alike, I could find none with the words “Thomas Merton” inscribed on it. When I was told it was “Father Louis,” his monastic name, that I should have been looking for, I finally found it. I remember spending some quiet time there, telling him, in prayer, all that he meant to me. And I remember the feeling of happiness when, as a newly-ordained priest, I took my place at a concelebrated Mass in the abbey church with the Trappist monks and other visiting priests.

It was because of Merton – and Henri Nouwen, who himself had been inspired by Merton² – that I decided to seek a doctoral degree in theology at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. Nouwen inspired me to pursue pastoral theology as my major, and Merton, the history of Christian spirituality as a minor. I loved reading about the mystics with Professor William Storey and learning through Robert Taft, SJ about Eastern Orthodoxy and through John Dunne, CSC about the importance of “passing over” and “coming back,” as well as the similarities between Jesus, the Christ, and Buddha, the enlightened one. I was also learning about Jungian psychology and the world of dreams. With the help of Morton Kelsey and Fritz Pfotenhauer, a whole new world of the unconscious opened up to me. In one of a series of dreams I encountered Thomas Merton who in this dream acted as a guide. We seemed to be standing on a hillock, overlooking two stone buildings below us, one of which seemed deserted, with an empty interior and shattered glass, while the other, connected to similar structures nearby, forming a circle, looked firm and solidly built. Pointing to the uninhabited one, Merton said in my dream, “This is the church which didn’t adapt,” and then, pointing to the other, “This is the one open to the life of the Spirit.” It was about the time of the dreams that



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I had Merton's saying framed and placed on my desk: "If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians."³

After graduation from Notre Dame in the early 1980s, I was happy to be hired by the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota (now Saint Catherine University), to teach pastoral theology, Christian spirituality, Jungian psychology and spiritual direction, while administering a pastoral ministry certificate program, and eventually others. This was also the time when I began to pursue research and writing in Celtic spirituality, an area of interest of mine not only because of my Irish ancestry, but also because Merton had introduced me to that particular rich ecclesial and spiritual heritage years before in his writings. On a leave-of-absence from my teaching, I had the opportunity to research and write at the St. Theosevia Centre of Christian Spirituality in Oxford, England, with the help of Donald Allchin, a friend of Merton who encouraged me in my writing. We spent time talking about Merton, and Donald introduced me to other scholars in the area: Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG, Rowan Williams, Kallistos Ware and Esther de Waal. Upon my return to Minnesota, when one of my first books, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*,⁴ was published, I dedicated it to "Thomas Merton, my guide." I later had the honor of having articles I had written on the early Celtic church and its soul-friend tradition, originally published in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, reprinted in a series on Celtic spirituality that included Merton's own works.⁵

Merton continued to haunt my conscious life and dreams. In 1992, I contacted Brother Patrick Hart, who had been Merton's secretary and had endorsed my book on the Celtic saints, asking him if I might be able to spend some time in Merton's hermitage. He graciously assented. One rainy day in May, I arrived at Gethsemani Abbey, located a short distance outside of Bardstown, Kentucky. Brother Patrick drove me out into the hills near the monastery and let me spend the day in the hermitage alone. I was somewhat overwhelmed to be in Merton's landscape, standing in the same doorway where he had stood, looking over the valley, occupying (at least for a short time) his sacred space. I didn't accomplish a great deal that day, spending quite a bit of time in the morning trying to get damp wood started in the fireplace, and the afternoon seated at Merton's desk, looking out the wide window through which he had once watched birds, squirrels, deer and sky, praying and doing some writing on my own. I also took stock of his library and meticulously wrote down the list of books it contained, so many of them ones that I possessed and had read. Yes, I thought, Thomas and I have similar interests, particularly in the area of Christian spirituality. Quite frankly, I also wrestled with the temptation to steal one of them: the book by Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*,⁶ long out of print, which I had been attempting to find and purchase in one of many antiquarian book stores in Ireland. There it was, on Merton's shelf. He didn't need it anymore, I thought. Who would miss it? Who would know? And, besides, I wanted some memento or relic from my stay there that would remind me of my pilgrimage to his hermitage and the wonder of being seated at his desk.

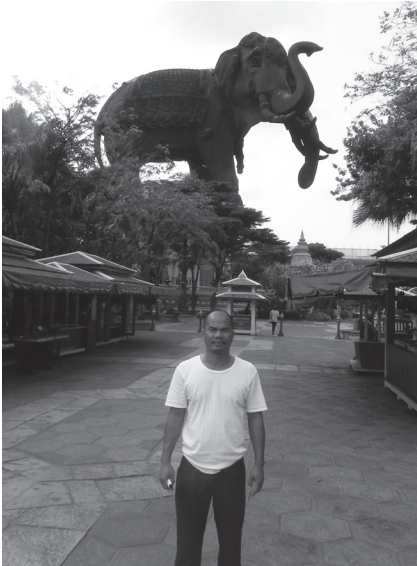
Rather than "borrowing" the book, I finally settled for a small red stone I found in the dirt outside, near the hermitage's front porch. Late in the afternoon, when Brother Patrick picked me up in the monastery's old battered pickup truck and started driving me back to the monastery, he looked at the briefcase I was carrying and then said somewhat suspiciously, "I have known some people to actually take things from the hermitage." Incredulously I replied, "I can't believe anyone would even think of doing that sort of thing!"

Returning to my teaching undergraduate and graduate students at St. Kate's, I continued to read Merton's extensive works and incorporate them into my classes and my own writings. He was the inspiration for one of my most recent books, *Finding the Monk Within*,⁷ written not only for those living in monasteries or convents but for the increasing number of lay people interested in aligning themselves with and being nurtured by monastic communities as lay oblates, associates, consociates and partners. I also increasingly found how relevant Merton's writings on other religions than Christianity were for my students, and, most of all, for myself. While I had for some time been interested in other religious traditions, especially the mystical side of them, it was the tragedy of 9/11 in this country that pushed me into becoming more serious about understanding not only Islam but the great Asian spiritual traditions, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Merton, of course, was a tremendous resource in those areas. Not only did I include some of his books, like *Mystics and Zen Masters*,⁸ *The Way of Chuang Tzu*⁹ and *The Asian Journal*¹⁰ in my courses. Increasingly I felt the desire to visit Asia, as he had done, and get to know it first-hand.

I set out to travel to Japan and China on two summer ventures, and then this past February, on a sabbatical when I began writing a book on how Zen Buddhism had changed the lives of two Catholic writers, Merton and Jack Kerouac, I made plans to visit Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand. Like Merton, I wanted to visit the temples and monasteries, and learn directly from Buddhist monks about their spirituality and prayer life. I also determined, while in Bangkok, to find the place where Merton had died. Before I left on this Asian pilgrimage, I called Brother Patrick at Gethsemani to find out if he knew where the Red Cross Center was located where the conference had been held at which Merton had given a major talk on "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" (*AJ* 326-43), and whether the cottage where he died still existed. Brother Patrick did not know the exact address of the Center nor whether the cottage was still standing forty-five years after Merton's death. He said I should look in Merton's *Asian Journal* for the address. When I found no specific mention of it,

I consulted with others, including my friend, theologian Michael Downey, but to no avail.

So, now, after eight days in Burma, I was in Bangkok, at the Holiday Inn in the heart of the city, a city I had first viewed in a movie on Merton's life decades ago.¹¹ No one, however, seemed to know anything about that Red Cross Center, and as hard as the hotel staff at the main desk searched the internet, no one could find an address. Only later did I discover that the name of the place had been changed, and the institution itself was now caring for elderly and physically-challenged patients. That first day in Bangkok, with no information to be found, I went to bed highly discouraged and depressed, wondering if my quest had come to naught. Sleep and, yes, prayer, however, seemed to help. The next morning I awakened with a new-found determination: after traveling thousands of miles, I was this close, I told myself, and I was not going to just give up, and sight-see! Praying to Thomas for guidance, as well as to my spiritual friend who had helped me over the years,



Bunthawee Jhanthasan ("Wee")

the bodhisattva Quan Yin, I experienced a new charge of energy and an inner voice of conviction: “You have to try; you cannot give up, after traveling so far on your quest; you must find a way.”

So, shortly after a light breakfast, I called the number of a taxi-driver whom I had first met ten days earlier on my overnight in Bangkok before leaving for Rangoon, Burma. He had taken me to the airport then to get the flight, and given me his card, telling me that he also acted as a guide if I was interested in seeing the city of Bangkok when I returned. His name on the card was Bunthawee Jhanthasan, but he went by the simpler name “Wee” (thank God!). He answered my call, and happily was available that day. By ten a.m. he had picked me up in the hotel lobby and, after shaking hands, I told him of my mission – not to see the tourist sites but first to find the site where a Christian monk had died. Yes, he looked a bit perplexed at first, but understood, I think, by the tone of my voice how important it was for me to find it. I told him that the hotel staff could find nothing on the internet, but that I had talked with a missionary on my earlier flight to Burma who informed me that there was a Red Cross hospital in the center of Bangkok. Surely, I said, if we went there, someone might know of the center I was looking for. Wee immediately took matters into his own hands, and drove us to that hospital, weaving in and out through Bangkok’s congested traffic, talked with the police outside the hospital when we arrived about allowing him to park his cab near the entrance, and then took me inside. We walked the halls, with Wee asking various people about such information, finally discovering an elderly nurse who knew what he was seeking. All of their conversation was in Thai, and the only thing I understood was that she could help. Wee told me she had identified the center and given him directions to it which he understood. I hugged the nurse, thanking her profusely in English and she only smiled and went back to her work. I, however, was ecstatic, filled with hope, and greatly relieved to know that Wee knew where he was going.

So for what seemed an eternity, we drove through endless traffic, until at last, after a few wrong turns (accompanied by looks of confusion on Wee’s face), we arrived at the entrance to the grounds of a large hospital complex, located in Samutprakan, a town some twenty-nine miles outside of Bangkok. The name on the sign over the front entrance was “Thai Red Cross Rehabilitation Center,” and not the “Sawang Kaniwat Conference Center” as it had originally been called when Merton spoke there. This was evidently the reason that it couldn’t be identified on the internet, and that most people, except of course the nurse in the Bangkok hospital, did not know how to find it. As we soon learned, however, having reached the center did not guarantee that we would locate the cottage where Merton died.

When we inquired of three nurses who were in the lobby of the main building where Cottage Two was located (I had found in my readings that this was the place where Merton had died), they



looked at us with bewilderment; it was, after all, almost forty-five years since Merton had been there, and these nurses were either children when he had been there or not yet born! They had no idea what Wee was asking them about! A monk, a dead American Christian monk named Thomas Merton? They had never heard of the man. Ask them, I told Wee, about Cottage Two. Did they know where the cottages could be found? Again, on their faces, a look of perplexity. And, then, out of the blue, the word, “bungalow” came to my lips. Did they know where *Bungalow* Two was located?

Ah, a smile came to their faces; that they knew, and told my patient driver how to find it.

Wee got me back in the cab, and we drove a short distance farther, pulling up in front of a dilapidated white cabin, greatly in need of paint. There was the Roman numeral two above its front door, now covered with Asian posters, and on each side of it were windows so dirty that one could hardly see in. Most disheartening, the door had a padlock on it, and was locked. Again, I thought, “Oh, my God, we have come this far and now we cannot get in!” Still wondering whether this was really the cottage where Merton had died (if there had been other cottages nearby, they were now gone), I began looking around the exterior to see if there was another entrance somewhere. Wee, however, called my attention to a woman, probably in her sixties, whom he had found not far from Cottage Two who, most amazingly, had told him that she had a key to the place.



Unlocking the front door, she led us into a large, open room, containing no furniture in it except for a wooden bed-frame, located near a front window; it was mostly just empty space, with a flight of steps on the left leading to what I later discovered was another expansive empty room upstairs. The room where we were standing on the main floor, bereft of anything but dust, had obviously



been unoccupied for some time. (Only upon my return to the States did I read how that large room had originally been divided into two rooms, one of which Merton occupied, and the other, another monk, while two more guests lived upstairs during the conference.) On the main floor, though, as I looked around, I noticed a bathroom with a toilet in it, and another room, near the steps, that was probably once a shower. Still, at this point, I continued to question whether this was really the place where Merton had died or whether we had somehow

been misled. Then Wee began translating for me the words of the woman, who was relating to him, “That room (the one next to the steps) was where the monk had showered, and here (she was pointing to an area on the bare floor), is where his body was found.” She knew this, she told him, because other pilgrims had come to this place, evidently wanting to know what I too had been seeking. She knew this, she said, because the hospital staff before her had told her the story of the monk and shown her the spot where his body had lain.

I was amazed, still disbelieving that this was where Thomas Merton had died – such a holy place, for me, yet so very ordinary – and so totally lacking in any sort of recognizable, identifiable sign. I had been on pilgrimages before to many different lands, with groups that I led, or by myself as a lone pilgrim. But all of them had churches, tombs, reliquaries, signs showing pilgrims where the holy





man or woman could be found and suitably honored. Here, there was only the dirty, concrete floor. While Wee and the woman talked, I stood at the spot where Merton had died so many years before. I stood, not knowing what to do, except to pray silently, with my hands folded, thanking the Holy One for bringing me here, after a lifetime of seeking Merton, and, close to tears, praying to Thomas, my guide and soul friend, thanking him for his words and his example that had so influenced my life and the lives of so many others.

Wee and the unknown woman (she wouldn't give me her name) respected my silent prayer, and when I was finished, she closed the door behind us and locked it once more.

Before we left the hospital grounds, I took some photos of Cottage Two and the surrounding site, appreciative of the flowers and bushes in bloom that added color to the landscape. And, as Wee and I drove away, the thought came to me that it seemed like some kind of testament to Merton that the hospital still left Cottage Two standing, while others around it seem to have disappeared. Someone must be aware that this is in fact a holy place, and that other pilgrims, like myself, might continue to come there to honor the memory of the dead Christian monk whom Buddhists would describe as a "Master," a great teacher, poet, spiritual guide.

The next two days in Bangkok were a wonderful adventure in discovering the rich history and culture of Thailand, touring with Wee as guide to many of the same places, such as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which Merton photographed¹² and described in his *Asian Journal* (see *AJ* 248-50). In retrospect, however, my visit to the cottage, the bungalow where Merton died, was the high point of my entire Asian pilgrimage. Carl Jung would have called the numerous seemingly chance encounters that eventually led me to finding the place "synchronicity." I would call it grace: how I first met Wee on my way to Burma and his offer to show me around when I returned to Bangkok; my conversation with the missionary on the plane who gave me information that led me to the one hospital in Bangkok that could help me the most; then Wee's finding the nurse who knew where the Red Cross Center was located; and, finally, and not least, encountering a woman outside Merton's cottage who had the key to let us in. And there was, of course, the nudge from within me to change the word "cottage" to "bungalow" which helped the nurses identify what I was looking for.



Wee in the hotel lounge.

When I returned to the hotel that evening, I thanked God once again for helping me find Merton's dying place and, of course, Thomas Merton himself and, yes, Quan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion. As Wee and I toasted to the events of the day in the hotel lounge, I thanked Wee too for his willingness to accommodate the desperate hopes of a pilgrim in finding a place made holy by another man's life. My Asian pilgrimage had reached its destination, and this day would live forever in my memory and my heart. Merton's own words came to mind, from a talk he gave in Calcutta,

India, two months before his sudden death: “there is something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person, the meditative person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life” (*AJ* 306). Thomas Merton, the monk, poet, and writer, was such a man.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
2. See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Pray to Live – Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides/Claretian, 1972).
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 12.
4. Edward Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1993).
5. Edward Sellner, “A Common Dwelling: Soul Friendship in Early Celtic Monasticism,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 29.1 (1994) 1-21; “Songs of Praise: Early Celtic Hagiographies and Their Spirituality,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 31.2 (1996) 153-80 (both included in a reprint booklet of three *CSQ* articles on Celtic Spirituality).
6. Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
7. Edward Sellner, *Finding the Monk Within* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008).
8. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967).
9. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
11. *Merton: A Film Biography*, a film by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn (1985).
12. See the front cover of this issue.