

Jack Kelly, GIVING UP EVERYTHING

Run to the mountain;
 Shed those scales on your eyes
 That hinder you from seeing God.
 Dante, *Purgatorio*, II, 7

The above quotation opens *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, Volume One of the Journals of Thomas Merton. And it tells in just a few words the story that emerges as we wander through the pages of this new and revealing book of Merton's thoughts and musings during his pre-monastery years. We're with him when he lives on Perry Street in New York; we travel with him during his Cuban adventure; and we join him on the Erie Lackawanna Railroad to Olean where he taught at St. Bonaventure University.

I read *The Seven Storey Mountain* when I was a teenager. I remember telling someone that I had not committed a sin since. My jocular comment gave me a spirited sense of self-aggrandizement. Then I forgot about Merton. As the years went by, I dipped into his latest works, but found them too "spiritual" or too "holy." I did not share his zeal for God. Catholicism was a club I'd resigned from in my twenties. I respected his choice but by being raised Catholic I felt and saw the narrow and provincial attitudes it provoked in me and my contemporaries. "If Jesus were to return today, he wouldn't be *welcome* in the Catholic Church," one



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 with Robert Lax & Marcia Kelly

elderly Episcopal priest pointed out to me. “There’s nothing wrong with Christianity,” he continued, “It’s just that it’s never been tried!” I didn’t disagree. One of those endless puzzles that never gets solved. Occasionally there would be an insight such as Lincoln Steffens’ fable of a man who climbed to the top of a mountain and seized hold of the truth. Satan had directed that he be followed and when the worried demon reported the man’s success — that he had seized hold of the truth — Satan was unconcerned. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I’ll tempt him to institutionalize it.”

In the late 1980s, through a series of coincidences, my wife and I became involved in writing books which took us to more than 250 monasteries, abbeys, and retreats in the United States, places of kinds of spiritual beliefs: Catholic, Buddhist, Protestant, Hindu, New Age, Yogic, even one Essene health farm in Baja, California. Early in our pilgrimage, we visited a Sufi retreat. Their brochure quoted Thomas Merton: “We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out how to do them the most good.” Very appropriate quote for a retreat brochure, I thought, but what was Merton doing in a *Sufi* brochure? That was just the beginning.

We found Merton everywhere. There are dozens of retreats that offer a series of discussion on his writings on an annual basis. One retreat house has a wing where every room is named after a saint or spiritual celebrity, thus the Thomas Merton Room. Another retreat has a complete tape library of available words he recorded. A southern retreat offers a program examining mystics: Meister Eckardt, Teresa of Avila, and Thomas Merton. And on and on. I became even more interested when I realized my cavalier approach was totally inappropriate, especially when my coauthor and I sought out quotations for our first two books, ones that were provocative and insightful and that matched our feeling of spiritual unity. A perfect passage came from *The Asian Journal*: “When I said that St. Paul was attacking religious alienation, I meant that really he meant very seriously what he said about “There is no longer Jew or Gentile. There is no longer Asian or European for the Christian.’ So while being open to Asian cultural things of value and using them, I think we also have to keep in mind the fact that Christianity and Buddhism, too, in their original purity, point beyond all divisions between this and that.”

This opened up a totally new vista of spiritual understanding to me. Thinkers like Thomas Merton who supercede institutions is what gives them an ecumenical appeal. They don’t tell us what to *do*, they tell us how to *be*!

This phenomenon, Father Louis, wrote within cloistered walls and sent a message of spirituality that reached across all oceans and over fences and walls behind which dogma and doctrine and property are hidden. He tells us in *Run to the Mountain* of his efforts at wrestling with his own demons, emulating Dante who “. . . started by praying to achieve a much higher kind of writing” and then later “perhaps it’s easier to write well of difficulty — the hard climb of the mountain of purgatory — than the swift and breathtaking . . . movement through the nine spheres of heaven.”

His prose is at times breathtaking and this beautifully edited and organized book gives us a chance to look at this energetic and forceful youth as he grapples with dilemmas we all face sooner or later. The young man who wrote, “After the things I have done for so long my head is full of crap! Half the images and most of the language that occurs to me is scatological, because I have been in all that up to the neck, wallowing around rather weakly, claiming to know myself . . .” *gave up everything*, joined the Trappists and emerged as the measured clear thinker I admire as much as anyone. I’m grateful to have the treasure of these Journals. The clarity of his thinking sets me free.