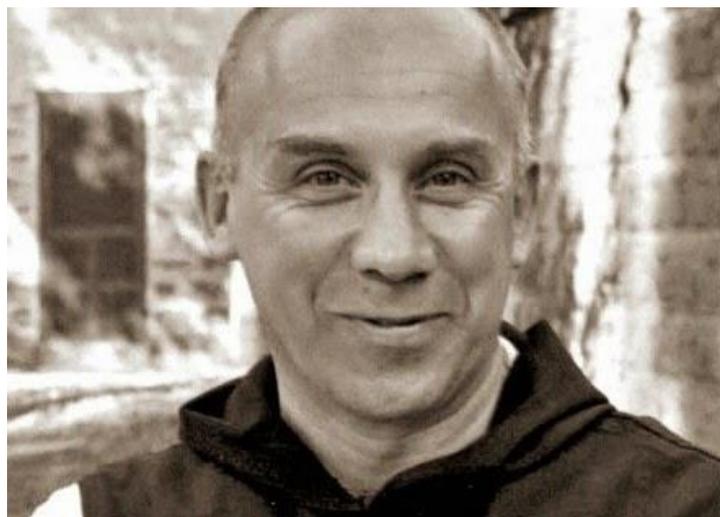


THOMAS MERTON THE ARC AND INSIGHTS OF A MODERN CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNEY



“He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people... Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.” - Pope Francis, address to Joint Session of Congress SEPTEMBER 24, 2015

Agenda

1:30	Gather
1:40	Silence, Opening Prayer and Initial sharing
2:00	Conference 1: What you should say is that you want to be a saint. Early influences. From Worldly Loss to Despair to a Beginner’s Hope in God
2:30	Conference 2: My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. Through Darkness into Light, Healing and Opening to a deep encounter with God and loving others.
3:00	Break
3:15	Conference 3: It was like waking from a dream of separateness. The Prophet speaks out to serve the world.
3:45	Conference 4: The things that are on the surface are nothing, what is deep is the Real. Opening dialogue on experiencing God.
4:15	Final Comments and Discussion
4:30	Closing Prayer and Adjourn

Opening Prayer

“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 that 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 will I 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.” Amen! – Thoughts in Solitude

Introductions

1. Name
2. What is your background and interests with Thomas Merton?
3. What would you like to get out of today?

What characterizes the Christian Contemplative Spiritual Journey?

The Contemplative Spiritual Journey is about seeing more clearly and then discerning action from that greater clarity.



There's movement, change and overlap. You revisit the same places but with a deeper/clearer understanding.

Living and noticing Life – (Extraordinary and Ordinary) Experiences, questions (not so much answers) and paradoxes.

Relationship is foundational - with God and others.

Who is Thomas Merton?

- Catholic/Christian Monk
- Spiritual Master
- Contemplative/Mystic
- Prophet/Activist
- Pioneer in Interreligious Dialogue/Understanding

Characteristics of Merton's Authentic Self:

- Lifelong Seeker of Truth which he found in God
- An omnivorous intellect
- A Continually Restless and Driven Soul, always anxious to get on with something new
- A Writer and Artist
- Drawn to Solitude
- Draws life from People and Community (Paradox with Solitude)
- Drawn to nature

What characterized the world of Merton?

- Global conflict / war / violence and the threat of global destruction
- Business greed
- Technology becoming increasingly important
- Emergence of multicultural / multi-faith world and unbelief
- Social Justice /
- Civil Rights, Racial Hatred and Bigotry
- Selfishness and Separation
- Distraction, Anxiety and Separation from the natural world

Some Thomas Merton quotes to frame today:

Attending to Experience is vital:

"Every moment and every event in every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. " – Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 1961

God wants a deep relationship with each of us:

"Whatever I may have written, I think all can be reduced in the end to this one truth, that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ" Thomas Merton - November 1963

Our questions, more than our answers, define us and our journey:

"What a man truly is can be discovered only through his self-awareness in a living and actual world... I do not have clear answers to current questions. I do have questions, and, as a matter of fact, I think a man is known better by his questions than by his answers. To make know one's questions is, no doubt, to come out in the open oneself." - Preface to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1966

Merton loved to write; it was like oxygen for him. He eventually made it an integral part of his monastic vocation which, in 1949, he describes in the *Sign of Jonas*:

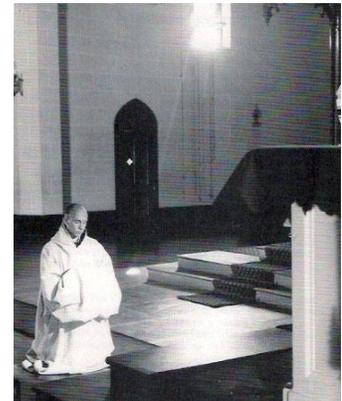
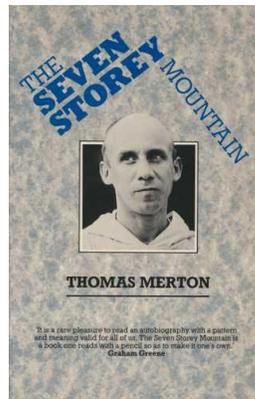
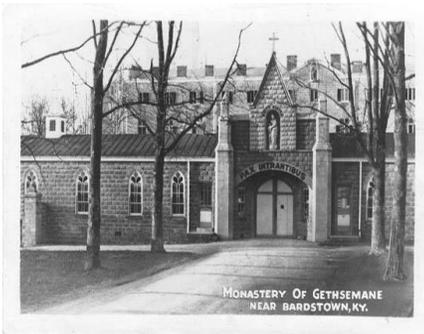
To be as good a monk as I can be, and to remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issue: this is very hard because I am all mixed up in illusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down. But without exaggeration, repetition, useless emphasis. To be frank without being boring: it is a kind of crucifixion. Not a very dramatic or painful one. But it requires much honesty that is beyond my nature. It must come somehow from the Holy Spirit.

A complete and holy transparency; living, praying, and writing in the light of the Holy Spirit, losing myself entirely by becoming public property just as Jesus is public property in the Mass. Perhaps this is an important aspect of my priesthood—my living of my Mass: to become as plain as a Host in the hands of everybody. Perhaps it is this, after all, that is to be my way to solitude. One of the strangest ways so far devised, but it is the way of the Word of God. – *The Sign of Jonas*

Conference 1 (1915 – 1949) – 34 years

What you should say is that you want to be a saint.

From Worldly Loss to Despair to a Beginner's Hope in God



Written Sources for this part of his life:

- The Seven Storey Mountain – Merton's autobiography up to 1944
- The Sign of Jonas (Parts 1 – 4; 1946 - 1949)

Highlights:

- **Born in France during World War 1 on January 31 1915**, parents were Artists (mother Ruth Jenkins was an American Quaker and father Owen Merton was an Anglican from New Zealand. Owen was a landscape painter.
- **Moves to Long Island, NY in August 1915**
- **Losses his family throughout the years**
 - **Mother dies from cancer when he was 6 (1921)**

- **Father dies from brain tumor when he was 16 (1931)**
- **Maternal Grandfather dies in 1936**
- **Only Brother dies in World War II in 1943**
- **His Friends, Trappist Community, Catholic Faith and the World become his family.**
- Chaos (after age 6, he began to experience less and less stability)
 - **After his mother dies, he moves around.** Small trips with his father to Cape Cod, Bermuda but was often absent as he went on trips to pursue his painting career. Tom moves to France 1925 then England 1928.
 - **Was isolated in France but found comfort wandering among old churches and monasteries.**
 - Wrote novels and for the school newspaper.
 - **Spent time in solitude in nature, thinking and reflecting.**
- Descent to Hell (Chapter 3 – The Harrowing of Hell):
 - Started after his Father’s death when he was left in the care of Tom Bennett, his legal guardian.
 - **He finished High School and entered Clare College, in Cambridge on scholarship**
 - **The summer of 1933 he went to Rome and began to wander through early Christian Churches and Basilicas,** was fascinated by Byzantine mosaics. He began to pray and read the Bible and received a sense of his father’s presence in his room.
 - **In the fall of 1933 He entered Cambridge and had a miserable year, ignored his classes, drank excessively and hung out at public classes, spent way too much money, was very free sexually and probably fathered a child. Left Cambridge in Spring 1934**
 - Tom Bennett helped settle the paternity case legally and then, in May, Merton returned to live with his Grandparents in Long Island
- Purgatory and Conversion to Catholicism (begins to settle into some stability)
 - **Enrolled in Columbia University in January 1935 as a sophomore and his life began to, slowly, turn around.**
 - **Two professors became his life-long mentors,** Mark Van Doren (a professor of English Literature) and Dan Walsh (professor of Philosophy) – his early Spiritual Confidant.
 - **Found a group of (lifetime) friends on the staff of the Columbia School Newspapers,** the Jester and the Columbia Review as well as the yearbook. They included Bob Lax, Ed Rice, Robert Giroux, and Sy Freegood.
 - **Received B.A. in English in 1938.**

- His reading turned more and more toward Catholicism and a pull toward God. He started attending Church and then formally asked to become a Catholic at Corpus Christi church where **he was baptized on November 16, 1938.**
- **In 1939 he received his M.A. in literature and also applied to become a Franciscan but was turned down. In September 1940, Merton began to teach English at St. Bonaventure College in Olean NY and lead a personally devout life.**
- **In April 1941 he went on a Holy Week retreat to Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, a Trappist Monastery in rural KY and was moved by the experience.**
- **In the summer of 1941, spent 2 weeks volunteering at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem which had a profound impact on him.**
- **Entry into Monastery**
 - **He felt a strong attraction to the priesthood, on December 10, 1941 went to Gethsemani and waited to be accepted into the Trappists**

The Original Monk's schedule:

- 2:00 am Monks arise
- 2:30 am Time for personal prayer
- 3:00 am Vigils
- 4:00 am Priest Monks say Private Masses, others go to Communion Mass with time for personal prayer afterwards
- 5:30 am Canonical Hour of Prime, followed by Chapter with the Abbot, go to dormitory to make beds and refectory for a cup of coffee and two slices of dry bread.
- 7:45 am Terce with High Mass followed by Sext and two hours of manual labor, examination of conscience and dinner
- None followed by period of rest and two more hours of work.
- 4:30 pm Vespers followed by a period of quiet prayer and a small meal.
- 7:30 pm Compline concluded with the signing of Salve Regina, receive Abbot's blessing and off to bed.
- **Working toward becoming ordained a Priest (his pinnacle experience)**
 - Obtains the habit of a choir-monk novice and given name of Mary Louis – February 21, 1941
 - Takes Simple vows – March 19, 1944
 - Pronounces Solemn vows – March 19, 1947
 - **Ordained a priest on May 26, 1949 – a pinnacle experience**
 - **Began to experience the struggle of wanting more solitude**
- Applied for U.S Citizenship (1/5/1949)

Some representative quotes on this part of the Journey:

Experiences that would shape Merton's Journey

Seven Storey Mountain – France 1926, pg 59:

The only real valuable religious and moral training I ever got as a child was from my father, not systematically, but here and there and more or less spontaneously, in the course of ordinary conversations... if something spiritual was on his mind, it came out more or less naturally. And this is the kind of religious teaching, or any other kind of teaching, that has the most effect... And it is precisely this speech “out of the abundance of the heart” that makes an impression and produces an effect in other people.

Seeds of Destruction - Defends Ghandi at Oakham Boarding School in 1930 (age 15) pp 222 – 223:

Yet I remember arguing about Ghandi in my school dormitory: chiefly against the football captain, then the head prefect... I insisted Ghandi was right, that India was, with perfect justice, demanding that the British withdraw peacefully and go home; that the millions of people who lived in India had a perfect right to run their country. Such sentiments were of course beyond comprehension. How could Ghandi be right when he was so odd? And how could I be right if I was on the side of someone who had the wrong kind of skin, and left altogether too much of it exposed? A counter argument was offered but it was not an argument. It was a basic and sweeping assumption that the people of India were political and moral infants, incapable of taking care of themselves, backward people, primitive, uncivilized, benighted, pagan, who could not survive without the English to do their thinking and planning for them. The British Raj was, in fact, a purely benevolent, civilizing enterprise for which the Indians were not suitably grateful... Infuriated at the complacent idiocy of this argument, I tried to sleep but failed.

Rome 1933 before going to Clare College in Cambridge: Seven Storey Mountain pg 119:

Things were going on as they usually did with me. But after about a week... **I found myself looking into churches rather than ruined temples.** Perhaps it was the frescoes on the wall of an old chapel... I was fascinated by these Byzantine mosaics. I began to haunt the churches where they were to be found, and, as an indirect consequence, all the other churches that were more or less of the same period. **And thus without knowing anything about it 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 reasons. And yet it was not for a wrong reasons either. For these mosaics and frescoes and all the ancient altars and thrones and sanctuaries were designed and built for the instruction of people who were not capable of immediately understanding anything higher... **These mosaics told me more than I had ever known of the doctrine of a God of infinite power, wisdom and love. Who had yet become Man, and reveled in His Manhood the infinity of power, wisdom and love that was His Godhead. Of course I could not grasp and believe these things explicitly...**

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me... And I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray – praying not with my lips and with my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery. There were a lot of tears connected with this...

... When I got back to New York I lost my temporary interest in religion. My friends in that city had a religion of their own, a cult of New York itself, and of the peculiar manner in which Manhattan expressed the bigness and gaudiness and noisiness and frank animality and vulgarity of this American paganism...

Cambridge (1933): Seven Storey Mountain pg 136:

God in His mercy was permitting me to fly as far as I could from His love but at the same time preparing to confront me, at the end of it all, and in the bottom of the abyss, when I thought I had gone farthest away from Him. .. **For in my greatest misery He would shed, into my soul, enough light to see how miserable I was, and to admit that it was my own fault and my own work. And always I was to be punished for my sins by my sins themselves,** and to realize, at least obscurely, that I was being so punished and burn in the flames of my own hell, and rot in the hell of my corrupt will **until I was forced at last, by my own intense misery, to give up my own will. I had tasted**

something of this before but nothing compared to the bitterness that soon began to fill me in that year at Cambridge.

Finding a compelling Image of God (1937): Seven Storey Mountain pg 187:

... in Scribner's window, I saw a book called *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*... the feeling of disgust and deception struck me like a knife in the pit of my stomach... They should have warned me that this was a Catholic book! ... **You must understand that while I admired Catholic culture, I had always been afraid of the Catholic Church... the imprimatur told me that what I read would be in full conformity with that fearsome and mysterious thing, Catholic Dogma, and the fact struck me with an impact against which everything in me reacted with repugnance and fear. Now in the light of all this, I consider that it was surely a real grace that, instead of getting rid of the book, I actually read it.... And the one big concept which I got of its pages was something that was to revolutionize my whole life, the word aseitas.** In this one word, which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, **I discovered an entirely new concept of God – a concept which showed me at once that the belief of Catholics was by no means the vague and rather superstitious hangover from an unscientific age that I had believed it to be. On the contrary, here was a notion of God that was at the same time deep, precise, simple, and accurate and, what is more, charged with implications which I could not ever begin to appreciate, but which I could at least dimly estimate, even with my own lack of philosophical training. Aseitas – the English equivalent is a transliteration: aseity – simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself, but as requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist.** There can be only one such Being: that is God. And to say that **God exists a se, of and by and by reason of Himself, is merely to say that God is Being Itself.** ... And this means that God must enjoy “complete independence not only as regards everything outside but also as regards everything within Himself.” ... ‘When God says that He is being and if what He says is to have any intelligible meaning to our minds, it can only mean this: **He is the pure act of existing.**

Appreciating Columbia and his close friends: Seven Storey Mountain pg 194:

God has willed that we should all depend on one another for our salvation, and all strive together for our own mutual good and our own common salvation. Scripture teaches us that this is especially true in the supernatural order, in the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which flows necessarily from Christian teaching on grace. “You are the body of Christ and members one of another” ... **So now it the time to tell a thing**

that I could not realize then, but which has become very clear to me: that God brought me and a half a dozen others together at Columbia and made us friends, in such a way that our friendship would work powerfully to rescue us from the confusion and the misery in which we had come to find ourselves, partly through our own fault, and partly through a complex set of circumstances which might be grouped together under the heading of the “modern world,” “modern society.”... The traditional Gospel term, “the world,” will do well enough.

His first interaction with an Eastern master, Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1938): Seven Storey Mountain pg 214:

I became very fond of Brahmachari, and he of me. We got along very well together, especially since **he sensed that I was trying to feel my way into a settled religious conviction, and into some kind of a life that was centered, as his was, on God. The thing that strikes me now is that he never attempted to explain his own religious beliefs to me... What was most valuable to me was to hear his evaluation of the society and religious beliefs he had come across in America...**He was never sarcastic, never ironical or unkind in his criticisms: in fact he did not make many judgements at all, especially adverse ones. He would simply make statements of fact and then burst out laughing – his laughter was quiet and ingenuous, and it expressed his complete amazement at the very possibility that people should live the way he saw them living all around him... It was some of the well-meaning idealisms that he came across that struck him as funny. And one of the things that struck him as funniest of all was the eagerness with which Protestant ministers used to come up and ask him if India was by now nearly converted to Protestantism. He used to tell us how far India was from conversion to Protestantism – or Catholicism for that matter. One of the chief reasons he gave for the failure to any Christian missionaries to really strike deep into the tremendous populations of Asia was the fact that they maintained themselves on a social level that was too far above the natives... **all Christian missionaries, according to him, suffered from this big drawback: they lived too well, too comfortably. They took care of themselves in a way that simply made it impossible for the Hindus to regard them as Holy...But one thing is certain: the pagans have their own notions of holiness, and it is one that includes a prominent element of asceticism.** According to Brahmachari, the prevailing impression among the Hindus seems to be that Christians don't know what asceticism means.... **The Hindus... want to know if we have any saints to send them... I was interested to hear his opinion of the Catholics.** They, of course, had not invited him to preach in their pulpits but he had gone to a few Catholic churches out of curiosity. **He told me that these were the only ones in which he really felt that people were**

praying... It was only to Catholics that love of God seemed to be a matter or real concern, something that struck deep in their natures, not merely pious speculation and sentiment... He did not generally put his words in the form of advice but **the one counsel he did give me is something that I will not easily forget.** ‘There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read St. Augustine’s Confessions and the Imitations of Christ.’... Now as I look back on those days, it seems to me very probably that one of the reasons why God had brought him all the way from India, was that he might say just that... So now that I was told that I ought to turn to the Christian tradition, to St. Augustine – and told by a Hindu monk!”

After his Baptism and First Communion (1938): Seven Storey Mountain pg 246:

For now I entered into the everlasting movement of that gravitation which is the very life and spirit of God: God’s own gravitation towards the depth of His own infinite nature, His goodness without end. **And God, that center Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me, through incorporation with Christ, incorporated into this immense and tremendous gravitational movement which is love, which is the Holy Spirit, loved me. And he called out to me from His own immense depths.**

Seven Storey Mountain pg 260: Shortly after he converted to Catholicism in the late 1930s, Thomas Merton was walking the streets of New York with his friend, Robert Lax. Lax was Jewish (and converted later to Catholicism himself), and he asked Merton what he wanted to be, now that he was Catholic.

“I don’t know,” Merton replied, “I guess I want to be a good Catholic.

“What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic.”...

“What you should say,” he told him, “is that you want to be a saint!”

A saint!, The thought struck me as a little weird, I said:

“How do you expect me to become a saint?,”

“By wanting to,” said Lax simply.

“I can’t be a saint,” I said, “I can’t be a saint.” And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities: the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they must do... “I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin,” but which means, by those words: “I do not want to give up my sins and my attachments.”

But Lax said: **“No. All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don’t you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let him do it? All you have to do is desire it.”...**

Experience in Havana, Cuba in April 1940: - Seven Storey Mountain, pg 310 – 312

I was in the Church of St Francis in Havana...what had just taken place on the altar, at the Consecration... made Him (God) belong to me...It was as if I had been suddenly illuminated by being blinded by the manifestation of God’s presence. And yet the thing that struck me most of all was that this light was in a certain sense “ordinary” – it was a light (and this is what took my breath away) that was offered to all... It was the light of faith deepened and reduced to an extreme and sudden obviousness. ... And the first articulate thought that came to my mind was: “Heaven is right in front of me: Heaven, Heaven” It lasted only a moment, but it left a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness that stayed for hours and it was something I have never forgotten.

Volunteering at Friendship House in Harlem (August, 1941): Seven Storey Mountain pg 378

Here in this huge, dark, steaming slum, hundreds of thousands of Negroes are herded together like cattle, most of them with nothing to eat and nothing to do. All the senses and imagination and sensibilities and emotions and sorrows and desires and hopes and ideas of a race with vivid feelings and deep emotional reactions are forced in upon themselves, bound inward by an iron ring of frustration: the prejudice that hems them in with its four insurmountable walls. In this huge cauldron, inestimable natural gifts, wisdom, love, music, science, poetry are stamped down and left to boil with the dregs of an elementally corrupted nature, and thousands upon thousands of souls are destroyed by vice and misery and degradation, obliterated, wiped out, washed from the register of the living, dehumanized... **Now the terrifying paradox of the whole thing is this: Harlem itself, and every individual Negro in it, is a living condemnation of our so-called “culture”.** Harlem is there by way of a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown. The brothels of Harlem, and all its prostitution, and its dope-rings, and all the rest are the mirror of the polite divorces and the manifold cultured adulteries of Park Avenue: they are God’s commentary on the whole of our society... The most terrible thing about it all is that there is not a Negro in the whole place who does not realize, somewhere in the depths of his nature, that the culture of the white men is not worth the dirt in Harlem’s gutters. They sense the whole thing is rotten, that it is a fake, that it is spurious, empty, a shadow of nothingness. And yet they are condemned to reach

out for it, and to seem to desire it, and to pretend they like it, as if the whole thing were some kind of bitter cosmic conspiracy: as if they were thus being forced to work out, in their own lives, a clear representation of the misery which has corrupted the ontological roots of the white man's own existence.

[Abandoning the world to find himself in God...](#)

Entering the Monastery: Seven Storey Mountain (December, 1941) pg 410:

So Brother Matthew locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom. And it was appropriate that the beginning of freedom should be as it was. For I entered a garden that was stripped and bare. The flowers that had been there last April were all gone. The sun was hidden behind low clouds and an icy wind was blowing over the grey grass and the concrete walks. In a sense my freedom had already begun, for I minded none of these things.

Life in Community: Seven Storey Mountain (1941) pg 419:

Now I was face to face with monks that belonged not to some dream, not to some medieval novel, but to cold and inescapable reality. The community which I had seen functioning as a unity, in all the power of that impressive and formal liturgical anonymity which clothes a body of men obscurely in the very personality of Christ Himself, not appeared to me broken up into its constituent parts, and all the details, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant, were there for me to observe at close range. By this time God had given me enough sense to realize at least obscurely that this is one of the most important aspects of any religious vocation: the first and most elementary test of one's call to the religious life... is the willingness to accept life in a community in which everybody is more or less imperfect. The imperfections are much smaller and more trivial than the defects and vices of people outside in the world: and yet somehow you tend to notice them more and feel them more, because they get to be so greatly magnified by the responsibilities and ideals of the religious state, through which you cannot help looking at them.

Simple Vows (1944): Seven Storey Mountain pg 460:

By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was, or what the contemplative vocation was, or what my vocation was, and what our Cistercian vocation was. In fact I could not be sure I knew or understood much of anything except that I believed that You wanted me to take those particular vows in this particular hour on that particular day for reasons best known to Yourself, and that what I was expected to do after that was follow along with the rest and do what I was

told and thing would begin to become clear. That morning when I was lying on my face on the floor... **I began to laugh, with my mouth in the dust, because without knowing how or why, I had actually done the right thing, and even an astounding thing. But what was astounding was not my work, but the work You worked in me.... You do not want me to be thinking about what I am, but about what You are. Or rather, You do not even want to be thinking about anything much: for You would raise me above the level of thought.** And if I as always trying to figure out what I am and where I am and why I am, how will that work be done?... **I no longer desire to see anything that implies a distance between You and me: and if I stand back and consider myself and You as if something had passed between us, from me to You, I will inevitably see the gap between us and remember the distance between us. My God, it is the gap and that distance which kill me.**

Ordination Sign of Jonas – part 4 To the Altar of God (May 26, 1949) pg 181:

My priestly ordination was, I felt, the one great secret for which I had been born. Ten years before I was ordained, when I was in the world, and seemed to be one of the men in the world most unlikely to become a priest, I had suddenly realized that for me ordination to the priesthood was, in fact, a matter of life or death, heaven or hell... the grace of my priesthood, the greatest of my life, was to me something far greater than a momentary flight above the monotonous lowlands of an everyday existence. It permanently transformed my ordinary, everyday life. It was a transfiguration of all simple and usual things, an elevation of the plainest and most natural acts to the level of the sublime. It showed me that the charity of God was sufficient to transform earth into heaven. For God is Charity, and Charity is Heaven. To love God is everything. And Love is enough. Nothing else is of any value except insofar as it is transformed and elevated by the charity of Christ. But the smallest thing, touched by charity, is immediately transfigured and becomes sublime.

Questions:

1. What struck you about this part of Merton's Journey?
2. How do you relate best to it?
3. What experiences from early life carry forward into your unfolding Spiritual Journey?

Conference 2 (1949 – 1958) – 9 years

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going”

Through Darkness into Light, Healing and Opening to a deep encounter with God and loving others.



Written Sources for this part of his life:

- The Sign of Jonas (Parts 5,6 Journal from 1949 – 1952)
- Thoughts in Solitude (written mostly in 1953, published in 1959)
- No Man is an Island (1955)
- New Seeds of Contemplation (written 1961 - update Seeds of Contemplation)

Highlights:

- Became U.S. Citizen in 1951
- Given use of wooden toolshed as a place of solitude – 1953
 - Named it St Anne’s
 - Wrote Thought’s in Solitude there
- First time in his life he was responsible for others:
 - Master of Scholastics (Students for the Priesthood): 1951 - 1955
 - Master of Novices: 1955 – 1965
- Personal Understanding of Faith through trials of uncertainty and questions
- Develops a Mature, Individualized and Personal Spirituality beyond the safety of the Institution.
- Much of his deeply Christian Spiritual writing is done in this period

Some representative quotes on this part of the Journey:

Exploring darkness, questions and hints of reality:

Sign of Jonas – Writing from the day before his Ordination – May 25, 1949 pg 192:

My joy is in the great power of Christ. Once again I am glad of my deep moral poverty which is always before me, these days, but which does not obsess or upset me, because

it is all lost in His mercy. **The truth is, I am far from being the monk or cleric that I out to be. My life is a great mess and tangle of half-conscious subterfuges to evade grace and duty. I have done all things badly. I have thrown away great opportunities. My infidelity to Christ, instead of making me sick with despair, drives me to throw myself all the more blindly into the arms of His mercy.**

Sign of Jonas – part 5 (pg 230):

Ordination is only the beginning of a journey, not its end. The beginning was easy and pleasant. But when summer was over the serious business of being a priest began... I found myself face to face with a mystery that was beginning to manifest itself in the depths of my soul and to move me with terror...

Ongoing transformations and conversions - Sign of Jonas - June 13, 1951 (pg 328):

It is sometime in June... In any case every day is the same for me because I have become very different from what I used to be. **The man who began this journal is dead, just as the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when this journal began was also dead, and what is more the man who was the central figure in *The Seven Storey Mountain* was dead over and over. And now that all these men are dead, it is sufficient for me to say so on paper and I think I will have ended up forgetting them.** Because writing down what *The Seven Storey Mountain* was about was sufficient to get it off my mind for good.

Sign of Jonas (Personal Experience) – Prologue – pg 8:

“Technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience. **Since my focus is not upon dogmas as such, but only on their repercussions in the life of a soul in which they being to find a concrete realization, I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul.**

Reaching out to the human community, different ending than Seven Storey Mountain - Sign of Jonas – March 3, 1951:

Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else... I am beginning to believe that perhaps the only, or at least the quickest way, I shall become a saint is by virtue of the desires of many good people in America that I should become one...

Perhaps I am called upon to objectify the truth that America, for all its evil, is innocent and somehow ignorantly holy.

Sign of Jonas – Epilogue Fire Watch July 4, 1952

Pg 352:

The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which our task as watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness. God, my God Whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer! I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives for entering the monastery and You have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept in shame. It is true that all my motives have meant nothing? Is it true that all my desires were an illusion? While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question. This night, and every night, it is the same question. There is a special living resonance in these steep hollow stairs to the novitiate chapel, where You are all alone, the windows closed tight upon You, shutting You up with the heat of the lost afternoon.

Pg 354

On all sides I am confronted by questions that I cannot answer, because the time for answering them has not yet come. Between the silence of God and the silence of my own soul, stand the silence of the souls entrusted to me. Immersed in these three silences, I realize that the questions I ask myself about them are perhaps no more than a surmise. And perhaps the most urgent and practical renunciation is the renunciation of all questions.

Pg 360, 361

And now my whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry, and my hand is on the door through which I see the heavens. The door swings out upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer. Will it come like this, the moment of my death? Will You open a door upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars? ... Although I see the stars, I no longer pretend to

know them. Although I have walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one I shall forget the names of individual things. **You, Who sleep in my breast, are not met with word, but in the emergence of life within life and of wisdom with wisdom. You are found in communion: Thou in me and I in Thee and Thou in them and they in me:** dispossessions within dispossessions, dispassion within dispassion, emptiness within emptiness, freedom with freedom. **I am alone. Thou art alone. The Father and I are One.**

Thoughts in Solitude – acknowledges Merton's own process of continual transformation, solitude providing the insight into God!

Preface – pg ix: These are simply thoughts on the contemplative life, fundamental intuitions which seemed, at the time, to have a basic importance.... The peculiar way is not necessarily the ideal of the Religious Order to which the writer happens to belong. It is, for all that, a substantially monastic ideal... **It need hardly be added that much water has passed under the writer's own private bridge since these notes were written, and the lines of thought that are found here have travelled in various unexpected directions in the intervening years... What is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits. It has a bearing on the whole future of man, and of his world: and especially, of course, on the future of his religion.**

Pg 37 -- **The spiritual life is first of all a life.** It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived. Like all life, it grows sick and dies when it is uprooted from its proper element. Grace is engrafted on our nature and the whole man is sanctified by the presence and action of the Holy Spirit... **We live as spiritual men when we live as men seeking God. If we are to become spiritual, we must remain men. And if there were not evidence of this everywhere in theology, the Mystery of the Incarnation itself would be ample proof of it... If we want to be spiritual, then, let us first of all live our lives.**

pg 127 – In solitude I have at last discovered that You have desired the love of my heart, O my God, the love of my heart as it is – the love of a man's heart... **Only solitude has taught me that I do not have to be a god or an angel to be pleasing to You, that I do not have to become pure intelligence without feeling and without human imperfection before You will listen to my voice. You do not wait for me to become great before You will be with me and hear me and answer me. It is my lowliness and my humanness that have drawn You to make me Your equal by condescending to my level and living in me by Your merciful care.**

Emerging into the Light to find Love/Relationship, Contemplation, True Self and Mercy:

No Man is an Island – Author's Note and Prologue.

Leaving systems to others, and renouncing the attempt to lay down universal principles which have been exposed by better men elsewhere, I only desire in this book to share with the reader my own reflections on certain aspects of the spiritual life. I consider that the spiritual life is the life of man's real self, the life of that interior self whose flame is so often allowed to be smothered under the ashes of anxiety and futile concern. The spiritual life is oriented toward God, rather than toward the immediate satisfaction of the material needs of life, but it is not, for all that, a life of unreality or a life of dreams. On the contrary, without a life of the spirit, our whole existence becomes unsubstantial and illusory. The life of the spirit, by integrating us in the real order established by God, put us in the fullest possible contact with reality – not as we imagine it, but as it really is. It does so by making us aware of our own real selves, and placing them in the presence of God.

The meditations in this book are intended to be at the same time traditional and modern and my own. I do not intend to divorce myself at any point from Catholic tradition. But neither do I intend to accept points of that tradition blindly and without understanding, and without making them really my own. For it seems to me that the first responsibility of a man of faith is to make his faith really part of his own life, not by rationalizing it but by living it... They do not always pretend to be final answers to final questions, nor do they even claim to face those questions in the most fundamental possible terms. But at least I can hope they are thoughts that I have honestly thought out for myself and that, for better or for worse, mean something in my own life and in the lives of those I live with. They point, therefore, toward what seems to me to be the meaning of life... They are simply observations of a few things that seem to me to matter. If there is a thread of unity running through them all, I should say it was the following idea: What every man looks for in life is his own salvation and the salvation of the men he lives with. By salvation I mean first of all the full discovery of who he himself really is. Then I mean something of the fulfillment of his own God-given powers, in the love of others and of God. I mean also the discovery that he cannot find himself in himself alone, but that he must find himself in and through others.

No Man Is an Island pg 4:

Love not only prefers the good of another to my own, but it does not even compare the two. It has only one good, that of the beloved, which is, at the same time my own.

Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but **by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own**. The same good is enjoyed in its wholeness by two in one spirit, not halved and shared by two souls... **Love sees its whole good in the good of the beloved**, and to divide that good would diminish love... **love does not seek a joy that follows from its effect: its joy is in the effect itself, which is the good of the beloved**... Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. **Love, therefore, is its own reward**.

No Man Is an Island pp xx-xxi :

We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others. What do I mean by loving ourselves properly? I mean, first of all, desiring to live, accepting life as a very great gift and a great good, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give others. The modern world is beginning to discover, more and more, that the quality and vitality of man's life depend on his own secret will to go on living. **There is a dark force for destruction within us, which someone has called the "death instinct."** It is a terribly powerful thing, this force generates by our own frustrated self-love battling with itself. It is the power of a self-love that has turned into self-hatred and which, in adoring itself, adores the monster by which it is consumed. **It is therefore of supreme importance that we consent to live not for ourselves but for others. When we do this we will be able first of all to face and accept our own limitations. As long as we secretly adore ourselves, our own deficiencies will remain to torture us with an apparent defilement. But if we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be "as gods." We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations of ours play a most important part in all our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us. We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up in himself for the lack in another.** Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and "one body," will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the success but of the failures and the accidents in our lives.

New Seeds of Contemplation (Contemplation, false and True self):

Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive... It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life... It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely

abundant Source... It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith. It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped by images, in words or even in clear concepts... we know beyond all knowing or 'unknowing'... (pp 1-2)

It is the gift of God Who, in His mercy, completes the hidden and mysterious work of creation by enlightening our minds and hearts, by awakening in us the awareness that we are words spoken in His One Word, and that Creating Spirit dwells in us and we in Him... That we are "in Christ" and that Christ lives in us... **Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense experience, of what each Christian obscurely believes: "It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me."** ... It is an awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life... It is a pure and a virginal knowledge, poor in concepts, poorer still in reasoning, but able by its very poverty and purity to follow the Word "wherever He may go." (pp 4-5)

A Tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It "consents." so to speak, to His creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him. If it tried to be like something else which is was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give Him less glory... This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do... The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them. The special clumsy beauty of this colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom and it declares the glory of God. The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God... The lake hidden among the hills are saints and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her majestic dance. The great, gnashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints... nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is His sanctity... 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. Trees and animals have no

problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. – Things in their Identity pp 29 – 31

Chapter 5: To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence and nonexistence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.

Chapter 7: People who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people...cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other men... I am all the more something because you are nothing. And thus I spend my life admiring the distance between you and me... The man who lives in division is living in death...

pp 34-35: All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge, and love to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and over myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.

Chapter 5: God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please... We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects.

Chapter 5: ... there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.... That is something that no man can ever do alone. Nor can all the men and all the created things in the universe help him in this work. The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone. ... Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny... we are even called to share with God the

work of creating the truth of our identity.... To work out our identity in God, which the Bible calls “working out our salvation,” is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears. It demands close attention to reality at every moment and great fidelity to God as He reveals Himself, obscurely, in the mystery of each new situation.

New Seeds of Contemplation pp 60 – 63:

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason of my existence, for God is love. **Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self.** Love is my true character. Love is my name... To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God... **I who am without love cannot become love unless Love identifies me with Himself.** But if He sends His own Love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then I shall be transformed, **I shall discover who I am and shall possess my true identity by losing myself in Him.**

Chapter 39:

Yet we must not deal in too negative a fashion even with the “external self.” This self is not by nature evil, and the fact that it is unsubstantial is not to be imputed to if as some kind of crime. It is afflicted with metaphysical poverty: but all that is poor deserves mercy... It is possible to speak of the exterior self as a mask... The mask that each man wears may well be a disguise not only for man’s inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation. And indeed, if Christ became Man, it is because He wanted to be any man and every man. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.

At the end of this period, from his Private Journals:

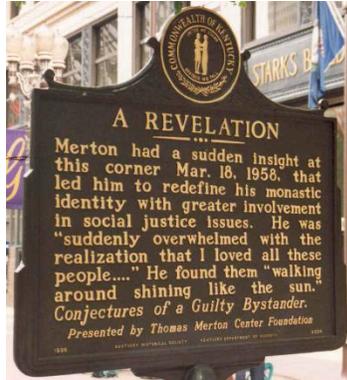
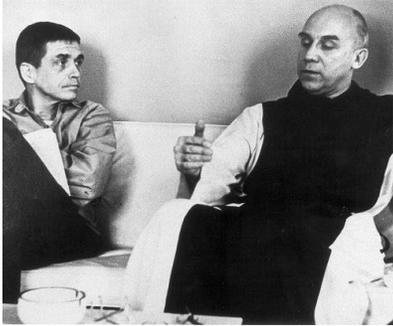
Finally I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. That I will never fulfill my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself, and if I accept myself fully in the right way, I will already have surpassed myself. For it is the unaccepted self that stands in my way and will continue to do so as long as it is not accepted. When this has been accepted – it is my own stepping stone to what is above me. Because this is the way man has been made by God. Original sin was the effort to surpass oneself by being “like God” – i.e. unlike oneself. But our Godlikeness begins at home. We must first become like ourselves and stop living “besides ourselves.” - Journal Entry October 2, 1958

Questions:

1. What did you notice changing in Merton in these 10 years?
2. How do Merton’s insights on Contemplation/True Self and false self resonate with you?

Conference 3 (1958 – 1968) – 10 years

**It was like waking from a dream of separateness.
The Prophet speaks out to serve the world.**



Highlights:

- Reaches out to the World in a big way as Prophet/Activist through his writings and contacts
 - Letters to and visits from countless activists
 - Focuses on War/Peace/Nonviolence, Civil Rights, Social Justice
- Writing was engaged Spirituality
 - Disallowed to write about certain topics
 - Got around that through his Cold War Letters
- Moved into Hermitage – August 1965
- Brief intense and necessary romantic interlude with Marjorie, a 19-year old nurse in Louisville - late Spring / early Fall 1966
 - Proved that he could love and be loved by a woman
 - Reaffirmed his monastic vows
 - Abbot treats it as a matter of fact: "He fell in love, these things happen".

Primary Written Sources:

- New Seeds of Contemplation (1961)
- A Thomas Merton Reader (1962) – Merton's own collection of significant writing
- Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (based on notebooks taken starting in 1956, published in 1966)
- Raids on the Unspeakable (1966)
- Faith and Violence (1968)

- Contemplation in a World of Action (1998) – collection of essays
- Love and Living (2002) – collection of essays

Merton ceases to demonize the world, embraces his place and see it as the deep fulfillment of his life and any Christian life to live the Gospel!

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander – The conjectures of a Merton pushed back in contact with the world by his contemplative experience. Offers the readers not answers but guesses. Bystander refers to aloofness of almost two decades in the monastery. Guilt in that he didn't recognize the irresponsibility of the aloofness.

Fourth and Walnut experience (March 18, 1958): pg 153 – 154

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, **I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.** Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of “separation from the world” that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, “spiritual men,” men of interior life, what have you.

Certainly these traditional values are very real, but their reality is not of an order outside everyday existence in a contingent world, nor does it entitle one to despise the secular: **though “out of the world,” we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and to make a profession out of this consciousness. But does that entitle us to consider ourselves different, or even better, than others? The whole idea is preposterous.**

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: “Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others.” To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking.

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes.

I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them — and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone, they are not “they” but my own self. There are no strangers!

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and “understood” by a peculiar gift.

... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us in our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependents, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of

life vanish completely... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

New Seeds of Contemplation pp 292 – 296:

The Lord would not only love His creation as a Father, but He would enter into His creation, emptying Himself, hiding Himself, as if He were not God but a creature. ... **For in becoming man, God became not only Jesus Christ but also potentially every man and woman that ever existed. In Christ, God became not only “this” man, but also, in a broader and more mystical sense, yet no less truly, “every man”.** The presence of God in His world as its Creator depends on no one but Him. **His presence in the world as Man depends, in some measure, upon men... we are able to decide whether we ourselves, and that portion of the world which is ours, shall become aware of His presence, consecrated by it, and transfigured in its light...** It is possible to speak of the exterior self as a mask... The mask that each man wears may well be a disguise not only for man’s inner self but for God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in His own creation. **And indeed, if Christ became Man, it is because He wanted to be any man and every man. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.**

Contemplation in a World of Action: (376) “Is the world a problem?...”

I am personally involved in the absurdity of the question; due to a book I wrote thirty years ago, I have become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative – the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one hand, and holding a Bible open at the Apocalypse. **This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion...** Whether or not “the world” is a problem, a confused idea of what the world might possibly be is quite definitely a problem and it is that confusion I want to talk about. **I want to make clear that I speak not as the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which seemingly a lot of people have read, but as the author of more recent essays and poems which apparently very few people have read...** This is simply the voice of a self-questioning human person who, like all his brothers, **struggles to cope with turbulent, mysterious, demanding, exciting, frustrating, confused existence in which most definitions, explanations and justifications become incredible even before they are uttered,** in which people suffer together and are sometimes utterly beautiful, at other time impossibly pathetic. In which there is much that is frightening, in which almost everything public is patently phony and in which there is at the same time an immense ground of personal authenticity that is right there

and so obvious that one can talk about it and most cannot even believe that it is there. I am, in other words, a man in the modern world. In fact, I am the work just as you are! Where am I going to look for the world first of all if not in myself?

Love and Living, Creativity, pg 177:

All Christian life is meant to be at the same time profoundly contemplative and rich in active work... It is true that we are called to create a better world. But we are first of all called to a more immediate and exalted task: that of creating our own lives. In doing this, we act as co-workers with God. We take our place in the great work of mankind, since in effect the creation of our own destiny, in God, is impossible in pure isolation. **Each one of us works out his own destiny in inseparable union with all those others with whom God has willed us to live. We share with one another the creative work of living in the world. And it is through our struggle with material reality, with nature, that we help one another create at the same time our own destiny and a new world for our descendants.**

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pg 323 – 324:

I think that, like most other converts, I faced the problem of the “religiousness” and came to terms with it. God was not for me a working hypothesis, to fill in gaps left open by a scientific world view. Nor was He a God enthroned somewhere in outer space. Nor did I ever feel any particular “need” for superficial religious routines merely to keep myself happy. I would even say that, like most modern men, I have not been much moved by the concept of “getting into heaven” after muddling through this present life. On the contrary, my conversion to Catholicism began with the realization of the presence of God in this present life, in the world and in myself, and that my task as a Christian is to live in full and vital awareness of this ground of my being and of the world’s being. Acts and forms of worship help one to do this, and the Church, with her liturgy and sacraments, gives us the essential means of grace. Yet God can work without these means if He so wills. When I entered the Church I came seeking God, the living God, and not just “the consolations of religion.”

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pg 122 - 124

“The time is fully come, and the Reign of God is at hand: repent and believe in the good news.” – Mark 1:15

The greatest temptation that assails Christians is that in effect, for most of us, the Gospel has ceased to be news. And if it is not news it is not Gospel: for the Gospel is the proclamation of something absolutely new, everlastingly new, not a message that

was once new but is now two thousand years old. And yet for many of us the Gospel is precisely the announcement of something that is not new: The truths of the Gospel are old, deep-rooted, firmly established, unchanging and in some sense a refuge against all that is disturbing because it is new... **The message of the Gospel when it was first preached was profoundly disturbing to those who wanted to cling to well-established religious patterns, the ancient and accepted ways, the ways that were not dangerous and which contain no surprises. Repentance is at the same time a complete renewal, a discovery, a new life, and a return to the old, to that which is before everything else that is old. But the old and the new meet in the metanoia, the inner change, that is accomplished by the hearing of God's word and the keeping of it.** That which is oldest is also newest because it is the beginning. "I am the Beginning, and I speak to you." "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." The Jews were scandalized at Christ who spoke as if He were already know to Abraham. "Thou art not yet forty years old." Christ replied: "Before Abraham was made, I am." **The new is within the old because it is the perennial beginning of everything, and emerges from the old, transcending it, having no part in it, eternally renewing its own life. The Gospel is handed down from generation to generation but it must reach each one of us brand new, or not at all. If it is merely "tradition" and not news, it has not been preached or not heard – it is not Gospel. Any word that comes from God is news! ... If there is not risk in revelation, if there is no fear in it, if there is no challenge in it, if it is not a word which creates whole new worlds, and new beings, if it does not call into existence a new creature, or new self, then religion is dead and God is dead. Those for whom the Gospel is old, and old only, have killed it for the rest of men. The life of this Gospel is its newness... What makes the Gospel news? The faith, which is created in us by God and which we hear it as news. The acceptance of faith, this new birth in the Spirit, opens up a new dimension in which all things are made new: eternity, time, our own self, the world around us... The Gospel is the news that, if I will, I can respond not in perfect freedom to the redemptive love of God for man in Christ, that I can now rise above the forces of necessity and evil in order to say "yes" to the mysterious action of Spirit that is transforming the world even in the midst of the violence and confusion and destruction that seem to proclaim His absence and His "death."**

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pg 303:

We must recover the New Testament awareness that our **God does not need a temple (Acts 7:47-53)...** The New Testament teaches in fact that **God has one indestructible temple: which is man himself (1 Cor 3:17).** To understand that God is present in the

world in man is in fact no new or radical idea. It is, on the contrary, one of the most elementary teachings of the New Testament.

Raids of the Unspeakable:

Prologue: Well Raids, you're grown up now. It is time for you to go out and meet people as the other books have done... I must say you have proved yourself to be a little unusual... I would hardly call you devout, though I have found you meditating in your own way (not often in Church). But you must remember that most of your brothers went to the seminary, and you will be expected to act like a seminarian yourself. This, I fear, is where you will run into trouble... Yet I must admit I would be disappointed if no one got your message. Because you do have a message, and I must say I rather like it myself. I feel that though you are definitely a bit wild, your intuitions hit a few targets that the other books may have missed. **Mind you I do not repudiate the other books. I love the whole lot of you. But in some ways, Raids, I think I love you more than the rest.**

Rain and the Rhinoceros – pg 21

The love of solitude is sometimes condemned as “hatred of our fellow men.” But is this true? **If we push our analysis of collective thinking a little further we will find that the dialectic of power and need of submission and satisfaction, ends by being a dialectic of hate. Collectivity needs not only to absorb everyone it can, but also implicitly to hate and destroy whoever cannot be absorbed. Paradoxically, one of the needs of collectivity is to reject certain classes, or races, or groups, in order to strengthen its own self-awareness by hating them instead of absorbing them.** Thus the solitary cannot survive unless he is capable of loving everyone, without concern for the fact that he is likely to be regarded by all of them as a traitor. **Only the man who has fully attained his own spiritual identity can live without the need to kill, and without the need of a doctrine that permits him to do so with a good conscience. There will always be a place... “for those isolated consciences who have stood up for the universal conscience” as against the mass mind. But their place is solitude. They have no other. Hence it is the solitary person (whether in the city or in the desert) who does mankind the inestimable favor of reminding it of its true capacity for maturity, liberty and peace... We suffer all the needs that society demands we suffer, because if we do not have these needs we lose our “usefulness” in society – the usefulness of suckers. We fear to be alone, and to be ourselves, as so to remind others of the truth that is in them... “I will not make you such rich men as to have need of many things,” said Philoxenos (putting the words on the lips of Christ), “but I will make you true rich men**

who have need of nothing. Since it is not he who has many possessions that is rich, but he who has no needs....

A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann – pg 45, especially pg 47.

One of the most disturbing things that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly sane*. I do no doubt it at all, and that is precisely why I find it disturbing. If all the Nazis had been psychotic... their appalling cruelty would have been in some sense easier to understand. It is much worse to consider this calm, “well-balanced”, unperturbed official conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder... We can no longer assume that because a man is “sane” he is in his “right mind.” The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless. A man can be “sane” in the limited sense that he is not impeded by his disordered emotions from acting in a cool, orderly manner, according to the needs and dictates of the social situation in which he finds himself... And so I ask myself: what is the meaning of a concept of sanity that excludes love, considers it irrelevant, and destroys our capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and their sufferings, to recognize them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one’s own? Evidently this is not necessary for “sanity” at all. It is a religious notion, a spiritual notion, a Christian notion. What business have we to equate “sanity” with “Christianity”? None at all, obviously. The worst error is to imagine that a Christian must try to be “sane” like everybody else, that we *belong* in our kind of *society*. That we must be “realistic” about it...Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity, and become sane like Eichmann. They can even cling to a certain set of Christian formulas, and fit them into a Totalist Ideology... I am beginning to realize that “sanity” is no longer a value or end in itself. **The “sanity” of modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of the dinosaur. If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival.**

The Time of the End is the Time of No Room – pg 65 especially pg 72

We live in a time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into them and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration... We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of

insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race with ourselves, nauseated with life. As the end approaches, there is not room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth. At the end approaches, there is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention, for the awareness of our state... The time of the end is the time of demons who occupy the heart (pretending to be gods) so that man himself finds no room for himself in himself. He finds no space to rest in his own heart, not because it is full but because it is void. In this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it – because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it – his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.

Love and Living, Seven Words – War, pg 128

Living in a world that is constantly at war, in an age when all war has become total war, we scarcely need an explanation of what war is. And yet we are so familiar with it that we forget what it really is. If we did not forget so easily, we would not be so ready to become involved in new ones. The most obvious fact about war today is that while everyone claims to hate it, and all are unanimously agreed that it is our greatest single evil, there is little significant resistance to it except on the part of small minorities who, by the very fact of their protest, are dismissed as eccentric. The awful fact is that though mankind fears war and seeks to avoid it, the fear is irrational and inefficacious. It can do nothing against a profound unconscious proclivity to violence which seems, in fact, to be one of the most mysterious characteristics of man, not only in his individuality, but in his collective and social life. War represents a vice that mankind would like to get rid of but which it cannot do without. Man is like an alcoholic who knows that drink will destroy him but how always has a reason for drinking. So with war. And the best, most obvious, most incontrovertible reason for war is of course “peace.” The motive for which men are led to fight today is that war is necessary to destroy those who threaten our peace! It should be clear from this that war is, in fact, totally irrational, and that it proceeds to its violent ritual with the chanting of perfect nonsense. Yet men not only accept this, they even go so far as to sacrifice their lives and their human dignity and to commit the most hideous atrocities, convinced that in so doing they are being noble, honest, self-sacrificing, and just.... The

moral problem of war does not begin when men have finally resorted to force. The root problem of war is the occult determination to resort to force in any case, and the more or less conscious self-frustration of any show of "reason" in settling the problem that will eventually be decided by the ordeal of force. **The awful danger of war is, then, not so much that force is used when reason has broken down but that reason unconsciously inhibits itself beforehand... in order that it may break down, and in order that resort to force may become "inevitable."** The demonic psychological mechanism behind war is at once the fault of everybody and of nobody... The real problem of war is, then, not to be found in this or that special way in which force is grossly abused, but **in the instinct for violence and for resort to force which has become inveterate in the human race.** Is this something that man can learn to change? If so, how does he go about it? What should he do?... **Perhaps our first problem is to get rid of the illusion that we know the answer.**

New Seeds of Contemplation – The Root of War is Fear, pg 122

So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed - but hate these things in yourself, not in another.

Faith and Violence:

Pg 14 – Non-violence is perhaps the most exacting of all forms of struggle, not only because it demands first of all that one be ready to suffer evil and even face the threat of death without violent retaliation, but because it excludes mere transient self-interest, even political, from its considerations. In a very real sense, he who practices non-violent resistance must commit himself not to the defense of his own interests or even those of a particular group: he must commit himself to the defense of objective truth and right and above all man... Christian non-violence is not built on a presupposed division, but on the basic unity of man. It is not out for the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for the healing and reconciliation of man with himself, man the person and man the human family... For the Christian, the basis of non-violence is the Gospel message of salvation for all men and of the Kingdom of God to which all are summoned. The disciple of Christ... proves his faith by the gift of his whole self to the Lord in order that all may enter the Kingdom... **The great historical event, the coming of the Kingdom is made clear and is "realized" in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in circumstances of their own place and time. By their example of a truly Christian understanding of the world, expressed in a living and active application of the Christian faith to the human**

problems of their own time. Christian manifest the love of Christ for men (Jn 13:35, 17:21), and by that fact make him visibly present in the world.

Pg 130 Religion and Race in the United States. – The idea of Kairos – the time of urgent and providential decision – is something characteristic of Christianity, a religion of decisions in time and in history. Can Christians recognize their Kairos? Is it possible that when the majority of Christians become aware that “the time has come” for a decisive and urgent commitment, the time has, in fact already run out? ... **In the Negro Christian non-violent movement, under Martin Luther King, the Kairos, the “providential time,” met with a courageous and enlightened response. The non-violent Negro civil rights drive has been one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century. It is certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action In the social history of the United States...**The passage of the Civil Rights Bill has only brought the real problem to a head. The struggle for rights now enters a new and more difficult phase. **Hitherto the well-intentioned and the idealistic have assumed that if the needed legislations were passed, the two races would “integrate” more of less naturally, not without a certain of difficulty, of course, but nonetheless effectively in the end. They have also assumed as axiomatic that if something is morally right and good, it will come to pass all by itself as soon as obstacles are removed. Everyone seemed to believe with simple faith that law and order, morality, the “American way of life” and Christianity are all very much the same thing. Now it is becoming quite clear that they are not so at all. Many Christians, who have confused “Americanism” with “Christianity” are in fact contributing to the painful contradictions and even injustices of the racial crisis... we are living in a society that is not exactly moral, a society which misuses Christian clichés to justify its lawlessness and immorality.**

Pg 138 – “In the American crisis the Christian faces a typical choice. The choice is not interior and secret, but public, political and social. He is perhaps not used to regarding his crucial choices in the light of politics. He can now either find security and order by falling back on antique and basically feudal (or perhaps fascist) conceptions, or go forward into the unknown future, identifying himself with the forces that will inevitably create a new society. The choice is between “safety”, based on negation of the new and the reaffirmation of the familiar, or the creative risk of love and grace in new and untired solutions, which justice nevertheless demands... The mentality which we have summarized as ‘Christian violence’ becomes more and more irrational in proportion as it implies both an absolute conviction of one’s own rightness and a capacity to approve the use of any means, however violent, however extreme, in

order to defend what one feels, subjectively, to be right. This is an axiom. This totalism admits no distinctions, no shades of meaning. 'Our side' is totally right, everyone else is diabolically wicked."

Pg 215 – The Contemplative Life in the Modern World : pg 222.

The Christian is then not simply a man of goodwill, who commits himself to a certain set of beliefs, who has a definite dogmatic conception of the universe, of man, and of man's reason for existing. He is not simply one who follows a moral code of brotherhood and benevolence with strong emphasis on certain rewards and punishments dealt out to the individual. Underlying Christianity is not simply a set of doctrines about God considered as dwelling remotely in heaven, and man struggling on earth, far from heaven, trying to appease a distant God by means of virtuous acts. On the contrary Christians themselves too often fail to realize that the infinite God is dwelling within them, so that He is in them and they are in Him. They remain unaware of the presence of the infinite source of being right in the midst of the world and of men. True Christian wisdom is therefore oriented to the experience of the divine Light which is present in the world, the Light in who all things are, and which is nevertheless unknown to the world because no mind can see or grasp its infinity. "He was in the world and the world was made by Him and the world did not know Him. He came into His own and His own did not receive Him." (John 1:10-11) **Contemplative wisdom is then not simply an aesthetic extrapolation of certain intellectual or dogmatic principles, but a living contact with the Infinite Source of all being, a contact not only of man and hearts, not only of "I and Thou", but a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become according to the expression of St. Paul, "one spirit." ... One need not be a monk to turn this way. It is sufficient to be a Child of God, a human person. It is enough that one has in oneself the instinct for truth, the desire of that freedom from limitation and from servitude to external things which St. Paul calls the "servitude of corruption" and which, in fact, holds the whole world of man in bondage by passion, greed, the lust for sensation and for individual survival as though one could become rich enough, powerful enough and clever enough to cheat death. Unfortunately, this passion for unreality and for the impossible fills the world today with violence, hatred and indeed with a kind of insane and cunning fury which threatens our very existence. Science and technology are indeed admirable in many respects and if they fulfill their promises they can do much for man. But they can never solve his deepest problems. On the contrary, without wisdom, without the intuition and freedom that enable man to return to the root of his being, science and only precipitate him still further into the centrifugal flight that flings him, in all his**

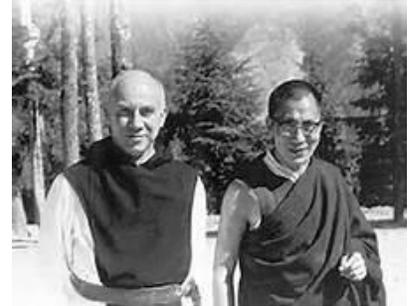
compact and uncomprehending isolation, into the darkness of outer space without purpose and without objective.

Questions:

1. How did Merton express his solidarity in service to the world?
2. What did you notice changing in Merton's writings during this time period?
3. Has your Spiritual Journey opened you up to be prophetic?

Conference 4 (1964 – 1968) – 4 years

The things that are on the surface are nothing, what is deep is the Real.



Highlights:

- Ecumenical Outreach to other Christians and Faith Traditions around Vatican Council II
 - Personal interest in monastic renewal
- Visit D.T. Suzuki – Zen Scholar at Columbia – June 1964
 - First wrote him in March 1959 after studying Zen for a few years.
- Moved into Hermitage – August 1965
 - Looking for other more solitary places (Alaska in 1968)
- Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn visits monastery and makes enormous impression on Merton (1966)
- Deep outreach to all faiths – on the heels of Vatican Council II
 - His final Pilgrimage to the East
 - Leaves Abbey on 9/10/1968
 - Visits India, Sri-Lanka (Ceylon) and Thailand
 - Visits Dalai Lama – November 1968
 - Dalai Lama writes of Merton: I could see he was a truly humble and deeply spiritual man. This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling

of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity... It was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word "Christian."

- Dies in Bangkok on 12/10/1968

Hermitage schedule:

- 2:15 am rise, Lauds followed by meditation
- 5:00 am breakfast followed by Lectio
- 7:30 am Prime and rosary
- 8:00 am Manual work, chores, etc
- 9:30 am Terce, Sext, None then to monastery for private Mass followed by thanksgiving and part of the psalter, dinner at infirmary refectory then return to hermitage; siesta or light reading.
- 1:00 pm Vespers
- 2:15 pm writing, work or walk
- 4:15 pm Vigils
- 5:00 pm Supper followed by Compline
- 6:00 pm New Testament, meditation, examen
- 7:00 pm Retire

Written Sources:

- Mystics and Zen Masters (1961)
- Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1966)
- Faith and Violence (1968)
- Zen and the Birds of Appetite (1968)
- Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (1973)

Important recognitions:

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, pg 316:

For my own part I consider myself neither conservative nor an extreme progressive. I would like to think I am what Pope John (XXIII) was – a progressive with deep respect and love for tradition – in other words a progressive who wants to preserve a very clear and marked *continuity* with the past and not make silly and idealistic compromises with the present – yet to be completely open to the modern world while retaining the clearly defined, traditionally Catholic position. The extreme progressives seem to me... to be hasty, irresponsible, in many ways, quite frivolous in their exaggerated and confused enthusiasms. They also seem to me at times to be fanatically incoherent, but I do not sense in them the chilling malice and meanness which comes

through in some of the utterances of extreme conservatives... The extreme conservatives seem to me to be people who feel themselves so menaced that they will go to any length in order to defend their own fanatical concept of the Church. This concept seems to me to be not only static and inert, but in complete continuity with what is most questionable and indeed scandalous in the history of the Church: Inquisition, persecution, intolerance, Papal power, clerical influence, alliance with worldly power, love of wealth and pomp, etc.

Thomas Merton wrote to the famous Zen scholar and author, D.T. Suzuki, dated March 12, 1959:

I will not be so foolish as to pretend to you that I understand Zen... And I think, too, that many of the Americans who are excited about Zen are perhaps, dealing with something in their own imagination, and not with a reality... All I know is that when I read your books -- and I have read many of them -- and above all when I read English versions of the little verses in which the Zen masters point their finger to something which flashed out at the time, I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says, "That's it!" Don't ask me what ... I have my own way to walk, and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go. So there it is, with all its beautiful purposelessness and it has become very familiar to me though I do not know "what it is." Or even if it is an "it". Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are busting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But still I don't know that it is. No matter. I don't know that the air is either.

Faith and Violence pg 106:

Nhat Hanh is My Brother... He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. (statements about Vietnam) ...I have far more in common with Naht Hahn than I have with many Americans, and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and an new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cuts across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program.

Reflections:

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (pp 140-141):

If I do not have unity in myself, how can I even think, let alone, speak of unity among Christians? Yet, of course, **in seeing unity for all Christians, I also attain unity within myself... the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone.** I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhist, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot "affirm" and "accept", but first one must say "yes" when one really can. If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.

Faith and Violence - Apologies to an Unbeliever (pp 205 – 214):

My own peculiar task in my Church and in my world has been that of the solitary explorer who, instead of jumping on all the latest bandwagons at once, is bound to search the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities, and in those certainties which lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety. In these depths there are no easy answers, no pat solutions to anything. It is a kind of submarine life in which faith sometimes mysteriously takes on the aspect of doubt when, in fact, one has to doubt and reject conventional and superstitious surrogates that have taken the place of faith. **On this level, the division between Believer and Unbeliever ceases to be so crystal clear. It is not that some are all right and others are all wrong: all are bound to seek in honest perplexity. Everybody is an Unbeliever more or less! Only when this fact is fully experienced, accepted and lived with, does one become fit to hear the simple message of the Gospel – or of any other religious teaching. The religious problem of the twentieth century is not understandable if we regard it only as a problem of Unbelievers and of atheists. It is also and perhaps chiefly a problem of Believers. The faith that has grown cold is not only the faith that the Unbeliever has lost but the faith that the Believer has kept.** This faith has too often become rigid, or complex, sentimental, foolish, or impertinent. It has lost itself in imaginings and unrealities, dispersed itself in pontifical and organizational routines, or evaporated in activism and loose talk. **The most hopeful sign of religious renewal is that authentic sincerity and openness with which some Believers are beginning to recognize this. At the very**

moment when it would seem that they had to gather for a fanatical last-ditch stand, these Believers are dropping their defensiveness, their defiance and their mistrust. They are realizing that a faith this is afraid of other people is not faith at all. A faith that supports itself by condemning others is itself condemned by the Gospel.

Mystics and Zen Masters – Contemplation and Dialogue pp 204 – 205:

... genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common, beneath surface differences. Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual “ground” which underlies all articulated differences. A genuinely fruitful dialogue cannot be content with a polite diplomatic interest in other religions and their beliefs. It seeks a deeper level, on which religious traditions have always claimed to bear witness to a higher and more personal knowledge of God than that which is contained simply in exterior worship and formulated doctrine. In all religions we encounter not only the claim to (divine) revelation in some form or other, but also the record of special experiences in which the absolute and final validity of that revelation is in some way attested. Furthermore, in all religions it is more or less generally recognized that this profound “sapiential” experience, call it gnosis, contemplation, “mysticism”, “prophecy”, or what you will, represents the deepest and most authentic fruit of religion itself. All religions, then, seek a “summit” of holiness, of experience, of inner transformation to which their believers – or an elite of believers – aspire because they hope, so to speak, to incarnate in their own lives the highest values in which they believe. To put it in grossly oversimplified language, all religions aspire to a “union with God” in some way or other, and in each case this union is described in terms which have very definite analogies with the contemplative and mystical experiences in the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, tradition...

Zen and the Birds of Appetite – More and more he spoke of Contemplation in terms of experience rather than in precise doctrinal statement. The emphasis on experience beyond concepts and words led him back to Eastern thought and especially to Zen. It was a way of life closer to his own Christian tradition that he had initially thought. It was, moreover, a means of enriching his understanding of that tradition.

The Study of Zen – pg 3

To define Zen in terms of a religious system or structure is in fact to destroy it – or rather to miss it completely, for what cannot be “constructed” cannot be destroyed either. Zen is not something which is grasped by being set within distinct limits or given

a characteristic outline or easily recognizable features so that, when we see these distinct and particular forms, we say: "There it is!" **Zen is not understood by being set apart in its own category, separated from everything else... Zen is "beyond the world of opposites, a world built up by intellectual distinction ... a spiritual world of nondistinction which involves achieving an absolute point of view."** ... Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense "void." But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green, or red, or yellow. If Zen has any preference, it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is "just glass." In other words to regard Zen merely and exclusively as Zen Buddhism it to falsify it and, no doubt, to betray the fact that one has no understand of it whatever... **The real drive of Buddhism is toward an enlightenment which is precisely a breakthrough into what is beyond system, beyond cultural and social structures, and beyond religious rite and belief... Now if we reflect a moment, we will realize that in Christianity, too, as well as in Islam, we have various admittedly unusual people who see beyond the "religious" aspect of their faith... And in Zen enlightenment, the discovery of the "original face before you were born" is the discovery not that one see Buddha but that one is Buddha and that Buddha is not what the images in the temple had led one to expect: for there is no longer any image, and consequently nothing to see, no one to see it, and a Void in which no image is even conceivable... What this means then is that Zen is outside all structures and forms.**

Pg 6

What is meant here is that the Zen consciousness does not distinguish and categorize what it sees in terms of social and cultural standards. It does not try to fit things into artificially preconceived structures. It does not judge beauty and ugliness according to canons of taste... If it seems to judge and distinguish, it does so only enough to point **beyond judgement to the pure void.** It does not settle its judgements as final. It does not erect its judgement into a structure to be defended against all comers. **Here we can fruitfully reflect on the deep meaning of Jesus' saying: "Judge not, and you will not be judged."** Beyond its moral implications, familiar to all, there is a Zen dimension to this word of the Gospel. Only when this Zen dimension is grasped will the moral bearing of it be fully clear! ... there eventually comes a time when like Moses we see that the thornbush of cultural and religious forms is suddenly on fire and we are summoned to approach it without shoes – and probably also without feet. Is the fire other than the Bush? More than the Bush? Of is it more the Bush than the Bush itself? The Burning

Bush of Exodus reminds us strangely of the Prajnaparamita Sutra “Form is emptiness, emptiness itself is form; form does not differ from emptiness (the Void), emptiness does not differ from form; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form...” “So too the words from the flame-and-bush in Exodus: “I am what I am.” These words go beyond postilion and negation, in fact no one quite knows what the Hebrew means.

Pg 8

The “mind of Christ” as described by St. Paul in Philippians 2 may be theologically worlds apart for the “mind of Buddha” – this I am not prepared to discuss. But the utter “self-emptying” of Christ – and the self-emptying which makes the disciple one with Christ in His kenosis – can be understood and has been understood in a very Zen-like sense as far as psychology and experience are concerned. Thus with all due deference to the vast doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and preserving intact all respect for the claims of the different religions: in no way mixing up the Christian “vision of God” with the Buddhist “enlightenment,” we can nevertheless say that the two have this psychic “limitlessness” in common. And they tend to describe it in much the same language. It is not “emptiness,” now “dark night,” now “perfect freedom,” now “no-mind” now “poverty.”

The New Consciousness – pg 15

Christian renewal has meant that Christians are now wide open to Asian religions, ready, in the words of Vatican II, to “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods” found among them. It is not that simple... Only the Catholics who are still convinced of the importance of Christian mysticism are also aware that much is to be learned from a study of the techniques and experience of Oriental religions. But these Catholics are regarded at times with suspicion, if not derision, by progressives and conservatives alike... let us remind ourselves that another (not-Cartesian), metaphysical consciousness is still available to modern man. It starts not from the thinking and self-aware subject but from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely nonobjective. It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject become aware of itself as a quasi-object. This consciousness of Being... is an immediate experience that goes beyond reflexive awareness. It is not “consciousness of” but pure consciousness, in which the subject as such “disappears.”... The Oriental religions and Christian

mysticism have stressed, this self-aware subject is not final or absolute; it is a provisional self-construction which exists, for practical purposes, only in a sphere of relativity. Its existence has meaning in so far as it does not become fixated or centered upon itself as ultimate, learns to function not as its own center but “from God” and “for others.” The Christian term “from God” implies what the nontheistic religious philosophies conceive as the hypothetical Single Center of all beings, what T.S. Eliot called “the still point of the turning world,; but which Buddhism for example visualized not as “point” but as “void.” (and of course, the void is not visualized at all.) In brief, the form of consciousness assumes a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking self which is its own justification and its own center. Here the individual is aware of himself as self to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in “letting-go,” in ecstasy, in God – there are many ways of phrasing it. The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is “everywhere and nowhere” in whom all are encountered, for whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter “the other” with whom it is already united anyway “in God.”

A Christian Looks at Zen – pg 33

The truth of the matter is that you can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare them... **Zen is deliberately cryptic and disconcerting. It seem to say the most outrageous things about the life of the spirit. It seems to jolt even the Buddhist mind out of its familiar thought routines and devour imaginings, and no doubt it will be even more shocking to those whose religious outlook is remote from Buddhism... Now the reader with a Judeo-Christian background of some sort... will naturally be predisposed to misinterpret Zen because he will instinctively take up the position of one who is confronting a “rival system of thought” or a “competing ideology” or an “alien world view” or more simply “a false religion.” Anyone who adopts such a position makes it impossible for himself to see what Zen is, because he assumes in advance that it must be something that it expressly refuses to be. Zen is not a systematic explanation of life, it is not an ideology, it is not a world view, it is not a theology of revelation and salvation, it is not a mystique, it is not a way of ascetic perfection, it is not mysticism as this is understood in the West, in fact it fits no convenient category of ours... Zen is not concerned with God in the way Christianity is, thought one is entitled to discover sophisticated analogies between the Zen experience of Void... and the experience of God in the “unknowing” of apophatic Christian mysticism... Now the great obstacle to mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism lies in the Western tendency to focus not on the Buddhist**

experience, which is essential, but on the explanation which is accidental and which indeed Zen often regards as completely trivial and even misleading. Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas – or by emotional excitement... Zen, then aims at a kind of certainty: but it is not the logical certainty of philosophical proof, still less the religious certainty that comes with the acceptance of the word of God by the obedience of faith. It is rather the certainty that goes with an authentic metaphysical intuition which is also existential and empirical. The purpose of all Buddhism is to refine the consciousness until this kind of insight is attained, and the religious implications of the insight are then variously worked out and applied to life in the different Buddhist traditions... **It cannot be repeated too often: in understanding Buddhism it would be a great mistake to concentrate on the “doctrine,” the formulated philosophy of life, and to neglect the experience, which is absolutely essential, the very heart of Buddhism. This is in a sense the exact opposite of the situation in Christianity. For Christianity begins with revelation. Though it would be misleading to classify this revelation simply as a “doctrine” and an “explanation” (it is far more than that – the revelation of God Himself in the mystery of Christ -- it is nevertheless communicated to us in words, in statements, and everything depends on the believer’s accepting the truth of these statements. Therefore Christianity has always been profoundly concerned with these statements: with the accuracy of their transmission from the original sources, with the precise understanding of their exact meaning, with the elimination and indeed the condemnation of false interpretations. At times this concern has been exaggerated almost to the point of an obsession... This obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude has often made people forget that the heart of Catholicism, too, is a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations. What too often has been overlooked, in consequence, is that Catholicism is the taste and experience of eternal life... Too often the Catholic has imagined himself obliged to stop short at a mere correct and external belief expressed in good moral behavior, instead of entering fully into the life of hope and love consummated by union with the invisible God “in Christ and in the Spirit” thus fully sharing in the Divine Nature... When we set Christianity and Buddhism side by side, we must try to find the point where a genuinely common ground between the two exists. At the present moment, this is no easy task. In fact it is still practically impossible... After all, what do we mean by Christianity and what do we mean by Buddhism?... The immense variety of forms taken by thought, experience, worship, moral practice in both Buddhism and Christianity make all**

comparisons haphazard... We keep returning to one central questions in two forms: the relations of objective doctrine to subjective mystic (or metaphysical) experience, and the difference in this relationship between Christianity and Zen. In Christianity the objective doctrine retains priority both in time and in eminence. In Zen the experience is always prior, not in time but in importance. This is because Christianity is based on supernatural revelations, and Zen, discarding all idea of any revelation and even taking are very independent view of sacred traditions, seeks to penetrate the natural ontological ground of being. Christianity is a religion of grace and divine gift, hand of total dependence on God. Zen is not easily classified as "a religion"... and in any event is strives, like all Buddhism, to make man completely free and independent even in his striving for salvation and enlightenment.

Transcendent Experience – pg 71

It is an experience of metaphysical or mystical self-transcending and also at the same time an experience of the "Transcendent" or the "Absolute" of "God" not so much as object but Subject. The Absolute Ground of Being... is realized so to speak "from within" -- realized from within "Himself" and from within "myself," thought "myself" is not lost and "found" "in Him." ... the problem of a self that is "no-self," that is by no means an "alienated self" but on the contrary a transcendent Self which, to clarify it in Christian terms, is metaphysically distinct from the Self of God and yet perfectly identified with that Self by love and freedom, so that there appears to be but one Self. Experience of this is what we here call "transcendent experience" or the illumination of wisdom. To attain this experience is to penetrate the reality of all that is, to grasp the meaning of one's own existence, to find one's true place in the scheme of things, to relate perfectly to all that is in a relation to identity and love... It is finally beyond the ordinary level of religious or spiritual experience... in which the intelligence and "the heart" (a traditional and technical term in Sufism, Hesychasm, and Christian mysticism generally) are illuminated with insight into the meaning of revelation, or of being, or of life. All these experiences are on a level where the self-aware subject remains more or less conscious of himself as subject, and indeed his awareness of his subjectivity is heightened and purified... In Christian tradition the focus on this "experience" is found not in the individual self as a separate, limited and temporal ego, but in Christ or the Holy Spirit "within" the self. In Zen it is Self with a capital S, that is to say precisely not the ego-self. This Self is the Void. .. More specifically, all transcendent experience is for the Christian a participation in "the mind of Christ"... It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being

and Love are manifested... Note that in Buddhism also the highest development of consciousness is that by which the individual ego is completely emptied and becomes identified with the enlightened Buddha, or rather finds itself to be in reality the enlightened Buddha mind. Nirvana is not the consciousness of an ego that is aware of itself as having crossed over to “the other shore”, but the Absolute Ground-Consciousness of the Void, in which there are no shores. **Thus the Buddhist enters into the self-emptying and enlightenment of Buddha as the Christian enters in the self-emptying (crucifixion) and glorification (resurrection and ascension) of Christ. The chief difference between the two is that the former is existential and ontological, the latter is theological and personal. But the “person” here must be distinguished from “the individual empirical ego.”**

The Asian Journal – Thomas Merton went as a Cistercian monk deeply grounded by years of study in his own tradition and totally committed to it, yet at the same time, deeply convinced that there was much he could learn from firsthand experience of Eastern monasticism.

October 23, 1968 talk - pg 306:

Faith is not the suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it. The man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith. Consequently, the monk is one who has to struggle in the depth of his being with the presence of doubt, and to go through what some religions call the Great Doubt, to break through beyond doubt into a certitude which is very, very deep because it is not his own personal certitude, it is the certitude of God Himself, in us. The only ultimate reality is God. God lives and dwells in us. We are not justified by any action of our own, but we are called by the voice of God...to pierce through the irrelevance of our own life, while accepting that our life is totally irrelevant in order to find relevance in Him. And this relevance in Him is something that can only be received, not something we grasp or possess. It is something that can only be received as a gift. Consequently, the kind of life that I represent is a life that is openness to gift; a gift from God and a gift from others. It is not that we go out into the world with a capacity to love others greatly. This too we know in ourselves, that our capacity for love is limited. And it has to be completed with the capacity to be loved, to accept love from others, to want to be loved by others, to admit our loneliness and to live with our loneliness because everybody is lonely. This is then another basis for the kind of experience I am talking about, which is a new approach, a different approach to the external experience of the monk. The monk in this solitude and in his meditation seeks this dimension of life. .. **And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond**

speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

November Circular Letter to Friends – pg 324

In summary, I can say so far my contacts with Asian monks have been very fruitful and rewarding. **We seem to understand one another very well indeed.... They are all specialists in meditation and contemplation. This is what appeals to me most. It is invaluable to have direct contact with people who have really put in a lifetime of hard work in training their minds and liberating themselves from passion and illusion... they are men of unusual quality and depth,** very warm and wonderful people. Talking with them is a real pleasure... I hope you will pray for me and for all those I will be meeting. I am sure the blessing of God will be upon these meetings, **and I hope I can bring back to my monastery something of the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact** – but it is something very hard to put into words. **I wish you all the peace and joy in the Lord and an increase of faith: for in my contacts with these new friends I also feel consolation in my own faith in Christ and His indwelling presence. I hope and believe He may be present in the hearts of all of us.** With my very best regards always, cordially yours in the Lord Jesus and in His Spirit.

Experience:

Polonnaruwa – writes about it December 4, 1968 (pg 233) – The Human Experience of Transcendence.

Polonnaruwa is both an ancient city in east-central Sri Lanka, and the name of the kingdom of which it was the capital from 1070 to 1284 CE. Its ruined palaces and temples testify to the glory which it must have had at the height of its power. Gal Vihara (variously translated “rock temple” or “stone monastery”) is a Buddhist shrine in Polonnaruwa constructed in the 12th century by King Parakramabahu I, and is the most celebrated and visited temple in the city, if not in the entire country. Its chief adornment is the great whale-shaped granite rock out of which have been carved four images of the Buddha—a large seated figure, a smaller seated figure inside an artificial cave, a standing figure and a reclining figure.

Merton visited Gal Vihara on Monday, December 2, eight days before his death. On Thursday, December 4th. He entered in his journal his description of his experience there, in the presence of the great statues, and his reflection on the experience. David

Polonnaruwa with its vast area under trees. Fences. Few people. No beggars. A dirt road. Lost. Then we find Gal Vihara and the other monastic complex stupas. Cells. Distant mountains, like Yucatan.

The path dips down to Gal Vihara: a wide, quiet, hollow, surrounded with trees. A low outcrop of rock, with a cave cut into it, and beside the cave a big seated Buddha on the left, a reclining Buddha on the right, and Ananda, I guess, standing by the head of the reclining Buddha. In the cave, another seated Buddha. **The vicar general, shying away from “paganism,” hangs back and sits under a tree reading the guidebook. I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation—without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening.**

I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape figure, rock and tree. And the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow, where you can go back and see different aspects of the figures.

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The queer evidence of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded (much more “imperative” than Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa because completely simple and straightforward).

The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya ... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says

everything; it needs nothing And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered. It does not need to be discovered. It is we, Asians included, who need to discover it.

The whole thing is very much a Zen garden, a span of bareness and openness and evidence and the great figures, motionless, yet with the lines in full movement, waves of vesture and bodily form, a beautiful and holy vision.

December 10, 1968 Final Talk – pg 340

Incidentally, I would way that the question of Asian monasticism for Christians should not be interpreted in terms of just playing an Asian part or an Asian role. It is not that we want to look like Asians; it is not sufficient simply to present an Asian image. Too often it seems to resolve itself into that. I think we have to go much deeper than this. **For a Christian – as also, I believe, for a Buddhist – there is an essential orientation that goes beyond this or that society, this or that culture, or even this or that religion. 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 Greek, 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 visions between this and that. So you respect the plurality of these things, but you do not make them ends in themselves. We respect these things and go beyond them dialectically.** The kind of thing I am saying is that in Christianity you have a dialectic approach to this and in Buddhism you have an essential dialectic... All these dialectic approaches go beyond the thesis and antithesis, this and that, black and white, East and West. We accept the division, we work with the division and we go beyond the division.

The monk belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him insofar as he has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it. You can't just immerse yourself in the world and get carried away with it. That is no salvation. If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support yourself. Supposing somebody is drowning and you are standing on a rock, you can do it. There is nothing to be gained by simply jumping in the water and drowning with him.

Questions:

1. How did Merton's solidarity extend to InterReligious Dialogue?
2. What paradoxes or deeper seeing d you think Merton needed for this work?
3. What did you notice changing in Merton's writings during this time period?
4. Has your Spiritual Journey opened you up to the Interfaith/Interspiritual realm?

Final Reflection questions:

- What touched or resonated most with you about Merton's Journey?
- Which stage(s) do you most relate to Thomas Merton's Journey? Which quotes resonate most with you?
- What questions about God are you living?
- What new areas of freedom in your faith or spiritual life are you opening up to?
- What are the paradoxes in your life?
- How has the day met your expectations?

Closing Prayer

Preface: This new language of prayer has to come out of something which transcends all our traditions, and comes out of the immediacy of love. We have to part now, aware of the love that unites us, the love that unites us in spite of real differences, real emotional friction... The things on the surface are nothing, what is deep is the Real. We are creatures of Love. Let us therefore join hands, as we did before, and I will try to say something that comes out of the depths of our hearts. I ask you to concentrate on the love that is in you, that is in us all. I have no idea what I am going to say. I am going to be silent a minute, and then I will say something...

“O God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.” – **Closing statements and prayer from an informal address delivered in Calcutta, India (October 1968)**