

Soul Searching

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The Journey of Thomas Merton

Edited by Morgan C. Atkinson

with Jonathan Montaldo



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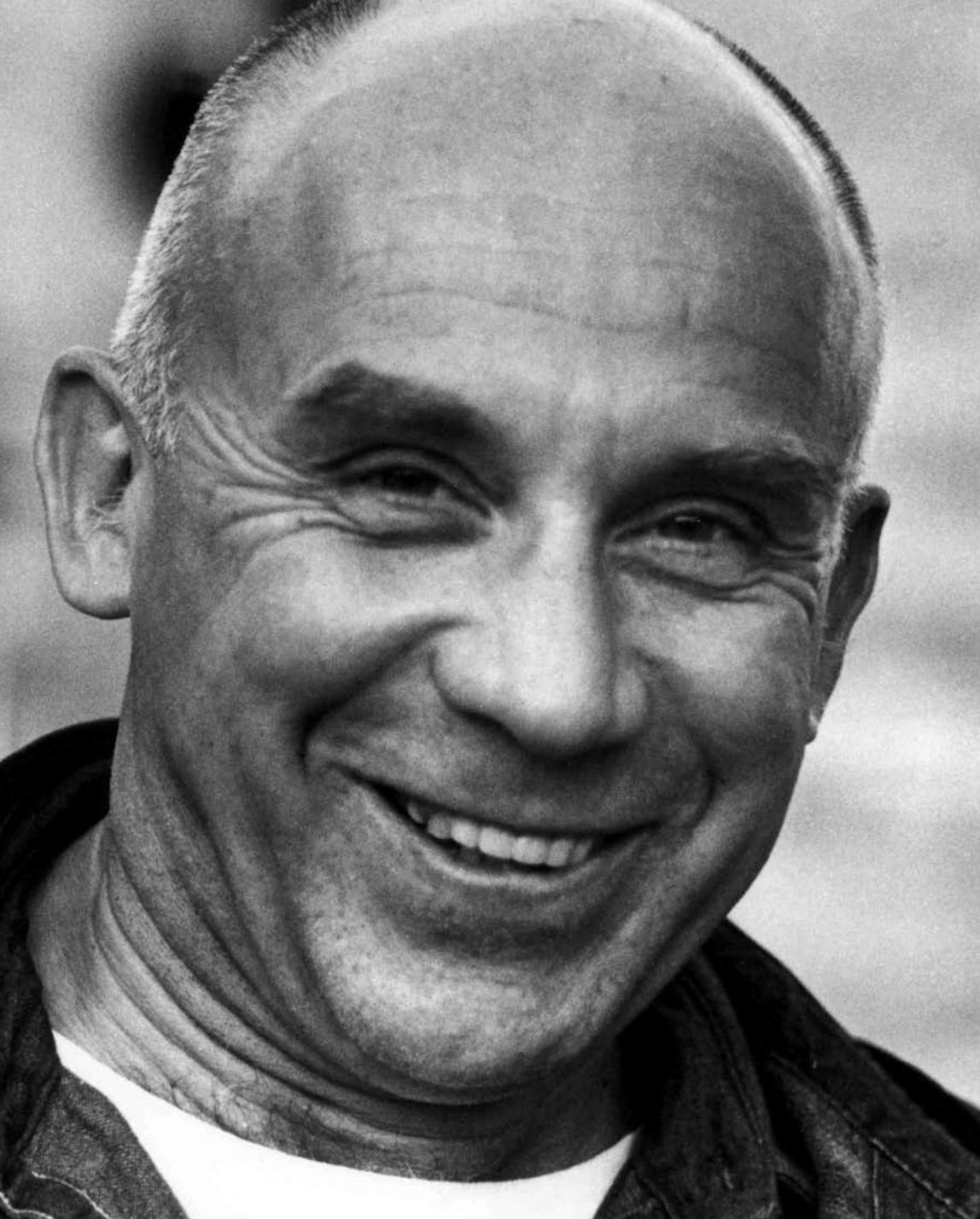
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*For Brayden, Will, and Ben:
“Mercy within mercy within mercy”*

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Introduction

Seeds

Thomas Merton articulated with such clarity the reality of God's presence in the world.

—Dr. Bonnie Thurston

He was studying Mahatma Gandhi and the Chinese mystics and Zen Buddhism when most people had never heard of Zen or Buddhism.

—Fr. John Dear

Merton is, in a sense, the lost soul of the twentieth century, looking for redemption, looking for recovery, looking for God.

—Sr. Kathleen Deignan

These three insights say a lot to me. In a nutshell they are why I find Thomas Merton compelling enough to devote two years to creating a documentary about him. They are why for more than thirty years I have read his work and been fascinated by his life.

For me these quotes define Merton as someone who:

- 1) wrote about the essence of life in a way that connects with a remarkably wide array of readers;
- 2) thought outside conventional “spiritual boxes” and was always looking for ways to find common ground with other spiritual traditions;

This picture of Thomas Merton has always been a favorite. It captures him in full stride—joyful, engaged, fully human. It could be called the compass for the documentary Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton, as I referred to it often in trying to bring him to life for viewers.

3) despite his extraordinary gifts, had an abundance of human foibles with which most of us struggle. And thankfully he wasn't too proud to admit it. In fact, it's his struggle with his humanity that makes his writing and life so interesting.

These three insights also made me think I should try to put together this book.

Another book about Thomas Merton? Since he died in 1968 there have been well over a hundred books written about Merton. These have been amplified by documentaries, plays, and all manner of magazine articles. Obviously people are interested in this man whom I feel safe in calling the twentieth century's most famous Christian monk. I doubt there is very much competition for this designation, but nevertheless, as the scholar and writer Anthony Padovano told me, "Thomas Merton is one of those figures who has achieved a kind of mythic stature. I think you achieve a mythic stature when you somehow or other symbolize and connect with very deep needs in the human psyche, and I think that Thomas Merton did that."

OK, but another book? Here's my case for this one. I'm a filmmaker and in creating the PBS documentary *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* I interviewed some thirty Merton friends and scholars, tracing how this complex man traveled his spiritual path. It came to more than sixty hours of interviews. These were then squeezed into a one-hour documentary. That left a lot of very rich material that didn't fit into a program designed for a visual medium. I agree with Dr. Padovano's assessment that Merton's life and writing tell us something important about ourselves and about the mysteries of the Spirit. A book including a far wider sampling of the insights from these interviews offers a great opportunity to share more about this important man and his spiritual journey. If you accept that premise, read on.

Journals—the Seedbed

Most Merton books tell the story of a twentieth-century spiritual master who after a rowdy youth spent his adult years living as a monk in a rural Kentucky monastery. Or as my father said when I first mentioned Merton some thirty years ago, “Thomas Merton? Wasn’t he the guy who wrote a famous book and locked himself away for the rest of his life?”

Dad was a little off with his chronology, not to mention his understanding of Merton’s life. Merton was already “locked away” when he wrote his most famous book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He lived as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani for twenty-seven years, seemingly in near total isolation but in actuality fully engaged with all corners of the world.

Merton baffled my father. As a working Hollywood writer he had to admire Merton’s prodigious writing output, but as a man with Epicurean tastes he could not fathom why anyone would embrace a monastic discipline. Equally puzzling to him was why I was suddenly so interested in Merton.

His doubt was understandable. Growing up I had shown little inclination toward spiritual matters, certainly not as expressed by a Trappist monk. I grew up a Presbyterian and by my late teens had become an observant agnostic. At the time of the Merton discussion with my father I was twenty-five, a college graduate looking for a life in filmmaking but not making much headway. My parents probably told their friends I was “looking for myself.” Their friends would’ve nodded sympathetically. Many faced the same situation with their children, late-blooming baby-boomers trying to find their stride. Now suddenly I was showing interest in a monk who had belonged to one of the most austere orders in the Roman Catholic Church, popularly known as Trappists, but formally known as the Cistercians. For my father there was consolation in the probability that Merton and monks would soon join Transcendental Meditation in my catalogue of abandoned interests.



Yet here it is more than thirty years later and I'm still interested in Thomas Merton. I became a Catholic because of him. I spent two years making a documentary about his life. Before that I made two other documentaries about life at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Now there's this book. What has sustained this interest and fascination? Lawrence Cunningham, the eminent Merton scholar from Notre Dame, told me, "Merton could easily be called the greatest spiritual writer, spiritual master, of the twentieth century in English-speaking America." Impressive, but my reasons are more personal. Thomas Merton's writing has quite simply been a roadmap to living my life as a more fully human being in every decade of my adult life: as a twenty-five-year-old lost in the weeds, as a thirty-four-year-old whose best friend had just died from cancer, a forty-five-year-old considering career path choices, a fifty-two-year-old on his wedding day, and now as a grandfather of three. In matters of joy, grief, or simply confusion, Merton has consistently shed light on what really matters—inspiring, teaching, entertaining, and commiserating.

My regard for Merton was such that I initially shied away from doing a documentary about him. I knew the dangers in taking on subjects that one admires a little too much. Even if objectivity could be maintained, this was Thomas Merton, an acknowledged spiritual master, an intellect well out of my depth, a life model of sorts. Besides, an excellent documentary had been made already in 1985 by Paul Wilkes.

This was and is a first-rate film. It will remain in a class by itself for its interviews of people closest to Merton's life, people whom Wilkes rightly claimed "knew him best." This wonderful documentary has qualities that will not be topped. But because of Merton's literary last will and testament, Paul Wilkes did not have access to what was then known as Merton's "restricted journals." His documentary could not consider the facts that would become apparent when these journals

Morgan Atkinson near Bear Harbor, California where Merton considered establishing a hermitage late in his life.

were published twenty-five years after Merton's death, beginning in 1993. These journals have now been published in seven volumes by HarperSanFrancisco. They are a primary source, along with his books, letters, poetry, calligraphy, and photographs, conveying essential hints of what lies beneath the surface of Merton's public story.

Because of the recent emergence of material like the journals, I felt there was room for another Merton documentary. Merton's journals became the bedrock of my documentary. I wanted to show the truly human dimensions of this great spiritual thinker, and these journals chronicled his most private thoughts from student days until his death. The journals revealed a very human, very fallible man writing thoughts that soared but that also trudged through desolate lands of doubt and self-recrimination. Time and again one could read how Merton struggled, failed, picked himself up, and found the courage to start again. Searching . . . and finding . . . then searching for more, farther on down the road.

In the process of reading his journals, I took Merton down from any false pedestal I might have built for him. At first this was disorienting. We like our life models perfect. But in the end the journals increased my regard for Merton. By dealing so frankly with his own shortcomings, Merton challenged some of the crutches I employed in my own life. If he could face dark issues, why couldn't I? If I took what he was writing about seriously, how could I not at least try to match his courage? It seemed that, if I could tell the Merton story in a way that captured his humanity without trivializing the depth and breadth of his search, it would be worthwhile.

Soul Searching

For the name of my documentary on Merton, a friend adept in the marketing business advised putting "search" in the title. He said research shows that this active verb often leads to brisk sales. For better or worse many of us are still searching for answers. Sales considerations aside, I

liked the word “search” because it also captured an essential element of Merton’s life. “Restless” is another much-used description. Jonathan Montaldo, an editor of Merton’s journals, confirmed to me that always stretching forward in his search for a deeper experience of God and of what it might mean to be a more complete human being was a continuing element in Merton’s monastic life. Merton, he said, was never satisfied with any of society’s “obligatory answers.” He couldn’t even swallow the easy answers he was tempted to fashion for himself. “So what looks like intellectual and emotional instability from our outside-of-his-experience perspective as readers,” Montaldo said, “was really his way of finding new energies to deepen his spiritual life. If you view Merton’s searching for the truth in contemplative experiences outside of Christianity, to take only one aspect of Merton’s interests and studies, as instability, I feel you miss the point of Merton’s life trajectory entirely. Dissatisfaction with himself and his present knowledge, and with his Western culture’s ‘easy answers,’ was the fuel that kept his spiritual life on fire, kept him searching for God. Complacency and settling down were Merton’s spiritual life’s greatest enemies.”

I cautioned myself, as I would often with the other voices I would listen to in conversations, that Montaldo’s slant on Merton was probably a very personal reading of Merton’s text. Yet there was something I could agree with in viewing Merton as someone relentlessly searching for the truth. It seemed very ’60s and also very much in keeping with Joseph Campbell’s description of the timeless quest of the hero. That struck a chord within me. As a child, at bedtime I had been read the Greek myths as well as the tales of King Arthur. The “searching” Merton I was now reading as an adult blended seamlessly with the Lancelot, Odysseus, and Springsteen of my youth.

Yes, Springsteen. After all, what could be more mythic than a rock star? In my estimation Bruce Springsteen was another bigger-than-life figure searching for the truth. In his signature song from the mid-1970s, “Born to Run,” Springsteen declared he wanted to break loose from the conventions of a confining small town and go find “if love is real.” For

me that's what Merton seemed up to—making the ultimate commitment to finding the ultimate love, one that would not fail him.

Seeking a Merton Choir

My documentary on Merton was undertaken in the fall of 2004 and reluctantly completed in 2006. I say “reluctantly” because quite honestly I regretted the project ending. For two very enjoyable years I was privileged to travel around the country interviewing Merton's friends and monastic colleagues, as well as scholars of his work. From the start of my work I knew the main voice I wanted in the program was Merton's, speaking in the personal, conversational manner of his journals. I wanted to complement this with the thoughts of a mix of people who would not simply praise the good monk and great writer but would help present the complexity of this man. I wanted a variety of voices, a Merton choir.

In casting this Merton choir I traveled from coast to coast. From Manhattan skyscrapers to California redwoods, my criteria in selecting people to interview was pretty simple. Did they actually know Merton well? Had they lived in community with him? If they didn't know him firsthand, had they written a compelling book about him or about topics in which Merton was interested? Could they talk about him in a way that was accessible? Honestly, it also helped if they lived in an interesting locale.

In my travels I had the good fortune of meeting many generous people, generous and patient. As I talked with them it became clear that there were many Mertons running free. By this I mean different people had different perceptions of just who Merton was. Lawrence Cunningham at Notre Dame confirmed as much.

“What Thomas Merton are you interested in?” he asked. “Are you interested in Thomas Merton the monk? Are you interested in Thomas Merton the literary critic? Are you interested in Thomas Merton the poet? The social justice person? The person of peace? The guy who

writes on spiritual theology? There are many Thomas Mertons, at least from the perspective of his writings.”

He concluded by saying that Merton was really “unclassifiable.” Not the best of news for a documentary producer attempting to do in some way just that.

Merton’s Neighborhoods

Aside from interviewing people about Merton, I felt I needed to see where he had spent his adult life. Traveling to New York, Gethsemani, Louisville, and points west, my goal became to put myself as much as possible *in* Merton’s place. While attempting to do so I kept in mind what Dom John Eudes Bamberger had told me. He had been a student of Merton’s and also a good friend. As the monastery’s resident psychiatrist he had worked closely with Merton in the screening of Gethsemani’s candidates for community life. So he knew Merton and monastic life well. He described the frustration of many novice monks who had been drawn to monastic life at Gethsemani because of how Merton described it. Their consternation grew steadily as days, months, years went by and they were not seeing or experiencing the same revelations that Merton had and had written about, even though they were in essentially the same environment. Dom John Eudes would counsel the aspirants to consider that perhaps Merton was unusually perceptive as well as equipped with extraordinary powers of description. This says nothing about his unique spiritual gifts.

Dom John Eudes’s story helped me to have no illusions about seeing *as* Merton saw, but I figured I could at least in many cases observe (and share with viewers) *what* he saw. Thanks to the hospitality of several monastic communities, I was able to live in monasteries in Kentucky, New York, the New Mexico desert, and the California redwoods. I also lived in Merton’s hermitage at Gethsemani and kept his hours, sort of. My adherence to his rigorous schedule usually trailed off after the first day or two. But I did mindfully walk his Kentucky woods as well as the

New Mexico desert and the Bear Harbor seashore in California that had excited him so much.

Some have been disappointed that I confined my travels to the continental United States even though Merton was profoundly influenced by Europe and Asia (not to mention South America and the Middle East). This was due in part to a modest production budget but also because the U.S. is where Merton spent all but a few months of his adult life. The “adult Merton,” from age twenty to fifty-three, is the period of life on which I chose to focus. I kept reminding myself that mine was not an attempt to create a cradle-to-grave documentary as Paul Wilkes had done. The goal was to create a human, lively portrait of Merton that might inspire viewers to explore Merton more deeply on their own.

Spare Parts

At the end of my travels I had captured some two hundred hours of footage, including the interviews. The editing of this rich material presented the only unpleasant part of the work. Trying to find the essence of Merton, I had cast an intentionally wide net. Now, unavoidably, there was so much material, very rich material, that was left unused. It was frustrating in that I knew how much these conversations meant to me. I believed they could also have meaning for anyone interested in the spiritual dimension of life, particularly for those interested in the life and times of Thomas Merton. The solution seemed to be a book that incorporates more highlights of the “Merton choir” interviews.

These interviews are far from academic lectures, as none of my conversation partners spoke from notes. They allowed me to capture them speaking unrehearsed the candid but informed insights about a man they knew and loved very well. These generous people have allowed me the unusual license to reproduce their reflections without any input into the editing of what are their conversational remarks. If you want to know best who my conversation partners are and what they most seri-

ously and thoughtfully conclude about Merton's legacy, I urge you to follow up this introduction by reading their books and their articles.

I have organized this material by using four geographic centers of Merton's adult life as lenses through which to see him. The areas are New York City; the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky; Louisville, Kentucky; and points west and east (to accommodate his travels in the last year of his life). To each geographic center I've assigned significant issues of Merton's life. For example, the New York section includes Merton's time at Columbia University, his "playboy" years, early writing, his brief flirtation with communism, and ultimately his conversion to Catholicism. To illuminate these issues I call on the expertise of the Merton choir, or pertinent excerpts from my interviews with these people. My hope is that you will enjoy listening with me as this panel of Merton experts weighs in.

So, let the search begin . . . or continue.

Part 1

The Young Merton in New York



ALMA MATER

New York City Serenade

New York, you are mine! I love you.

So Thomas Merton wrote as he entered the New York harbor in 1935 bound for school at Columbia University in Manhattan. Decades later, when he would return for a brief meeting with the Zen Buddhism scholar D. T. Suzuki, Merton acknowledged that he was in his heart a New Yorker. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is in large part set in New York. He loved the vitality of the city with its diverse and energetic people. It's the city where he spent his formative college years at Columbia and where he established some of the most important and lasting friendships of his life. New York City is for Merton an important "seed" for his later contemplative life at Gethsemani. But New York is also the place where the young Merton would find everything about life "intolerable." The negativity he came to associate with Manhattan seemed to stem from a self-loathing that grew within him because of the life choices he made in New York City and earlier in England during his freshman year at Cambridge. New York, he said, "did not prove to be any good for me." Its culture became a paradigm of American culture for Merton, but more personally the city represented the consequences of a tumultuous and unstable early life. As a young monk writing his autobiography, he would rail against Manhattan and try to kick its dust from his shoes. As a mature monk, Merton would look back on the city of his youth with love.

Columbia University was like a welcoming mother for the young Merton. He arrived on campus bruised from his first year failures at Cambridge. Columbia became the closest thing to a home he had had until that time.

As I walked the Columbia campus, as I admired the beauty of Corpus Christi Church where Merton was baptized a Catholic, and as I drank coffee in Greenwich Village, I tried to conjure before my mind's eye Merton in New York. I called on my Merton choir members to describe this young man fresh off the boat from England. It's 1935, and Tom Merton is embarking on a chapter of his life that marks him indelibly and eventually makes him famous in a world for which he had great ambivalence.



Paul Elie: I've come to know Robert Giroux, Merton's editor and initially his classmate at Columbia. When he recalls Thomas Merton at Columbia, he recalls a young man of frenzied activity who literally couldn't sit still. Such was the appeal of the clubs, the classes, the newspapers, the dining out, the excursions downtown that Columbia offered. He just did not rest. Merton himself would say later that this restlessness was theological, that he didn't have a sense of his true orientation and so was casting around in all directions. To put it a little more prosaically, and this is what Robert Giroux told me, his life lacked an order that would give him a little peace.

Monica Weis: I think of Merton in that time as the man about town. He was discovering friendship and had wonderful friendships with people like the artist Ad Reinhardt and the poet Bob Lax. Being part of the Columbia journalism project there, the *Jester*, he spent time with those guys. He hung out with them and discovered questions that they were interested in. I think the intellectual discussions late at night must have been extremely stimulating. Here was a place for him to discover, I'll say "home" in quotation marks, because this is a man who was always searching for "home."

Going to the jazz clubs, I think that really reflects something of the personality of Merton. Jazz is an improv kind of music but it has rules.

He loved improvisation but then discovered that there are principles and rules of life. So jazz could be a very good metaphor for him during his student days at Columbia.

Elena Malits: As a young person, when he was going to what we would call high school in England, he was already interested in jazz. And that certainly continued in his days at Cambridge and then after he came to Columbia. I think that's a very good metaphor for Merton's life because jazz is a very complex kind of music. It has a certain kind of gait and rhythm. It is intricate in the arrangements of notes. It's the kind of music, I think, if you get interested in it at all, it hooks you. And that's the kind of personality Thomas Merton had.

John Eudes Bamberger: I think anyone who knew Merton for any length of time quickly saw that he did everything with full speed ahead. He was a type that once he jumped on something, he landed with both feet. That would get him in trouble when he was younger, and it would occasionally get him in trouble later on in the monastery when he would write certain things. I remember him telling me once, "I'm going to get hit over the head for this, but I'm going to say it anyhow." There was always a certain spontaneity about Merton that made one feel that he was always right there with you.

Christine Bochen: I had the experience of meeting a woman who was also a student at Columbia when Merton was there, and what she remembered was that he always had a group of people around him, and I think that captures something of the Merton that we've come to know. The one who is the solitary also had, in this place, both a hunger and a capacity for human relationships. She remembers walking into the student union and seeing Merton surrounded by people.

Michael Mott: When I talked to a friend from Merton's Columbia days, Jinny Burton, about him, she gave rather a telling remark that the two of them were dance partners. She said Merton was almost a professional dancer. He was terrific, but she remarked that he couldn't forget



himself. You know, you're a dancer, you've got to forget your body and do all kinds of things, but he was too self-aware, just too self-aware, she said. I thought that was interesting.

Elena Malits: I did some graduate study at Union Theological Seminary, which is right across from Columbia where Merton was an undergraduate. So I used to eat in some of the places he talked about, on the Upper West Side. I used to look at Columbia students and say to myself, "Which of these young people I'm looking at now would Thomas Merton be like?" The thing that strikes me about him is that he was intellectually curious beyond belief. He read everything he could get his hands on. I think that he thought anything in print was worthy of at least starting. If it wasn't any good he would toss it aside. But he had almost an insatiable literary interest. He was interested in politics, in social issues. I can't think of anything that was going on in the United States in the mid-1930s when he was at Columbia that would not have been of great concern to him. He had a wonderful sense of humor; everybody who knows him says that. They say he was fun to be around. He belonged to the people who were probably the most interesting set in his class. As somebody who has taught in college all her life, there are just some classes of students that come around that are just more interesting than others. In 1935, when he came to Columbia, he got in with a group of bright young men who wanted to conquer the world, to know everything there was to know. I think his friendships were absolutely crucial to the person he later became.

Cambridge

I've always enjoyed descriptions of the young Merton. They are what first allowed me to make a connection with him. Though my own

This is another favorite Merton photo. Actually it's an outtake from his freshman year class picture at Clare College, Cambridge. Everyone looks pretty much on the same page with the exception of Merton, whose mind is definitely someplace else. It seems to aptly sum up that wayward freshman year.

school days had little of the scholastic seriousness of Merton's, I can nonetheless relate to his life on a college campus. I've noticed that Merton's youthful experiences seem to attract many other readers, perhaps for some of the same reasons as my own. Here is a towering spiritual figure who did not emerge fully formed from a cradle of piety. His advocacy of a spiritual life had credibility because he knew whereof he spoke in describing the limitations of a world based on purely material aspirations.

For my film Soul Searching I wanted to convey just how enthusiastically and fully the young Thomas Merton had "embraced the world." This was no recluse holed up in his dorm room. He danced every dance with gusto. If a spiritual path could be rooted in such earthy ground, then that was encouraging for those of us far outside the cloister.

As Merton describes these New York days in The Seven Storey Mountain, the vitality comes crackling off the page but so does his angst. Robert Giroux, Merton's friend and editor, noted that Merton's energy was almost manic. It was as if he was trying to obliterate something gnawing within him. Anthony Padovano observed to me that, in researching his biography of Merton, he sensed many of the ingredients of a nervous breakdown in the young student. What prompted all this?



Jonathan Montaldo: Certainly his experience at Cambridge University, before coming to New York—in his autobiography Cambridge becomes the “pit of hell”—must have affected Merton for the rest of his life. There’s no reason why Cambridge in and of itself is hell, but for Merton it was hell. He had made it hell. He did not make good grades and was in danger of losing his scholarship. He fooled around and is reported to have made a young woman pregnant. And somehow he gets out of that situation. His mother’s father’s money funneled through Tom Bennett, a London-based friend of Merton’s deceased father, Owen, might have bought Tom Merton out of the trouble.

It's Tom Bennett who tells Merton, "You're finished at Cambridge. You have to go back to America." Certainly that affected him, probably for the rest of his life. It probably explains his guilt, that is, his uneasiness with himself, his sinfulness, his selfishness which he reports in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

William Shannon: At Cambridge Merton not only had lost his faith, he really lost any sense of direction in his life. He didn't give the time to his studies that he should have. He did a lot of drinking. I think that was one of the temptations of his life always. I think that he could have very easily become an alcoholic if he hadn't been more careful about it. He once said, "I love beer and therefore I love the world." But he also loved bourbon.

There's an interesting story in one of the novels that the young Merton wrote called *The Labyrinth*, in which he tells of a party that took place at Clare College at Cambridge University. The story appears in a chapter of the novel called "The Party in the Night." Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's literary agent, who read the original copy, recalled that there was a mock crucifixion that took place at that party and she wondered whether the event was autobiographical and if Merton was the one who had been "crucified." Interestingly, when he filled out his naturalization papers as an American citizen, one of the identifying marks was a scar in the palm of his hand.

Michael Mott: I don't deny the possibility that Merton got a woman with child while he was at Cambridge. He may or may not have. Doing research for my biography of Merton, I was amused when his good friend Robert Lax told me that when he first heard about Merton, the rumor around Columbia was that he had fathered at least two children in Cambridge! It's a hell of a lot more glamorous on college campuses, I believe, to arrive as the putative father of two illegitimate children than it is to come as a flunky from your grades, which is the reason he was at Columbia rather than Cambridge.

“I don’t know” is the short answer to the question of whether Merton got a young woman pregnant. I suspect that there was some scandal because there’s a letter, a much later letter, in which he’s writing to his former guardian Tom Izod Bennett, in which he says, “If you’re still in touch with that woman, please let me know.” So presumably a woman existed. In his book about Merton his friend Ed Rice speculates, from a story he heard from Merton, that the mother and the child were killed during the Blitz in the Second World War. But I think that this was a child of Merton’s imagination.

Now, if he did indeed father a child, she would have been a woman of a different class to him, this is obvious. The drill, I’m afraid, was that you paid lawyers to pay her off. Everybody would have then agreed that he would have no recourse to her at all. She would have no recourse to him, except through the lawyers, and they were there to prevent that. It is possible that there was such an arrangement. Now, abortion was illegal in England at that time and for long after, but it was not unknown. Whether there was a live birth, I doubt. I can’t, you know, go any further than that. I did my attempted researches, but that’s not an easy thing to check up on, especially, you know, if for forty or fifty years people have been wiping that information out.

Writing

Some of these insights surprised me and admittedly tend toward the sensational. I wondered if including them had value or would be merely titillating. I did not want Soul Searching to come across as a paparazzi version of Thomas Merton. In trying to decide what seemed fair game to include, I considered how Merton himself dealt with the issue. From everything I have heard or read he despised fakery, almost always opting for what was honest and authentic despite the consequences.

In writing his private journals Merton could have airbrushed any flaws. He didn’t. My guess is that he felt it was important to share the

human dimensions and struggles of his spiritual life. As Anthony Padovano said, “He writes in his journals about his pettiness, his envy, his sexual temptations, his doubts. He wanted everyone to know that the mystical journey was profoundly human. That it wasn’t exotic. It wasn’t artificial.”

Merton told the truth of his life as best he could, without hiding or sensationalizing. That was the approach and balance I sought to achieve in my film. Besides, these weren’t exactly Fleet Street scandalmongers telling these stories to me. If they felt it was appropriate to relate this information, I was at peace in sharing it with a wider audience. Admitting his humanity was one of Merton’s most generous gifts to his readers.

Lawrence Cunningham suggested to me that another of Merton’s gifts was writing about his spiritual turmoil in a way that was accessible and not overly pietistic. I agree heartily. Merton was the first spiritual writer whose thoughts weren’t simply white noise for me. Many of the Merton choir are themselves writers of spiritual literature. I wanted to get their take on Merton’s writing as it began to develop.



Michael Mott: I think Merton finds a way of responding to the hunger for religion and religious life, the hunger for God that can be put in terms that are not off-putting, that are on-putting, if that can be used as a word, so that you finish reading it and you say, “I’m not sure about that yet, but this man is really speaking my language. And he’s speaking my language about subjects that very few other people are speaking about coherently, at my level, at my mental level. This man is interested in what I am thinking. He is interested in my search for God and he’s helping me in that search.”

We used to talk about “sending in clear.” When you send in clear, the message is received. If you try and muddle it, or get pretentious, you scramble a message. Here’s a good old army story about that. We’re sitting in the trenches and we send a message back by runner and the

message leaves us: “Send in reinforcements, we’re going to advance.” And it gets back to brigade headquarters as “Send three and four pence, we going to a dance.” This very seldom happened with Merton; he “sent in clear,” very clear.

I think Merton always considered himself extraordinary. I have the feeling that he earned that idea when he was about three months old or maybe younger, when his mother watched him with such passion the whole time, and everything he did was important. She impressed upon him that everything he did was important, and so important that she wrote it all down in a book called *Tom’s Book*. All of that ended when his brother John Paul arrived when Tom was three. His mother then started a journal for John Paul. I think that was a big crisis and he spent the rest of his life filling in *Tom’s Book*, which his mother had abandoned.

Elena Malits: I think it’s impossible to think about Thomas Merton without paying attention to the importance of writing in his life. I personally believe that writing was as essential to Merton as breathing. When he was eleven years old in France, he talks about hanging out with a group of boys who would walk around with their hands in their back pockets seriously talking about the novels they were writing. This is at age eleven! I think writing was an absolutely central mode of communication. Merton spoke well, but I think writing gave him the kind of distance that speaking doesn’t give anyone. Speaking gives you immediacy. Writing gives you the chance to step back a little bit from your audience and choose more carefully what you want to say. I think personally that Merton was a compulsive writer. He had to discipline himself not to write, the way alcoholics have to distance themselves from the nearest bottle.

Jonathan Montaldo: We know for certain that Merton was writing short stories when he was a young kid. We also know, and I think importantly, that at least at the age of sixteen he was writing journals. Now those early journals don’t exist, as far as we know now. He says in

his extant journals that he destroyed them. But from sixteen on he is writing journals. Merton at Columbia is also writing novels and trying to get them published.

He writes in his autobiography and in his early journals about outings to a cottage in Olean, New York, that was owned by the brother-in-law of his best friend Robert Lax. It's on the river. The guys and girlfriends go there one summer to write novels. It's a pretty big cottage. It has a very large living room with a fireplace. It has three or four bedrooms off of this big room. It has a very huge porch. I had always thought, before I saw it for myself, it was a small cottage with all these young people packed in there like the poor, but it wasn't. It's rather comfortable actually.

I met one of Robert Lax's nephews who was actually at the cottage, as an eleven-year-old boy while Ed Rice, Bob Gerdy, Tom Merton, and Lax were hanging out during the summer. He told me that Rice and Gerdy were really kind of men's men. They were building tree houses. They were always doing physical things. Merton he remembers was very, very quiet. Very much to himself, always writing. So this belies the image of Merton as a kind of a wild guy. He probably had many sides to him. He was the guy who liked to go out and drink and swagger after dames, and then he was this very serious person that perhaps he often didn't share with all of his friends.

Catholicism

Merton's writing life in New York produced unpublished novels, poems, and, as always, journal entries. All reveal a young man whose life seemed on a collision course with crisis. To be fair to him, a state of turmoil really isn't too surprising for people at the end of their time in college. Very significant decisions often have to be made. Throw in an ongoing Depression, a pending war, and the stakes are heightened. Factor within these historical contexts Merton's typical intensity, marked

by bouts with nervous exhaustion, and you've got quite a stew. Consider also that Merton's vocational aspirations had changed in a few years from the diplomatic corps to journalism to teaching. Now suddenly he was looking at a spiritual life seriously.



Elena Malits: I think to really understand Thomas Merton's interest in Catholicism, you have to go back to the time when he's sixteen years old and spends time in Rome on his own. I've always been fascinated with this, and I do not take it lightly, that I think Merton's first real attraction to the Catholic Church was through art.

He found himself going around to the smaller churches in Rome, the churches that do not draw huge crowds but have interesting mosaics. He talks about the image of Christ that he met in the Byzantine mosaics. The "strong Christ," as he says, of the apocalypse, of the martyrs. He says that while he went to see the art, without understanding what was happening, he found something else happening to him that went beyond the art. He just liked to go to those places and sit and be quiet.

Merton goes from visiting these churches to later reflect, when he's back in his room at a *pensione*, that he suddenly and really is in touch with his father who had just recently died. I think that whole sequence of events around that time in Rome was extremely important, and he tries to act on it. He buys himself a New Testament, and he sets up some rules for himself, and then he goes back and starts college at Cambridge and like any other college freshman suddenly he's overwhelmed by all the new things and excitement around him. I don't think he forgets about it. I think it just recedes into his unconscious.

I've tried to look at the conversion stories of many people, and often there is an earlier experience that compels somebody and then recedes. But at another time, when something else happens, that is the deep source, the deep well that the person can draw on.

Monica Weis: I don't think Merton was coming apart in New York City. I think he was trying to get it together. I really trace some of his "getting it together" back to his trip to Rome, when he was looking at all of the art in old, ancient, classical Rome and then wandered into some churches and was captured by the mosaics in there. He says in his autobiography that these were his first lessons, his first instructions in Christianity. I've been to the church of Ss. Cosmas and Damien to look at that mosaic. He was startled by the blue that's in there. And it is quite amazing.

One time when I was in Rome I did a little Merton pilgrimage of my own to some of his favorite churches. I wanted to know why, after he had had the vision of his father in his bedroom in Rome, he ran across town to the church of Santa Sabina, which is not nearby, and went into that church to kneel at the altar rail and say the Our Father, which he hadn't said since he was about three years old. When I walked into the church I think I knew the reason why. It's the light. I think that place may have triggered something in his mind about memories of Prades, France, where he was born, and the light that was part of his early childhood and the light in southern France when he and his father Owen lived together in the town of St. Antonin.

I now know why painters go to southern France to work, because the light there is something I've never seen before. There's something about Santa Sabina and its light. Now maybe that's why he had to go there. I don't think he would be conscious of it and say that, but perhaps that can be something of the seed or the driving force that was continuing to bear some fruit in his time at Columbia. He's looking and saying to himself, "Where is the light? Where can the light be for me?"

And "the light" happens intellectually as he's reading Etienne Gilson and Aldous Huxley. It happens spiritually when he's reading the life of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. He realizes that Hopkins made a spontaneous decision to become a Catholic and, as he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "Why can't I do the same?" And he runs down the street to find someone at Corpus Christi Church. I think that's all

part of a piece that we're only now beginning to understand as we look back at Merton's life and begin to see how maybe prophetic some of these experiences have been in drawing him on to a deeper sense of himself and a deeper sense of finding God in himself and finding himself in God.

Christine Bochen: In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when Merton is reflecting on his conversion, he talks about how God brought him and this group of friends together at Columbia. For Merton, the path to conversion is a very sacramental path, and what I mean by that is that he comes to experience God through the things of this world, and through the people of this world. So in some way, in all of that fun and all of that intellectual vigor and excitement, there was also for Merton the moment of awakening of the spirit.

Lawrence Cunningham: I think Merton was very typical of the age in which he lived. That is, this was a young man, obviously a budding intellectual, who had been deeply touched by what I call the modernist canon in literature. He's reading the people at this time who are revolutionizing studies in English and American Literature, people like William Blake and John Donne, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. These are writers, especially twentieth-century writers like James Joyce, who had a very deep sense of the crisis of Western civilization, the loss of values, the disappointment that occurred after the slaughtering war in 1918, the First World War, and who were seeking some kind of framework within which to live.

Merton himself was in New York during the time of the Depression, so there was also this huge discussion about social justice and equity. He himself flirted with, for a very short period of time, the Communist Party. I think it was Lyndon Johnson who said that nobody who was really thinking in the 1930s was unaffected by the attraction of communism after the crisis of the Depression in 1929.

The baptistry at Corpus Christi Church.



Sometime after the Second World War there was a famous collection of short essays written under the generic title *The God that Failed*. These were basically stories about people who had wholeheartedly embraced Marxism. Many of them who had joined the Communist Party felt that god with a small g had failed. As a consequence, a lot of them had become Catholic. But, just to back up a second, Merton's first interest in Catholicism came, interestingly enough, because of his interest in literature. He had read Dante, who is saturated with Catholic ideas. When he became interested in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he began to read in the background of Catholic intellectual thought.

There's a famous scene in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he talks about buying this book that he saw in a window of Scribner's Bookstore by the great French thinker Etienne Gilson called *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. Merton says that when he read that book it changed his life. Gilson wrote that in the Middle Ages the notion of God articulated by Thomas Aquinas and others was that God was the source of all being, and was the only subsistent being, and that all other being participates in God's being. Merton writes, "For the first time in my life I began to realize everything was interconnected." That led him then to begin to read other Catholic writers.

Let me add one other point. Merton is reading this book of Gilson's precisely at the time when there was a great renaissance occurring in Catholic letters and Catholic philosophy. This is the period of Jacques Maritain, the great philosopher, and of his wife Raissa, who would later become friends of Thomas Merton. This was the period when Dorothy Day had become a Catholic and was associated with Peter Maurin and the Catholic Worker movement. This was the time when new thinking about art was being generated by British artists like Eric Gill. This was a time when many people had lost faith in communism and were attracted to Catholicism. Some people cynically said they gave up one absolute worldview for another absolute worldview, but there was a kind of a flowering moment, people have called it the "Catholic renaissance," in that precise period of Merton's budding interest in Catholicism.

I do think that Merton was a searcher, and he first searched in literature. I think that Catholicism attracted him first of all intellectually, reading Gilson and others. Then he was interested in the aesthetics of Catholicism. There's another scene in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he mentions walking into Corpus Christi Church one day, and he was overcome by the fact that there were ordinary people there in the middle of the day just praying. That struck him very forcefully. When he made a trip to Cuba, while he was a graduate student, he had a kind of religious experience going into a church, when he heard a whole group of school children with this Franciscan cry out, "Yo Creo," I believe, as they began reciting The Apostles Creed. I think Merton saw some organic wholesomeness in Catholicism which was very attractive to him.

Communism

It has been pointed out by astute observers like Lawrence Cunningham and Anthony Padovano that a conversion is an ongoing process. For my film, I wanted to try to show Merton's conversion to Catholicism through his experiences in New York City unfolding step by step. I thought an initial stage in Merton's conversion was an attraction to communism. To my surprise, some of my conversation partners were reluctant to talk about Merton's passing interest in communism while at Columbia. Apparently being "Red" still carries menace almost twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They felt that Merton's legacy was already under enough fire in the institutional church and his critics didn't need any more ammunition. I countered that a consideration of communism served as a critical step in Merton's spiritual development. It had resonance for me because of a parallel in my own life. In my senior year in high school I carried a copy of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book conspicuously placed atop my other school books. It was an edgy bumper sticker of sorts that announced my seriousness . . . about something, I wasn't quite sure what. After several weeks no one had

noticed, probably a good thing in that I hadn't read beyond the first chapter. I put the book away.

Merton's consideration of communism was more deeply felt than mine, and I thought it should be explored.



Jonathan Montaldo: I think Merton's attraction to communism was superficial. He was recruited. He said he went to one meeting of a communist cell. He took an alias of Frank Swift, but he only went to one meeting, and then his interest dropped. We don't hear any more about it. I think Merton was much more interested in his interior life, even at that stage of his life. Maybe his attraction to communism was that everyone else was doing it. He does not make, in my memory of reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a big pitch for communism, its correctness, or for the Communist Party. It is part of his story, but I feel a small part.

Elena Malits: In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton talks about how everybody in the early 1930s at Columbia was talking about the importance of what the communists were saying. The word "Pinko" was thrown around very lightly. Merton was the kind of person that would never just write off words that were used to describe a movement or group of people who were making themselves known. I think that Thomas Merton understood that there was something essentially good in Marxism that led people to be critical, in the best sense of the term, of society. That's what attracted him. I don't think Merton was ever really attracted to the Russian brand of communism. He was interested in studying Marx, and that's quite a different thing. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* I've always thought that Merton himself jokes about his interest in communism. I think he does not do himself justice: like many young people he got attracted to communism because of his idealism and the kind of people he met. There's a passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he talks about his great discussion on communism in

the apartment on Park Avenue of a young woman as they looked out the window and drank their various drinks. He makes fun of this as how superficial his interest in communism was. Well, I think you can take it that way and, given this is a young monk looking back on his college life, you can understand that. But I really believe that he understood why serious intellectuals in America in the 1930s were dissatisfied. This is the time of the Great Depression and a lot of people didn't have any idea what might be done. They thought Marxism offered a solution. I think that's the ground of his interest in communism.

Paul Elie: In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton makes a lot out of his attraction to communism. I think he overstates it a little. What he's getting at is the appeal of communism as an idea and a way of life that he'd taken from books and hoped to find lived out in the world around him. Well, as he tells it in the book, the grand ideals of communism weren't matched by the pretty boring meetings that he went to at Columbia, the meetings of Young Communists. Now a few years later when he went to the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, he had a very different experience. He had read about monks and monasticism in lots of books, particularly a long entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* describing the Trappists. So he went down to the Trappist monastery, and there it was. The monks were doing the things that they were said to do in the encyclopedia, and in works of medieval literature. It was fully happening. It wasn't a shadow of the real thing. I think he was just blown away by the correspondence between what he'd read and what he saw and felt.

Conversion

I grew up in an area of Louisville, Kentucky, where there were a lot of Catholics. We had dozens of kids in my neighborhood and most of them were Catholic. We didn't talk much about religion and my notions

about Catholicism were pretty sketchy. If I had any interest, it was because it seemed so very different from my Presbyterian Sunday School.

The mystery and exotic nature of this faith was summed up for me by a trip to the neighborhood Catholic church. One of my buddies took me inside and told me to wait for him. He was going to confession, which for reasons I couldn't understand he seemed to be dreading. I looked around a bit fearful myself, not sure if I was even allowed in. The array of statues and candles were different but not all that exciting to me. Then the crucified Jesus in agony caught my eye. It was definitely a departure from the smiling, handsome, hale-savior-well-met I was used to seeing in my own church. I was trying to get a sense of what that was all about when my attention was jerked upward to a large eye located in the middle of the church's high-domed ceiling. The impact that big eye had on me was literally stunning. I stared transfixed. Seconds passed, maybe minutes. I began to get dizzy and lose my orientation, but then I realized it was because I had been staring straight up for too long. I left the church a bit wobbly and with a full plate of new notions to chew on.

For several nights I lay awake mulling over the possibilities of this Catholic God. Here was a Being that was certainly very present and obviously interested in what people were doing. Over the months I'd ask the occasional question of my buddies who went to church there. They'd grown up with the eye and weren't nearly as impressed with it as I was. They did say that on what they called Holy Days the eye was lit by a bulb from within. I'd like to have seen that but not enough to go back. I was nine or ten at the time.

*As I got older I didn't think too much about the eye or much else in the world of organized religion. I know for certain that reading about someone converting to Catholicism or any other spiritual path was of no interest to me. All religions, East and West, seemed so compromised by institutional bureaucracy and human foibles that none seemed even remotely credible or relevant. So as I read *The Seven Storey Mountain* and began to identify with the "wild" Merton, his abrupt switch to an enthu-*

siastic embrace of all things Catholic confused and frankly repelled me. But at the same time I was also impressed by his ardor and the way he expressed it. A more apt word than “impressed” would be “envious.” Merton made the spiritual life, something that had always seemed so artificial to me, sound vital, incredibly alive, and frankly the only thing in life worth being concerned about. He wrote about it with a passion I had previously found only in Rolling Stone record reviews or in a Ram-parts political essay. Tom Merton wrote about the spiritual life with the intensity and color of Tom Wolfe writing about 1960s culture.



Colman McCarthy: Well, I think the conversion story is what people find intriguing about Merton. Here was this intellectual hedonist, kind of a good liver, a drinker, a bit of a womanizer, and suddenly he goes to the other extreme. That fascinates people. How did that happen? Why did it happen? And when Merton explained it all, then he became a kind of mythical figure, and people are attracted to myths.

The hero is somehow doing something extraordinary which I couldn't do, and we love to get the inside story. That's what great investigative journalism is and Merton in a sense became one of those types of reporters. He was an investigative reporter going into the inner workings of the soul, and that's what his main appeal was as a writer. And he was authentic because he was living it, and so, when he had that perfect match of doing it as well as saying it, that's almost unbeatable, and that's how he became well known. And he wrote with a great flow of prose with metaphorical language, and so he became a man who attracted people and that was very compelling, because we're always searching for heroes, and so he fulfilled that need.

Lawrence Cunningham: I'd like to go back to the notion of conversion as it appears in the New Testament. The Greek word for conversion is

Baptism

No.	NAME OF PERSON BAPTIZED	DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH	DATE OF BAPTISM	FATHER'S NAME MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME
108	Merton Thomas	Jan. 31, 1915 Pader, France	Nov. 16 1938	Quinn Beth Jenkins

Register

SPONSORS	FRIEST	DATE OF CONFIRMATION	Record of Marriage, Religious Profession or Sub-Diaconate.	REMARKS.
Edward Rice	J. P. Moore			Conditional Baptism Convert - Episcopalian From Polish Univ. - Mich. 19 th 1947 at Bethelmann - Kentucky - Little River

metanoia. Now we tend to think of conversion as kind of a Saint-Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus experience, where all of a sudden someone gets thrown from their horse, gets up and goes down the sawdust trail and confesses their change of faith. I think it's deeper and it's more subtle than that.

I think in Merton's life it's very hard to pinpoint the moment when he's a believer as opposed to a nonbeliever. But conversion literally means to turn around or to turn over, so that in every conversion there is equally an aversion. That is, by turning to something you have to turn away from something else. I think that religious conversion happens when a person leaves off a certain way of being and seeing and thinking and embraces a new way of thinking and seeing and acting. I think that happens to Merton.

He goes from a position of not really being able to pray to one who becomes a person of prayer. He thinks that many of the problems that were in his past are problems that he needs to shuck off. He wants to find a deeper meaning in his life. He wants it to be focused and so on. So there is that kind of dialectic between turning away from one way of being to turning to another way of being.

The great philosopher of religion and psychologist of religion, William James, in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, talks about people who are "twice born." Some people are naturally Christian or are raised in Christian homes, and then after a certain period in their life, they actually go through a different conversion. They learn a greater depth of their Christian being. I think that you can trace in Thomas Merton not a conversion but a whole series of conversions in his life.

Robert Inchausti: When Merton converted to Christianity and Catholicism, the primary conversion was a kind of heart conversion. Merton writes and speaks from the heart. But he was also an intellectual. He

Corpus Christi's baptism register for Thomas Merton.

had read James Joyce and he had read all the contemporary modernists and he hadn't made the final connection between the head and the heart. The head was still a skeptic, was still an intellectual, was sort of a Joycean culture critic until he read Etienne Gilson's book on medieval scholasticism.

In that book Gilson says, "God is not a being, God is being." Now this opened his mind because suddenly, if the medieval theologians thought of God not as a being but as being, that meant that the most powerful theologians never thought of God as a man with a long beard or any of these superstitious, sort of silly conceptions of God. The medieval theologians were as hip as any contemporary existentialist and as profound as Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology, only three hundred years before them. And this made Merton think, "My God, there's an intellectual side to this, too, that isn't just my heartfelt acknowledgment of God. But God is not a being that one argues for or against. God is a reality that lives within, and it transcends our conception of God."

Part of Merton's problem with God, and part of our problem, too, was that his conception of God was not big enough. So it was sort of like for him, "God is greater than I thought. I was struggling with a false conception of who I thought God was, and now here I read this medieval theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, writing hundreds of years before my time that God is 'being' itself. God transcends my capacity to merely think about God." That was a real mind opener to him, and once he entertained the possibility that it was his conception of God that was narrow, it opened in him the desire to explore further. He started reading all the theologians, the medieval theologians, the contemporary theologians, with new interest. These weren't abstract, scholastic arguments, but they were actually talking about ideas that had contemporary significance for him. God is not something that adds on to reality to explain it. God is reality. That's what Merton learned from the medieval theologians, and that just opened the door for him, because now his head and his heart were no longer struggling and he was able to write and think within that paradigm.

William Shannon: What goes on in a person who goes through an experience of conversion? Probably many things, and they are probably very different for each person. Conversion is not simply changing from bad habits to good habits. Conversion is really achieving a whole new level of consciousness where one in a deep conversion experience comes to realize God as the hidden ground of love, which is a term that Merton used. In finding a “hidden ground of Love,” Merton found God, he found his own identity, he found his communion with other people.

Christine Bochen: I’ve come to see that there are very few 180-degree turns in Merton’s life. I would be inclined to look for the continuity in Merton’s experiences. So, for example, when people think of his conversion and think of this young man living an exciting life, first at Cambridge then at Columbia, they might be shocked to find him drawn to the Catholic Church. Yet, one finds in *The Seven Storey Mountain* moments where Merton points to the awakening of the spirit which flowers in a significant way in New York when he finds his way to Corpus Christi, when he decides to take instruction, and finally when he becomes a convert. This process of conversion is interesting because it involves a turning away in one sense, a turning around, but also involves a sense of being drawn. Merton’s responding to something. He says that God placed certain experiences in his path and this is not a God who for Merton is like a puppet master in the sky, but a God who is to be experienced through and in this world.

Merton came to see that at Columbia. A curiosity drew him toward experiencing God in the world. Catholicism was intellectually exciting to him, but he was moved, too, in New York and also during his visit to Cuba, by the faith of ordinary people. There was community to be found in the Catholic Church, and I think that that appealed to Merton.

John Eudes Bamberger: He had suffered a great deal actually in his earlier years before he was converted, and what he suffered most from, I believe, was the feeling of not belonging, of not being in touch with what he felt was most real. When he was converted, that was his

insight, that “This is real! This is what truth is! This is what life should be about!” So he could honestly and with great energy give himself totally to it.

Anthony Padovano: What happens in a conversion is difficult to say because I think it is different for all of us. Certainly there are some elements that we could sort out. One is that it is usually an experience of enlightenment in which you see—that’s why enlightenment is a good word—everything differently. Sometimes that’s all of a sudden, as it seems to have been with St. Paul, or even with Augustine. Other times it seems to be much more gradual and cumulative, which is how I think it happened with Merton.

A lot of things kept moving him in a direction that helped him constantly see things differently. So that idea of a gradual enlightenment is very important. For a reason you never know, you have this “Aha, Eureka!” and nothing looks the same again. I guess the closest that most people get to it is love. When you are in love with someone, the whole world looks different all of a sudden. You look different to yourself. This other person whom you thought you didn’t love looks different. Everything is different.

So enlightenment is one element in the conversion, but a second thing that comes about—and it is there from Paul to Augustine to Newman to Merton and so on—is that enlightenment summons you to a task and to take up a burden. Something must be done. Love is not only a joy but also a burden, a responsibility. “Now that I’ve seen the world differently, what do I do about myself and about all those things in my life that made me look at the world differently?” So the second element, Merton’s burden so to speak, his need to respond responsibly to what he had seen, was eventually the Cistercian monastery at Gethsemani.

Then I guess the third element is that, as one goes about the task, one tries to connect with other people. “I’m in love, I want to tell you about that.” No one is in love and says nothing. “I’ve had an experience and I want to let you know about that. I want to talk about that.”

So there is a need to communicate, which is why so many powerful conversions lead to powerful writing, whether that's Paul or Augustine or Newman or Merton or many others.

Jonathan Montaldo: At the urging of his friend Daniel Walsh, a former professor of his at Columbia, Merton makes a Holy Week retreat in April, 1941, at the Abbey of Gethsemani. What he finds at Gethsemani turns his life around. He writes in the journal he was keeping, "I should tear out all the pages of the journals I've been writing and begin again. This is the only real city in America. Now I know that the prayers of these monks are what is holding the world together." It's hyperbole, of course, but it's a great "Aha" experience.

When Merton returns to Saint Bonaventure College in Olean, New York, where he is teaching English, he begins a somewhat anguished discernment of his future. Finally he decides that he wants more than anything to become a monk of Gethsemani. He speaks to one of the Franciscan friars who tells him to go down to the monastery, just show up, and try to get in. Merton arrives at Gethsemani's gate on December 10, 1941. He stays in the guest house three days and begins a period of formal training for the monastery on Saint Lucy's Day, December 13.

Merton wanted to be a published novelist and poet, but I don't think Merton was really tempted to do social work or become what might be called a social activist before he entered Gethsemani. He was a young man desperately seeking God, desperately seeking a meaning for his life. He wrote in his book *Love and Living* that he was so active and distracted at Columbia and in search of so many experiences that he didn't have time to really think and find out who he truly was.

At Gethsemani his life would acquire stability. He wrote that he could finally "stop arguing with the seven guys who argue inside my head and be completely quiet in front of the Face of Peace." He writes this in a truly beautiful letter to his best friend Bob Lax dated December 6, 1941, just four days before he would enter Gethsemani. He writes to Lax that "finally it's time for me to go to the Trappists and try to get in.

It's time for me to get out of the subway and out of the room full of smoke and sleep in a clean bedroom." He says, "If you have a choice between being in a novel by John O'Hara or a book by St. Teresa of Avila, I guess you've got to make the choice and don't look at these two realities as being even comparable." And then he says that while he's praying in Gethsemani's big church, everyone he loves will be praying there with him: "Lax, Gibney and Rice, my mother and father who died, and my uncle and aunt, my brother, and Bramachari and the whole mystical body of Christ, all times, all peoples, all mysteries, all miracles." So four days before he arrives at Gethsemani, now twenty-six years old, Merton already has this sense that he is going into solitude at Gethsemani bringing everyone he loved with him in the pocket of his heart, that somehow they are all going to be with him at Gethsemani. Merton is not losing everything and everyone by entering Gethsemani. He is conserving everything. He's gaining everything by going there. I think, if he had stayed in Manhattan, he would've lost everything, perhaps himself, perhaps his soul. Fear of losing his soul led him out of Manhattan to teach at Saint Bonaventure's in Olean, New York. Saint Bonaventure's was Merton's halfway house toward his monastic vocation. On that Holy Week retreat at Gethsemani in April, Merton was ready to be tipped. In December, arriving at Gethsemani's gate, he fell all the way over, flat on his face in prayer, perhaps for the first time in his life secure that he could find out who he truly was as he became a man on a path to becoming a monk.