

Each can entrust to the other “all the secrets of [the] heart” (Aelred 45).
Judith Valente

GLENN, William D., *I Came Here Seeking a Person: A Vital Story of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), pp. vi, 229. ISBN 978-0-8091-5641-6 (paper) \$29.95.

William D. Glenn retired from a career as psychiatrist and therapist after having first sought to become a Jesuit priest earlier in his life. His life opened and he came out and went in a different direction. What a reader learns to appreciate through the book is how Glenn never, never, never lost touch with his soul’s yearning for the spiritual thread of his life and the life of the world he was living in. His search became even more earnest after he announced to family and friends as well as the Jesuit order that he was a gay man. Everything changed after that. Glenn says it took retirement and a necessary three years to write his memoir that reflects not just his personal story but an entire cultural awakening of a society – still in arduous processes – to the spiritual life of diverse others, especially those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and +.

Awakenings are difficult. Pope Francis recently sparked global attention in opening a synod of bishops at the Vatican, in October 2023, by suggesting the church can now begin to bless same-sex marriages; while some welcomed the change in tone, others assailed the pope for diluting Catholic tradition. It seems we have not yet plumbed the depths of the Mystery, nor will we. To say that the time is ripe for learning from the spiritual memoirs of queer people is to miss the vital story of grace cracking open a hard-hearted world to a deeper spirituality, a Mystery over which we can only delude ourselves with thinking we are in some kind of authority. As Pope Francis reportedly emphasized: “We cannot be judges who only deny, push back and exclude.”¹

Glenn’s book could help. His book weaves the story of one gay man’s spiritual journey in relation to a historical era of spiritual transformation. Eight decades are covered here, eight decades of finding and fighting lessons in spiritual growth, eight decades of mystical experiences, eight decades of seeking without being waylaid by dispiritedness.

The title of the book comes from a line from Merton’s novel *My*

Dutton (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2010) 22 (subsequent reference will be cited as “Aelred” parenthetically in the text).

1. See <https://time.com/6320335/pope-francis-inclusion-lgbtq-religion>.

Argument with the Gestapo,² and anchors this searching story. A second reference to Merton is also made that outlines the search that Glenn will embark on to find a person. He opens his work with a poem of Merton's, presented before the Table of Contents, titled here as: "If you Seek a Heavenly Light," which is the first line from "Song: If You Seek . . ." in Merton's *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.³ The poem serves the book well and I would recommend Merton readers to dwell on this poem before reading Glenn's story, especially if you do not want to make the mistake I did in glossing over the poem. Glenn's book illuminates this poem in an astounding manner just as Merton's poem almost narrates the mystical tale itself. The poem opens with a question, and if you do seek a heavenly light, then "I, Solitude, am your professor!" Solitude says, "I go before you into emptiness" and when I give my special signal through loneliness,

Follow my silence, follow where I beckon!
Fear not, little beast, little spirit
(Thou word and animal)
I, Solitude, am angel
And have prayed in your name.

Glenn has written a deep story of how all little beasts and spirits who truly seek the life of our lives beyond ready-made answers find that "I, Solitude, am thine own self: / I, Nothingness, am thy All. / I, Silence, am thy Amen."

Glenn says that he sheltered the secret signs of silence in his own life for years, resisting writing about their impact on his life. Even while submitting chapters to trustworthy friends and colleagues for review, he was still learning how much he was still seeking while writing, discovering how and what he could express that even he was still ignoring. Thus, as you read this spiritual autobiography, you realize that it is not contained in a box of paper, and that you are to be shaken by what you, perhaps, have not been ready to acknowledge in your own familiar story line. I recall the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron's frequent advice to "drop your storyline" in order to open compassion.⁴ Glenn shows us

2. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

3. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 38-39; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 340-41.

4. See Pema Chodron, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2018), which reads "drop our storyline."

many ways to drop our own storylines and go deeper into the mystery of the life of our lives. Many may wish to view the short film, in which Glenn introduces his book to readers, before reading the book, by visiting his website at www.williamdglenn.com.

I have not relayed Glenn's words thus far out of my desire to encourage others to read them without prejudice and foreknowledge, but I would be remiss if I did not describe his writing and share at least one pivotal passage from the book. The book flows well as he remembers events marking his journey as a spiritual seeker, candidly sharing his disappointments, the abuse of others, his responses to difficulties, changes in jobs, responsibilities, relationships, cultural trends, and political as well as religious obstacles to seeking "heavenly light" in dark times. He reveals that Michael Kelly, author of *Christian Mysticism's Queer Flame: Spirituality in the Lives of Contemporary Gay Men*,⁵ identifies Glenn as David in the book, which is his middle name. Glenn describes Kelly's account as being "about the experiences of other men of deep spirituality, men representing perhaps millions of others, whose life experiences would not otherwise have been recorded." Glenn then makes this stunning observation: "How bereft mystical theology would be without these queer experiences of the divine" (221). And then Glenn explains:

For it is the human margins that we all inhabit that so much of the work of the Spirit occurs. Unlike Thoreau, observing men living lives of quiet desperation, a deeper truth suggests that multitudes, despite or perhaps because of the suffering life imposes, are living vibrant lives of beauty, kindness, and untold generosity. These attentive humans – with the light this One provides – go about repairing the torn fabric of life. (221)

When I read those lines, transparent scales fell from my eyes, and I suddenly became a more attentive human. Glenn's book opens the third eye. I did not know this when I began reading. I hope you will be ready when you read it for yourself, and that you will share this gratefulness to William D. Glenn for sharing his spiritual life with such profound tenderness in knowing how much we hide and how much we seek. Indeed, may we all learn more about repairing the torn fabric of life as Glenn so warmly encourages.

To close, I would like to share a brief poem from another poet that I feel relates to this spiritual repair work by attentive humans regarding

5. Michael Kelly, *Christian Mysticism's Queer Flame: Spirituality in the Lives of Contemporary Gay Men* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

our handling of the torn fabric of life. The poet is William Stafford, and the poem is entitled “The Way It Is”:⁶

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

Gray Matthews

STRAUB, Gerard Thomas, with Jonathan Montaldo, *Reading Thomas Merton and Longing for God in Haiti: Learning Wisdom in the School of My Life* (Fort Pierce, FL: Pax et Bonum Communications, 2022), pp. 359. ISBN: 979-8-9860888-1-5 (paper) \$20.00.

Gerry Straub opens his book with a “friendly warning” in which he explains that he has written and directed twenty documentary films focused on the plight of the poor in nations like Brazil, El Salvador, India, Kenya, Jamaica and Haiti. Currently, he directs the Santa Chiara Children’s Center in Port au Prince, providing kids a place to be kids and escape from dangers of the streets.

Sharing learnings in the school of his life, Straub offers reflections in five parts: entering into silence and solitude; out of Africa; lessons learned along poverty road; Haiti; Louie’s place, journal of a retreat December 3-10, 2000 at Merton’s hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Alone in the woods, praying and writing on the table on which Merton wrote some of his masterpieces, Straub got a nibble of the solitude Merton desired and discovered in the last years of his life. The following text may give readers of this review a taste of Straub’s writing:

Thursday, December 7, 2000. I spent a few hours today reading Merton’s *No Man Is an Island*. I bought the paperback edition I’m reading a long time ago. I know because it has a sticker price of \$4.95 on it. What I found interesting as I read it, besides Merton’s insights and his way of expressing himself, is the passages I’d highlighted

6. William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998) 42.