

“Going Home to Where I Have Never Been”: Thomas Merton’s Flight toward Joy

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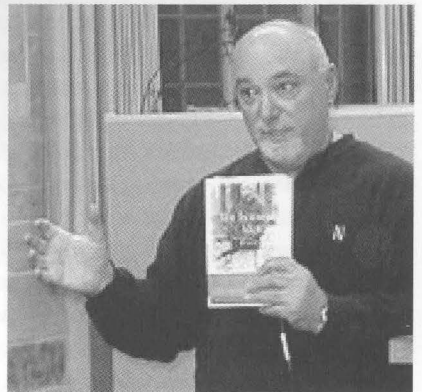
By **Jonathan Montaldo**

*“Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man is homeless” (Mt. 8:20).*

As a mere boy I took up reading Thomas Merton and I still have breath to name the good his text has worked in me. Merton’s writing remains perennially medicinal for my soul’s pathologies. It opens my heart’s inner ear. It unlocks my mind. It underscores my unfinishedness. He discomforts and goads me onward. Merton’s text commands me to pack my bags again to search for higher ground where I can more clearly discern the call to another country, that “hidden ground of love” with all my neighbors. Merton’s counsel always commands me to light whatever oil I can and to catch up with the company of those who are staying awake.

Merton’s literary voice has a different pitch for each reader who brings unique life experiences to the act of appropriating his text. My reading of Merton cannot precisely match yours. So my reflections on Merton this evening bear only the existential authority of someone who, like you, has wrestled with a messenger who has maimed him. I am in that large cadre of his readers for whom explicating Merton’s text is never merely an academic exercise.

I confess I have burnt bundles of incense in my time to the romantic concept of monastic life Merton formed in me, but I never lit a candle to the person behind Merton’s “literary voice.” I have never envied friends who made their ways to Gethsemani and had fifteen minutes in his presence. I never thought it might be great to shake his hand or look into his eyes, even in the beginning of my adolescent encounter with his books, and for certain, now in my late fifties, I wouldn’t travel far to touch his souvenirs. I have only loved Merton’s text as it held a mirror to my own life’s text, as his personal struggles



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helped me to identify the good and bad angels that contend for my own heart. Merton's text is my life's "elder." I am always consulting it with the questions, "Give me a word for my salvation" and "What is it I should do?"

In my reading of his text, particularly in his personal journals, Merton makes no appearance as a "spiritual master." Everything about his literature of "confession and witness" for me belies a sense of "mastery." Like many a writer before him and since, he did produce epiphanies of beauty and he certainly, in W. H. Auden's words, "lit an affirming flame" for his contemporaries. But his journals confess him as always being in the dark, always on the road, and co-dependent on God's mercy to him in all things. I find in Merton's journals everywhere the traces of his "compassionate transparency." He wrote journals after *The Seven Storey Mountain* to undermine his guru status and expose for his readers the self-deceits that inhabited his heart's dark cellar rooms.

The Merton Room at Bellarmine College opened for business in 1963. Merton himself helped establish this official archive where researchers can examine every jot and tittle of his last remains. If Merton left behind enough confessions in his journals for 1966 alone, so that no one reading them could clothe him unambiguously in the saffron robes of a "spiritual master," I remind us that Merton himself supervised the demolition of his public image. Here is the Merton who matters most to me now, the monk who made transparent for himself and any future reader his anguished struggles with competing, conflicted desires. Merton's personal integrity and transparency in his later journals is evangelical and missionary. "I am thrown into contradiction," he wrote in his journal for 1966. "I am thrown into contradiction: to realize it is mercy, to accept it is love, to help others do the same is compassion."¹ Merton might have us appreciate him in the same way that Merton's friend, the medieval scholar Eleanor Shipley Duckett appreciated the Irish wandering monks – all males – in the Middle Ages. Duckett offers us a solid approach to Merton when she writes of her approach to studying monks who went into exile to find their place to await the Lord's resurrection:

[W]e are not concerned at the moment with miracles done by holy men through beast or bird or elements of Nature. Rather, with the aid of modern scholarship, we shall look here at our saints in their lives as human beings, in their failures and their successes, in their struggles, their disappointments, their problems; at saints not yet canonized, saints in the making seen, as far as possible, in the light of their own words and against the history of their times; men angry, worried, homesick, men happy and full of hope, always moving forward.²

Merton's tears saved him. The ruin of his holiness project³ was his fortune. On the vigil of his fiftieth birthday he wrote that what he had found most in his whole life was *illusion*: he had wanted to be something – a monk, and then a hermit – of which he had formed a concept.⁴ Read one way, his life is a gradual exorcism from these idealized self-concepts and hallucinatory abstractions as to who he truly was. By learning through hard experience to accept his "unaccepted self,"⁵ Merton was always chiseling through to the person who he more deeply was: his "true self," that poor and fragile human being hidden under a beautiful white cowl. Walking the rocky, curved road of his monastic life, he struggled toward a more authentic place where he could finally kneel and wait for a mercy that he knew he could never bequeath to himself.

Merton's heart was pilgrim. He loved an unexplored road. He relished turning his book of journals to its next blank page so as to record another new line of his next moment's yearning to be born again. New paragraph after new paragraph, page after page, he exulted to make another raid on

his unspeakable joy, to hope that his ascended Lord Jesus would descend and be born again for him and within him through the lines of his life's next chapter.

Merton in his journals revealed himself as someone who always prepared himself to depart. By personal temperament and by grace, Merton was unwilling to arrive and take up house with only partial answers to his heart's largest questions. He resisted the hardening of arteries that results from a too facile acceptance of corporate "wisdom." Against all dogmatism, Merton deployed a protest of active, questioning engagement. He had an existential necessity to admire holy fools and vagabonds like Saint Benedict Joseph Labre.⁶ His artist father Owen gave him the genes to be peripatetic. His life's true hero was the pilgrim poet in exile on the island of Patmos, his best friend Robert Lax. Merton admired and loved these examples of the untidily disestablished. They modeled for him what it meant to live on the margins of corporate cultures that are endemically narrow and non-inclusive. Merton always sought out less secure landscapes so as to become, like his heroes, a more thoroughly catholic human being. "The country which is nowhere," he confided to his journals on May 30, 1968, "is the real home."⁷

Merton's journal-writing appropriated his monk's task of keeping vigil and "staying awake." Writing journals helped him remove, over and over again, anything that diverted his attention from keeping his mind's eye on the horizon of the next moment. The very next moment might reveal in light or in shadow the presence of the Beloved. He wrote journals to open his ears for the unexpected epiphany of God's voice. To write journals for Merton was to "bless the continuing stutter of the Word being made into flesh" (a phrase I'm borrowing from Canadian poet Leonard Cohen).⁸ What "word stuttering to be made flesh" might not sound in him and find its way to his next page? What new word might not arrive to his heart and bid him, "Come out to the new land that I will show you?"

Merton's need to journey forward to an unknown landscape that could become a new home has echoes of T. S. Eliot, who in "Little Gidding" surmised that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."⁹ But Merton's notion of "going home" was not a going back to the past or to an enlightened rediscovery of origins. Going home for Merton meant going forward from and out of his past experiences. Going home meant emptying his heart of any hardened concepts of who he thought he was. While going home for Merton did indeed mean accepting gratefully all that he had been and all the persons life had given him, his road to Grace's House would always mean transcending everything that was past by offering everything in eucharist to the "One Who is coming and Who makes all things new."

Merton's progress toward home was always about taking the next uncertain step. He never knew where he was going but he could not rest from following the scent of the Truth that ran ahead of him. He expressed this deepest destiny to be pilgrim and journey forward toward God in his journals for March 1961:

One thing very clear after Mass: the "return to the Father."

The nonentity and insufficiency of all other concerns.

A going clear out of the midst of all that is transitory and inconclusive. The return to the Immense, the Primordial, the Unknown, to Him who loves, to the Silent, to the Holy, to the Merciful, to Him Who is All.

The misdirectedness, the folly, the inanity of all that seeks anything but this great return, the whole meaning and heart of all existence.

The absurdity of movements, of the goals that are not ultimate, the purposes

that are “ends of the line” and therefore do not even begin.

To return is not to “go back” in time, but a going forward, a going beyond to retrace one’s steps is nothing on top of nothing, vanity of vanities, a renewal of the same absurdity twice over, in reverse.

To go beyond everything, to leave everything and press forward to the End and to the Beginning, to the ever new Beginning that is without End.¹⁰

As his plane lifted off from San Francisco’s airport in October 1968, carrying him toward Asia, he wrote into his journal most poignantly his paradoxical notion that “going home” was a going forward to what he had never known as “home”: “I am going home,” he wrote, “to the home where I have never been in this body, where I have never been in this washable suit . . . where I have never been with these suitcases . . . where I have never been with these particular books” (*OSM* 205-206).

I want to pay attention to these phrases that are among his last words and testament upon leaving America toward Bangkok and death. I knew I had heard them before and that, somewhere in his journals, Merton had prefigured this axial departing in 1968. Somewhere in his journals Merton had rehearsed his leaving America, a leave-taking that I am about to construe as having been his “death in the Spirit before he died.” I found this foreshadowing nine years earlier in his journals for 1959.

The year 1959 contained a moment of crisis for Merton. After years of wondering whether or not he should leave Gethsemani and pursue a more solitary monastic life elsewhere, perhaps as a Carthusian or as a monk of Camadoli, Merton had finally in 1959 officially requested Rome to allow a change of his stability from Gethsemani to a small experimental monastery in Cuernavaca, Mexico under the leadership of the Benedictine Gregorio Lemerrier. In his journals for the summer and fall of 1959, Merton described his need to go into exile from what he called Gethsemani’s “mothering hills,” a potent image that signaled his need to be reborn out of – to abandon the womb of – and thus to die to – his Gethsemani experience:

June 16, 1959

It is impossible to say what I ought to do. The situation is so vague and everything is uncertain. Is there any hope of obtaining an indult from Rome in the first place? It would be disastrous to stir up a great official fuss and then have nothing come of it.

More and more I realize that what I am really seeking is a spiritual and mystical action – which may need an exterior act, a geographic change, to make it really complete. But there is no hope that a legal act can solve a spiritual problem. It can only clear the way, perhaps (*SS* 295).

August 18, 1959.

What do I need? Hard question to answer. . . .

I need something beyond my capacity to know. If I call it solitude, I mistake it. Silence, a primitive life.

What I need – as far as I can interpret the desire in my heart, is to make a journey to a primitive place, among primitive people, and there die. It is at the same time a going out and a “return.” A going to somewhere where I have never been or thought of going – a going in which I am led by God, a journey in which I go out from everything I now have. And I feel that unless I do this my spiritual life

is at an end. Unfortunately, this obscure drive is not recognized by theologians and directors. Certainly it is “nature.” But is there no grace in it and with it? I do not know. It is an anxious and imperious thing . . . call it “acting out.” I am going to have to act out something like this – it would not be healthy not to. The woods, for the time being, make some such ritual possible here. . . .

What do I need? . . . Seriously I need silence, thought, solitude, to enter into myself to see and touch reality, to live the contemplative life (SS 318).

September 22, 1959.

The one thing necessary is a true interior and spiritual life, true growth, on my own, in depth, in a new direction. Whatever new direction God opens up for me. My job is to press forward, to grow interiorly, to pray, to break away from attachments and to defy fears, to grow in faith, which has its own solitude, to seek an entirely new perspective and new dimension in my life. To open up new horizons at *any* cost. To desire this and let the Holy Spirit take care of the rest. But really to desire this and *work* for it (SS 331-32).

October 6, 1959.

The train whistle in the valley reminds me of the first day I came here – the first day we worked, on a grey afternoon like this, in St. Edmund’s field. And my gratitude. It is the same gratitude and the same vocation. What has died in my spirit and my vocation here lately has come back to life. I feel at last that I can grow and move forward, and that all life has not been stamped out of my heart.

A remarkable letter . . . from Louis Massignon, about Indian art and its expression of suffering and the sacrifice of the heart which terrified me [in the past]. There is a great mystery here. I am not going forward to an easy life in Mexico, or to an easy death either. This is precisely what makes me *happy* – the first real taste of happiness in a long time! (SS 335-36).

November 15, 1959.

Was going to write another note to [Cardinal] Larraona, but perhaps there is no point to it. The embarrassing thing is that there is nothing external I can do that has any point. Just sit still and pray and hope in God. It is one of those occasions when one sees how great a thing is spiritual hope and how much more important than action. I still fully trust that I can get the indult. If I don’t get it this time – then later. . . .

For the rest, I am not angry, just tired and disgusted.

I will keep working at my own inconsistencies, my own failings, seek truth, an honest solution – getting out of this immoral and hypocritical mess of a cheese factory – honestly seeking solitude (SS 343).

November 21, 1959.

[A]fter Mass, suddenly it dawned on me – the first real ray of the sun – that I

will soon actually be going to fulfill a very ancient and very deep desire. It is still difficult to believe. The first stirring before a man awakens from a long sleep – a long, long sleep.

November 23, 1959.

After dinner, looked out at the hills and woods and realized with a shock that perhaps within two weeks I will have seen them for the last time in my life.

This thing is like death, but it must be so.

It hardly seems possible – never seeing the woods again. Other woods will not be the same. The strangeness, the exile, the essential. I must be quite determined about that and not let myself be held prisoner emotionally by the soft embrace of this “mother” – this silent, gentle, circle of hills that has comforted me for eighteen years and whose secrets I have come to know. . . .

That is the one thing that will really hurt. Making up my mind, adjusting my mind to this requires real determination, in the psalms especially. But it is a necessary “death,” a detachment from one of the few things I really love deeply and purely. . . .

Yet I prefer to die this way before dying in truth (SS 347).

Merton’s longing to enact a “necessary death” by leaving Gethsemani for Mexico in 1959 was only a rehearsal. His request to change his stability was denied and he obeyed the official injunction to stay put. But his wanting to leave Gethsemani for Mexico in 1959 was a foreshadowing of the pass-over that was to come nine years later in 1968. I have quoted lengthily from his journals because I can find no other way to underline this classic Mertonian theme of his realizing that he must “die before he died,” as the Sufis say, and go forth into exile from everything he had known that kept him complacent and comfortable. Becoming comfortable and complacent was a daily temptation. For Merton complacency was an obstacle to theological maturity as he settled down in safe, although spiritual, diversions and thus forgot the Living God.

I now want to juxtapose Merton’s journal entries for 1959 with those journals he wrote months before his death in Bangkok, at the time of his departure from Louisville in September 1968, and then at the time of his departure from San Francisco toward Asia in October. Reading these journals I am entertaining the notion that Merton’s electrocution on December 10 was in fact only a postscript. In my reading, Merton begins entering his “death throes in the Spirit” on September 11, 1968 when, on the first leg of his flight toward Asia, his plane lifted away from Louisville:

September 11, 1968.

Quiet in O’Hare. Gate G5. Waiting TWA to Albuquerque. Not in clericals.

Peace. Over the dirty cotton quilt that covered Indiana and Illinois.

When we left Louisville: talking to a nice Negro hostess who had approached me saying, “Are you a philosopher?”

I did not see Louisville fall away – into its own semi-darkness.

The tensions of the night before. The noises. The shouts in the red den full of organ music. Finished, thank God. Was any of it my fault? Perhaps. Tommie O’C. and I tongue-lashed each other sadistically, all in “fun,” and I won. She ended up crying. It was no good.

So now that lies under the dirty [indecipherable] sludge of clouds, the blue sea full of drifting snow, cloud-floes. And the big brown-green river makes south.

Best exit: through the Brahanarandra – or Foramen of Monro¹¹

Importance of *Tibetan Book of Dead* – the “clean passage,” direct, into a new space or area of existence – even in one’s “this present” life – clean unclogged steps into more maturity.

I stepped through a big mudhole [last night]. Like escaping through the window of a toilet (*OSM* 171).

If this ascent inside his plane from Louisville, as he read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, was construed by Merton as his escaping through a gap in his experience (the technical term in Tibetan is *bardo*, a liminal experience of being suspended between two different states of consciousness), his ascent from San Francisco in October signaled a much cleaner breakthrough and a passage to a state of “dying before he died in truth” that would transfigure him:

October 15, 1968.

There was a delay getting off the ground at San Francisco: the slow ballet of big tailfins in the sun. Now here. Now there. A quadrille of planes jockeying for place on the runway.

The moment of take-off was ecstatic. The dewy wing was suddenly covered with rivers of cold sweat running backward. The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground – I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around.

May I not come back without having settled the great affair. And found also the great compassion, *mahakaruna*. We tilted east over the shining city. There was no mist this morning. All the big buildings went by. The green parks. The big red bridge over the Golden Gate. Muir Woods, Bodega Bay, Point Reyes, and then two tiny rock islands. And then nothing. Only blue sea.

I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body, where I have never been in this washable suit (washed by Sister Gerarda the other day at the Redwoods), where I have never been with these suitcases (in Bangkok there must be a katharsis of the suitcases!), where I have never been with these particular books, Evans-Wentz’s *Tibetan Yoga* and *Secret Doctrines* and the others (*OSM* 205-206).

In an essay on the function of solitude in the tradition of the desert fathers in his book *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton provided a gloss on what his spiritual act of “dying before you died” might mean. It is especially in periods of prolonged solitude that the monk, he wrote, is emptied of all idealized self-concepts so that “the true inner dimensions of his own being, at once ‘real’ and ‘unreal’” might be discovered. As he further explained:

The conviction of one’s “self” as a static, absolute and invariable reality undergoes a profound transformation [in solitude] and dissolves in the burning light of an altogether new and unsuspected awareness. In this awareness we see that our “reality” is not a firmly established ego-self already attained that merely has to be

perfected, but rather that we are a “nothing,” a “possibility” in which the gift of creative freedom can realize itself by its response to the free gift of love and grace. This response means accepting our loneliness and our “potentiality” as a gift and a commission, as a *trust* to be used – as a “talent,” in the language of the parables. Our existence is then at once terrible and precious because radically it belongs not to us but to God. Yet it will not be fully [God’s] unless we freely make it “ours” and then offer it to [God] in praise. This is what Christian tradition means by “obedience to the Word of God.” The monk must learn this for himself.¹²

On October 15, mounting higher over the Pacific from San Francisco, almost two months before he would walk barefoot before the stone sculpture of the dying Buddha at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon, Merton was “returning to the Father” at jet speed. He had left all known homes for a new home his “body” never knew. Wombed within a jet, his heart an egg being carried inside a glistening “metallic cherub,” Merton’s mind was morphing out of his old known selves. Even this “metallic cherub” carrying him away from America was being morphed: his jet became a new whale that bore him forth to a final passing-over that, unlike the unwilling Jonas of the Bible, Merton now desired with all his heart to undergo. He was happy, enclosed within the jet as it swam him up through clouds moist with what Merton projected to be their joyful “tears.”

If I were writing the screenplay for a movie of Merton’s life, I would bring the movie to its close on his lift-off from San Francisco. There would be a close-up shot of his face through the jet’s window as he looked past the “shining courses of water” streaking its glass. The next shot would focus on the book open on Merton’s lap. The camera would then slowly rise to his face as he looks down to take up the book and read. The camera remains on Merton’s face as we hear his voice reading to himself from the sermon of Epiphanius on “Christ’s Descent into Hell” from the Gospel of Nicodemus.¹³ We hear Merton reading to himself the arriving Christ’s injunctions as he summons humanity’s parents out of hell:

I am your God who, for your sake, has become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleepers, to awake. I did not create you to be held prisoners in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person, and we cannot be separated.

At this moment the camera would shift above Merton’s jet and then angle behind the plane to remain stationary to watch the plane’s ascent. As the main music rises, and as the plane disappears, Merton’s voice is heard again as he continues his reading:

Rise, let us leave this place. . . . The throne formed by the cherubim awaits you. . . . The bridal chamber is ready, the eternal dwelling place is prepared, and the treasure house of all good things lies open. [Rise and come forth, my beloved] to the kingdom of heaven [that I have] prepared for you from all eternity.

Now the jet has disappeared. Only blue sky fills the camera’s lens whose eye has become vacant of all horizons and geography.¹⁴ We stare together through a landscape both void and full, as the music fades, the scene is cut, one monk’s story ends, and the credits roll.

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- 1 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 355.
- 2 Eleanor Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages* (1959; New York: W. W. Norton, 1964) 17.
- 3 My proximate source for the phrase “holiness project” is Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 4 See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 198.
- 5 Merton writes: “[I]t is the unaccepted self that stands in my way – and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted.” See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 220-21; subsequent references will be cited as “SS” parenthetically in the text.
- 6 Merton writes: “There is something in my nature that makes me dream of being a tramp.” See Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 275.
- 7 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 110; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.
- 8 Leonard Cohen, “The Window,” *Recent Songs* (CBS Records [CK 36264]: 1979) track 3.
- 9 T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets,” *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) 145.
- 10 Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 101.
- 11 The Foramen Magna is the opening in the base of the skull through which the brain stem extends as it becomes the spinal cord.
- 12 Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 281-82.
- 13 “An Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday,” attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca*, 43:439 ff. A substantial excerpt from the homily may be found in *Liturgy of the Hours according to the Roman Rite*, vol. 2 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976) 496-98.
- 14 “Geography comes to an end, / Compass has lost all earthly north, / Horizons have no meaning / Nor roads an explanation.” Thomas Merton, “Sacred Heart 2,” *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 24.