

WATER, WOODS, & WALNUTS:

Traveling (with Merton in Tow) in the Beauty of the Natural World

by **Robert E. Daggy**

For the first time since I have been away, I now have the feeling that I might be glad to get back to Kentucky, but not to mail and visitors and invitations . . . and other things that I will not be able to avoid. — Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, p. 30.

I stood on an outcrop looking down the brown dusty hill from New Camaldoli Monastery to the astounding blue of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur. I had been in California for two weeks. I was ready to go home, home to Kentucky. I was not so ready to go back to the routine of the Merton Center, to classes, meetings, exhibits, lectures, letters, and “other things” I knew I would not be able to avoid. A day later I did arrive in Kentucky and was glad to be home. Even later, back at the Merton Center (and ignoring the mail which had piled alarmingly high in my absence), I picked up *Woods, Shore, Desert* to read again Merton’s account of his trip to California in May, 1968. I came up short on page thirty when I read the words quoted above. Merton, on his last day in California on that trip, had voiced exactly the same thoughts that I had had during my last day in California. Amazing! Once again I felt that Merton had written something I *could have* written. But perhaps it is not surprising that Merton wrote this or that I thought it since my two recent trips, which took me literally from ocean to ocean, were definitely “Merton trips” — trips on which I enjoyed rich associations with people who “know” him, either in person or through his writings. Now, even later, in the beauty of Kentucky autumn, I realize that without those things I thought I wanted to avoid while standing at Big Sur, these trips would not have been possible, the contact with all the marvelous “Merton people” would not have been possible. And good memories come back.

— Sitting in the windows of Jonathan Montaldo’s and Bob Moore’s highrise apartment on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with my eyes more on the heading lights of the skyline ahead of me and the park below me than on Jonathan’s preliminary (but thorough) notes for the Merton journal he’s editing.

— Standing in the waters of Brandy Pond at Naples, Maine, discussing with Greg Ryan the transcription of Merton’s reading notebooks and urging him to accept the invitation to speak to the Belgian *Merton-Vrienden* at their next meeting.

— Standing in the waters of Ping Ferry’s pool in Scarsdale, New York, while he urged me to contact *The New York Times Book Review* to do a major spread for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton’s death; walking with Ping and Carol Ferry across the lawn from the pool to marvel at “the oldest apple tree in America” (as Ping calls it) — the tallest apple tree I’ve ever seen, a massive tree dropping huge yellow apples onto the ground; finding a box on my nightstand labelled “Open for Inspection” and discovering in it dozens of delightful “doodles” and this delightful statement: “One of the most serious needs of the higher education of the future — education of people who will spend much of their time in



DOODLE by W. H. FERRY

committee sessions — will be to develop courses in creative doodling. W. H. Ferry, who has had more operating experiences in such committees than most, has developed doodling to its highest point. He should be commissioned to explain the principles and prepare the text.”

— Laughing when Rusty Moe almost walked by me in Boston’s Logan Airport because he hadn’t expected me to meet his plane; responding to Rusty’s enthusiasm the next day in Milton, Massachusetts, as we interviewed Richard Bassett, holder of 150 Owen Merton watercolors; confirming in my own mind Merton’s estimation of his father’s talent as we viewed these paintings; wanting to take one gorgeous watercolor, dubbed in Owen’s handwriting “Allee de Trees,” away with me but not quite able to meet the asking price.

— Listening to the splash of the fountain in the middle of the courtyard at Santa Sabina Center in San Rafael, California, and looking at the beautiful lime tree as I said goodbye to Harriet Hope and Susannah Malarkey; feeling wistful about leaving and thinking of the wonderful participants in the “Reflective Weekend” I had just conducted.

— Sitting in the rain (yes, rain in California!) at Redwoods Monastery gazing at the brown field and the magnificent redwoods on the hill beyond; sitting in the rental car with Sister Cathy DaVico at the wheel, both of us frozen in awe as we waited for the great elk with his grand rack to move out of the steep, rutted road on the way to Needle Rock; agreeing with Merton about the beauty of the place and about “the beauty of these Flemish nuns and of the American nuns too.”

— Watching Brother Laurin’s goldfish in the murky waters of the fishpond at New Clairvaux Abbey in Vina; learning from Father John-Baptist Porter that English walnuts have to be grafted on to other trees leaving me wondering who first found an English walnut and who decided it was an English walnut; listening with pleasure to Dom Thomas Davis’s talk a bit about his days at Gethsemani; jumping with Father John-Baptist as we heard a loud crack up in a huge walnut tree and a log-size branch crashed to ground barely missing our heads.

— Sitting in my dusty little patio at New Camaldoli as a goofy, voluble topknotted bird chirped and danced around me; learning later that he was probably a Stellers Jay and still later reading Merton’s words: “Ping Ferry . . . told me the name of the big jay bird all dark-blue with a black crest which I saw yesterday. It is called Stellers Jay. Does the jay know whose bird he is? I doubt it. A marvelous blue!”

— Reflecting on the trip back in Louisville and paraphrasing Merton’s words in *Woods, Shore, Desert*: “It was not right that I should die under a walnut tree.”

Other people have certainly traveled with Merton in tow. Among the letters on my desk when I turned to my mail was one from Nestor Jose Forster from Porto Algre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. He and his wife visited the Merton Center and Gethsemani in September. He writes:

In the Abbey, we had a courteous and hot reception by the Guest Master, Brother Raphael, as a perfect example of the monastic and trappist hospitality. We felt at home at the Abbey. Knowing the Abbey and the hermitage, in the forest, where Thomas Merton lived so many years, was for us more than a spiritual experience. It was an authentic pilgrimage to a holy place. We had a great feeling of peace and personally I perceived a sensation of longing (in Portuguese we say “saudade,” there is not a correct translation to English) of Thomas Merton and I had a strong wish that he would be (“estivesse”) alive. But, the ways of God are mysterious and we have to accept them.

This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* leads off with Monica Weis’s “Living Beings Call Us to Reflective Living,” an examination of Merton and the natural world, including his sense of the lessons to be learned from the woods. The body of the issue is devoted to accounts — in prose and in poetry — of “Merton trips” to Gethsemani. Elsie F. Mayer and Rose Gordy contribute *haiku* which were inspired by their trips to the monastery. Gregory M. Corrigan talks of his travels to Gethsemani and what they mean to him in “Thinking of Louie.” In “A Merton Journey,” Maria Judge provides an amusing account of her first trip and her experience, I am sure, echoes that had by others on their first trips to Gethsemani. Jack Ledbetter has written a series of poems “Seasons (for Gethsemani)” which were inspired by his visits at the Abbey. (How fitting to have something called “Seasons” in the *Seasonal*!)

Robert McGovern’s woodcut for the cover of Thomas King’s book (which is reviewed in this issue along with two other books) appears on the cover of this issue. He writes: “If anyone is interested in a fine artists print from the wood block —I have a limited number at \$50 each.” The program for the Third General Meeting of the ITMS and our running feature of publications by and about Thomas Merton conclude the issue.