

Summer of '68: A Brief Encounter and a Brief Note

By William Mishler, William Manning and Thomas Merton

In his journal entry for June 13, 1968, Thomas Merton wrote, "The other night when it was too hot to go to bed, I was sitting up with nothing on but a pair of underpants when a couple of admirers suddenly appeared in front of the cottage. I told them to get the hell out, thereby once again ruining my image. But one of them wrote a very nice note of apology nevertheless."¹ No more about this incident was known until the recent publication of *A Measure of Endurance: The Unlikely Triumph of Steven Sharp*, by William Mishler.² This is the story of a young man from Oregon who lost both of his hands in a farming accident due to faulty machinery, and of the Minneapolis lawyer who filed and eventually won the case against the giant agricultural equipment manufacturer who had made the baler that severed Steven Sharp's hands. During the course of the trial, as the time for Steven's own testimony drew near, his lawyer, William Manning, began to spend considerable time with Steven, not only rehearsing his story but developing a warm, relaxed relationship. On one evening together, Bill Manning told Steven about an incident from his own youth, a visit to a Kentucky monastery. Here is the conversation as presented by author William Mishler:

Given the disparity in their ages, backgrounds, and circumstances, it helped at the start that they had sports in common, not so much as a current interest but as a shaping factor in their teenage years, Manning's primarily in basketball and Steven's in baseball. From these, both had imbibed a passion for winning along with a necessary fatalism about losing. To Steven it made perfect sense that from a college career supported by a basketball scholarship Manning would have gravitated toward the cerebral contact sport of trial law. He asked Manning about that.

"No," said Manning. "No, in high school and college I had no idea of becoming a lawyer. To tell you the truth, it would have been pretty far down on my list."

"What did you want to be?"

"You ready? A monk. I wanted to be a Trappist monk. You know what that is?"

"Not really."

"A celibate priest who lives in a monastery, takes a vow of silence, eats vegetarian food, spends most of his time working and studying. And praying."

"Lord, Bill, why ever in the world . . . ?"

"Well, I'll tell you. When I was in high school, one of my biggest heroes was a Trappist monk named Thomas Merton, who was living down in Kentucky at a monastery called Gethsemani. I'd read a bunch of his books, his autobiography, and one in particular that really spoke to me, called *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which, by the way, is a book I still reread. At the time, in the midst of the crazy sixties, it impressed me so much that one day at the end of my junior year in high school, I decided I'd drive down to Kentucky and talk to Merton, and from

this conversation see if I should become a monk like he was. That was how much I admired him.”

“Wow.”

“You gotta remember, Steve, I was a serious Catholic kid from serious Catholic school, and all around me was Vietnam and all other uproar of the sixties.”

“Still, it seems to me you could of admired him without wanting to live like he did.”

“Well, Steve, at the time I didn’t have all that sorted out. I was full of enthusiasm. So a friend and I got in the car and drove down to Gethsemani, Kentucky. We’d called ahead, of course, and reserved some rooms in their guest house.”

“So what did this monk tell you?” Steven asked.

“Not so fast, Steve,” Manning replied. “Merton, whose name in the monastery was Father Louis, was nowhere around. Very important people made reservations well in advance to talk to him, something I hadn’t done. It turned out he lived by himself in a cabin somewhere on the premises, but nobody would tell me where. So from the visitors’ area I started wandering into the enclosed part of the monastery where visitors weren’t allowed, and whenever anyone would stop me I’d act surprised and ask them where Father Louis was, and they would very nicely kick me out. This went on for a day or two.”

“Did you ever get to meet him?”

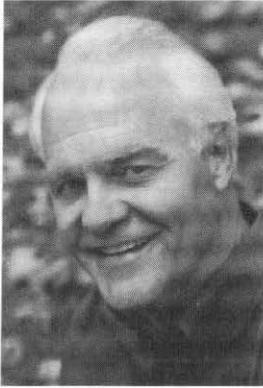
“In a sense. On the third morning, I wandered back into the enclosure again and this time headed down toward the lake, where an older priest was sitting. We chatted about one thing and another. I told him a little about myself and he told me a little about life in the leper colony where he spent the last thirty years of his life, and time went by, maybe an hour, and then I mentioned how much I admired Father Louis, and he said he did too. And I asked him, ‘Is it true that Merton is a hermit?’ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Where?’ I asked. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘over there,’ and he gestured across the lake toward a slope and some trees. Then he said, ‘I guess I shouldn’t have told you that.’ And I said nothing.”

“So now at least you knew where he was.”

“Right.”

“So what did you do?”

“I waited until it was dark, maybe nine o’clock. It was a hot, sticky June night in Kentucky with thousands of peepers making a big racket and I headed out around the lake toward those trees on that slope the monk had pointed to, and after a while I came to a clearing, and there was his cabin. It had a screened-in porch lighted by a lantern, and there sat Merton in a pair of shorts, at a table, writing. I moved closer and called his name, startling him, of course, and he jumped up, all pissed off. ‘Who in the hell’s there?’ he shouted, looking out into the darkness. So I went closer so he could see me and I told him my name, and that I wanted to talk to him.



Bill Manning

He came to the door and started to open it. He was over being startled, but he still wasn't particularly friendly. He said it was officially past his bedtime, that he was working late, but that if I really needed to talk to him, he'd talk to me.

"But then all at once it hit me how much I'd intruded on his space, and that from being this sort of disembodied spiritual consciousness – you know what I mean? – he was instead this specific busy man in shorts and no shirt who would let me talk to him if I insisted, but that wasn't at all the way I'd imagined it. So I said that I really didn't want to bother him, and he looked at me like: Well, then, what was I doing there? While what I was hoping he would say was: No, look, that's OK, come on in, have a beer. But since he just stood there waiting for me to make up my mind, I . . . Now I really didn't know what to do. All I could think of was to repeat that I didn't want to bother him. 'Well, then, don't,' he said, and sat down again. Boom, the end. And I walked back to the guest house, pretty much in a muddle."

"So you never did get to talk to him?"

"No, I didn't. But in another way I did. As soon as I got back to the monastery, I sat down and wrote him a letter. I tried to explain why I'd showed up there that night, that it was because he was such a hero for me. And about a week or so later, when I got home, there was a letter from him, waiting for me, short but friendly, in which he apologized for being short with me, that it had been a long hot day, and that he was trying to cut off all appointments for the rest of the summer. Later I found out he was preparing to leave for Asia. He closed with the lines: 'There's no point in being an image anyway. Blessings, Tom.'"

"How old were you, Bill?"

"That was in '68. I was seventeen years old, just the same age you were when you had your accident. Like you, I was between my junior and senior year."

"I guess at least it straightened you out about being a monk."

"It did do that." Manning smiled. "Just from that visit and brief encounter, I could see there was no refuge, even in Gethsemani, for what was bothering me. Only a few months later, Merton was dead, electrocuted in Bangkok after grabbing the cord of a portable fan with wet hands" (Mishler 214-16, slightly revised).

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The brief note Merton sent to Bill Manning, postmarked June 14, 1968, the day following his comment on the incident in his journal, is written on a hand-set poetry card printed by Unicorn Press (which also published Merton's *Ishi Means Man* and his translations of Pablo Antonio Cuadra, *The Jaguar and the Moon*). The poem, by Josephine Miles, is entitled "Bent" and has a striking appropriateness both to Manning's brief encounter with Merton and to the trip Merton was soon to make, from which he would not return:

*What am I sleepily asking of light?
 Into my shadowy head it brings
 Forms of denial.*

*Offices obdurate,
Not to attend and rely, not to exchange,
Receptive only in death to a random message.*

*If I believe
That knowledge can tell me more deeply to listen,
More softly to answer, then I will turn*

*In the westward light to perceive how denials
Create for me
The life of China.*

The note itself reads:

Dear Bill,

Sorry to cause shock. It had been a long hot talkative day and I was technically in bed. And I am trying to cut off all further appointments this summer, if I can. I know you understand. There's no point in being an image anyway. Blessings,
Tom Merton.

Now a member of the International Thomas Merton Society, Bill Manning framed this note resulting from his adventure in the summer of 1968, and it still hangs in the study of his Minnesota home.

1 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 129.

2 William Mishler, *A Measure of Endurance: The Unlikely Triumph of Steven Sharp* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); subsequent references will be cited as "Mishler" parenthetically in the text. Mishler was a poet, translator and retired professor at the University of Minnesota who died in December 2002, before his book was published. William Manning notes that "Mishler had read a great deal of Merton. His writing was inspired by Merton and many others" (November 10, 2003 letter to the editor).