

## Looking for Faith in All the Wrong Places

Review of  
*Running to the Mountain: A Journey of Faith and Change*  
 by Jon Katz

New York: Villard, 1999  
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Reviewed by **Bob Grip**

Don't be misled by the title of Jon Katz' autobiographical reflection, *Running to the Mountain*. It is not a sequel to *Run to the Mountain*, which was the title Brother Patrick Hart gave to the first volume of the Merton Journals. Neither is it primarily about Merton, though he does appear prominently on the book's dust cover. It is, rather, another item in the series of personal interpretations of Merton's work which have become popular in the past few years. It might be considered an example of Merton's influence on the Post-Christian Era, espousing the kind of religionless spirituality that will no doubt be featured on an upcoming edition of The Oprah Winfrey Show.

Katz is a former Executive Producer of the CBS Morning News who gave up television for a career as a writer. He guides us through his life as a man suffering through mid-life crisis, turning to Merton for guidance and renewal. Just as Merton longed for the time he could leave everyday life in the monastery proper for his hermitage, Katz dreams of fleeing his carpool, albeit temporarily, for his own retreat, which turns out to be a "handyman's dream," overrun by mice, high in the Adirondack Mountains of northern New York. Katz' wife, who must be a saint, allows him to fulfill his dream of moving for weeks at a time to live a solitary life, accompanied only by two dogs, his Powerbook, and a sack full of Merton books.

Katz had been intrigued by Merton ever since reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a ninth grader and writing to Merton at Gethsemani (a letter that was never answered). As Katz sees it: "He left the world behind, the better to seek God, and I had left God behind, the better to deal with the world" (*Running* 64). Katz admires Merton's determination to find his true identity, but sees the true Merton as a bitter, unhappy man, in contrast to the public Merton portrayed in many of his books. Katz believes that if Merton set out to share contemplation with the rest of the world, he failed: "The real tragedy of Thomas Merton, it seemed to me, was that he made spirituality seem inaccessible even while exploring it so

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ceaselessly and courageously himself. If you weren't a monk, sacrificing yourself to God, working silently in the garden, falling to the floor to say psalms, how could you possibly be holy?" (*Running* 194).

Still, Katz feels Merton had helped his own journey: "I had come to the mountain feeling [Merton] inspired me to make the trip, and I returned understanding that his abiding faith had helped me fashion my own" (*Running* 236). Katz finds faith – in himself, as a writer.

We each have our own Merton. Katz prefers his, secular. With so many people "searching," but not finding what they need through traditional religion, Katz's book may be a harbinger of the kind of Merton-related writing we will see in the future.

Perhaps that is a sign of the strength of Merton's life and work. He continues to appeal not only to Catholics, but to people with marginal or no religious affiliation at all, encouraging them to explore their own interior lives in an attempt to improve them.

*Running to the Mountain* liberally quotes Merton, stretching the "fair use" of Merton's material almost to the breaking point. Still, as an autobiographical essay on the challenges and questions facing all of us approaching middle age, it is an entertaining and honest look at the life of a man searching for greater meaning and purpose in his life.

Finally, contrast what Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation* – "Instead of worshipping God through His creation we are always trying to worship ourselves by means of creatures. But to worship our false selves is to worship nothing. And the worship of nothing is hell" (26) – to what Katz finds in his conclusion: "What I could do – actually, all I could do – was have faith in me" (*Running* 212).