

## A Gethsemani Journal

By John A. Ostenburg

*In mid-1992, as I was engaged in a political campaign for the Illinois House of Representatives, I made a retreat at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey. It was the first time I had visited the monastery, albeit because of my longstanding reading of works by Thomas Merton, I felt I had an awareness of the place even before physically being there; however, what I experienced was far beyond anything that I could have anticipated. I recently came across a journal in which I had recorded some of what constituted that experience. Some entries from that journal follow. They have been edited slightly for clarity but otherwise are just as I recorded them at the time. (I should note that I had the wonderful experience of another retreat at Gethsemani a year or so later, while I was serving in the Illinois legislature, when permission was afforded me by then-Abbot Timothy Kelly, OCSO to make my retreat at the Merton hermitage on the abbey grounds. I know I kept a journal of that experience also, but somehow over the nearly 30 years that have passed since then, regrettably it's been misplaced.)*

**Tuesday, July 14, 1992**

4:09 a.m.

After 30 years of desiring to do so,<sup>1</sup> I finally find myself residing within the walls of Gethsemani monastery – albeit only temporarily. The setting is, in many ways, much more modern than I had anticipated, but it nonetheless is what I would have it, for a still peacefulness is here, comparable to nothing I previously have experienced. This is holy ground, a small patch of Kentucky hillside that has been permeated for nearly 150 years not so much with holiness itself as with the desire for holiness, and it is that desire that constitutes sanctity. I find myself, therefore, in the presence of saints – saints in the choir stalls of the monastery church reciting the psalms, saints buried in the graveyards beside the church and in front of the guest house, saints who have traveled great distances – as have I – to be here only a few days but to have the occasion to make stronger this bond that exists between God and humankind.

I am joyful here, to the point of tear-filled eyes, to the point of wanting to shout to the God that I love and want only for the rest of my life to be one with, to sing God's praise, while also chit-chatting like two old friends. I am uncertain I ever will be the good person I desire to be, but the atmosphere here makes my desire for that goodness so much more blessed than I ever before have known it to be.

My retreat-master for these few days, I have decided, will be Father

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John A. Ostenburg

Louis himself, whose body lies confined to one of the small grave plots outside the window of my guest-house room, but whose spirit has been a part of my own spirituality for these past 30 years. Standing beside his grave for a few moments last night I wanted to say aloud, "Well, we meet face-to-face at last, old friend," but it was not really face-to-face and my preoccupation with behaving "normally" kept me from talking to the small metal cross that marks his place among the others. So I wandered down the little knoll instead, talking to God and thinking of how Father Louis must have felt when he first visited this holy land, trying to recall his words about the uniqueness of this setting that is so filled with the presence of God. "I had entered into a solitude that was an impregnable fortress," he had written of his first encounter with Gethsemani; "the silence that enfolded me, spoke to me, and spoke louder and more eloquently than any voice."<sup>22</sup>

I am here, God, as was Father Louis, to find your path for me. For too long I have wandered without vision of my unique role in your kingdom. Give me inspiration as we spend time alone, to better know your will and then to will myself that I might ever serve you and you alone.

7 a.m.

Judging from pictures in books, the monastery physically is much different from what it was in Father Louis' time. The church and retreat house are new, as are – no doubt – many other parts of the monastery that are restricted to the monks themselves. Probably in his day more of the monks wore sandals too, instead of running shoes. There is a wonderful incongruity, for example, about seeing the abbot in his black and white habit but with grey sneakers on his feet.

Actually, I am amazed at how many monks there are here. For some reason I suspected there would be fewer – I suppose because vocations in the church in general have been so poor of late. Probably by Gethsemani's standards there are fewer than at some times in the past, but by my standards the monastery is very well populated indeed. In a way, it is understandable that more persons would seek the solitude of monastic spirituality over what the rest of us have. I envy those men for their opportunity to concentrate on nothing but the wonderment of God's gracious relationship with humankind.

10:15 a.m.

The silence here is unbelievable. Going out for a long walk, I started on the hilltop where the St. Joseph statue is. I sat for a while to hear the voice of God in the singing of the birds and in the occasional sound of a tractor or truck leaving the cloistered area for farmland across the highway. The silence is so powerful that it overtakes the occasional sounds and makes them a part of itself. I walked through the woods to the Garden of Gethsemani statues erected in memory of Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopalian seminarian killed in Alabama during the Civil Rights protests of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> It is a long walk through the silent woods, past a perfectly still lake (except for the fish I saw jump), up a ladder stairwell, across a narrow bridge, up and down hills, through part of an open pasture. The walk is in itself prayerful – in fact some brother has placed a sign at one stop pointing out that the beauty of the wild flowers is a prayer and advising that such a prayer ought not be interrupted by the flowers being picked. He could have said the same of the songs of the birds, the buzzing of bugs, the stirring in the bush that came from rabbits and deer racing away as I drew close.

Finally, instinct – another of God's tools of communication – led me up a path where I soon began to see an isolated white building peeking through the woods. I knew at once that it was

Father Louis' hermitage, but I was afraid to admit it for fear I would be mistaken. I got as close as I could, since a light was on in the building and I didn't want to disturb someone who might be on retreat. I am sure now that it was the hermitage.

*3:45 p.m.*

The first draft of my inventory now is completed. I will go to the chapel soon, to sit in the presence of the sacramental Christ, to ask forgiveness for all my wrongdoing. In asking God's forgiveness, I need also to ask my own, for without that I will be too crippled to be able to fully benefit from the grace God offers with divine forgiveness. The most difficult part, of course, will be obtaining the forgiveness of others; perhaps I should let God forgive on their behalf and focus myself on whatever meager amends I might be able to do. Please, God, make me worthy of your forgiveness and of the forgiveness of all that I have harmed, consciously or unconsciously.

An aside: there was a burial today in the lay cemetery in front of the retreat house. Several monks were out with the mourners so it must be someone with whom they are familiar. I can understand the desire one would have to be buried here. At the same time, though, I must admit that the little cemetery back home, where Rick<sup>4</sup> is buried, probably provides the closest thing that I ever before have experienced to the solitude of the monastery. Especially on the early mornings when I have been there, a silence has been present that is akin to the silence here.

In addition to the silence, there also is a beauty to the setting of the monastery. The Kentucky hills that are part of it are beautifully landscaped with trees and foliage. Wild flowers pop up everywhere – white, yellow, blue, and a strange looking red one that grows on a vine that wraps itself up evergreens. This latter has a long reddish-orange tube that opens to a deep red blossom.

Monks were working all about the monastery grounds this morning, gathering large bales of hay, riding on tractors and mowers, driving pick-up trucks in and out of the cloistered area. I even saw one scurrying down to the water-filtration plant on a golf cart. Watching them do their work I felt so much the outsider, but not just "outside" in terms of them being monks while I am not. More so, I think I felt an outsider to the wonderment of full-time work for God. I cannot imagine that I ever will perform a task that is as significant as their grass-mowing, tractor- or truck-driving, hay-gathering, or doing checks on the water system. How truly wonderful it must be to know you are doing God's work every moment of the day.

Please, God, grant me your blessings in all the work I do. Give me your grace to make divine even the most profane of my daily tasks. Walk with me, sit with me at my desk or in meetings, and always remind me to do all things for you. I long, Lord, for the unity of purpose that you give to your chosen, and I plead with you to be admitted to those ranks.

*9:30 p.m.*

I confessed this afternoon to an 82-year-old monk who warned me that I must live my life as though I were to die at any moment. He acknowledged that his own time was near at hand but emphasized that all of life is too short for any portion to be wasted in separation from God. Afterwards I destroyed the inventory I earlier had prepared. God's saving grace has erased the guilt I bore for my offenses. I must now use that same saving grace to avoid states of sin in the future.

Lord, grant that I might be alert to my own behavior so I may immediately seek to amend any wrongdoing in which I might engage. My human nature cannot help but fall from your

grace; however, the divine sibling-ship you have opened to me and to all of humankind gives opportunity for spiritual growth to offset that failing. May I ever be open to kinship with you all the days of my life.

I have sinned against God and my fellows, and especially against God by sinning against my fellows.

**Wednesday, July 15, 1992**

*9:10 a.m.*

The second day of retreat. It is amazing but even here – where the whole day is mine to plan as I wish – I am not able to accomplish all the things I want to do. Always there is more: another book that I should read, a certain prayerful devotion I should give myself to, etc. Perhaps, Lord, this is the cross you have given me to bear, that I always will possess the desire to accomplish more than is possible. Give me strength to accomplish only what is your will.

As I look to my return to the active world on Friday, after this brief experience of contemplative living, I am desirous of finding the same order for daily life there that I have found here. There is a centrality of purpose within the monastery, one that both monks and retreatants share. It is the sincere desire to dedicate every action, every word, from morning until night, to the greater glory and honor of God. Things are not that way down the road. By the time I get to Culvertown<sup>5</sup> on Friday I already will be in the midst of a multi-purposed world – one where the will of God by and large is far removed from being primary – and that is chaos. How do I, then, give order to my existence when all around me is in disorder?

Perhaps that question is too filled with ego to be properly answered. I must have less concern with the world around me and more concern with the God that is within me. I will be guided by the word of God if only I listen, if only I am open and receptive to the message given to me. My God-given and God-directed role in life is to give love to all other of God's creation: that love can be given only if I am totally honest in all I do and say (remembering, however, that not *everything* always must be done or said). In addition, I can put order in my God-life by rearranging my priorities. For me, for example, as a married man, my major priority must be a blissful and *mutually* beneficent union with my spouse. As Christ is united with his mystical body on earth – the church – and always is mindful of its needs, so too I must be united with my loved and loving spouse and always mindful of her needs.

*11:20 a.m.*

For my walk this morning I climbed a path across the highway that led to a very high hill (they call them "knobs" here), so steep in parts that I thought I might not be able to make it. It was Vinegar Knob, I believe, the one where Merton's fire tower once stood. Merton had turned this site down in 1955 as his first hermitage. Instead he stayed within the monastery cloister to become novice master.<sup>6</sup> Atop the knob today is the cross that had been part of the spire of the old church. I cannot imagine how the cross and a huge stone monument identifying it ever were moved to that location. If this really was Vinegar Knob, it is a third bit of Mertonalia I've discovered here so far.

The walk to the top of the knob and back down – including a few side trips down trails I discovered – took about an hour and a half but was a very peaceful experience. The birds deep in the forest are symphonic with their varied songs mixing with the noises of insects. As before I could hear rabbits or deer moving through the bush as I approached certain spots. When I passed

a few towering pine trees I could hear creaking as their tops swayed from a breeze blowing above the forest. At one spot, water filled a hole along the pathway: it seemed little more than tire ruts from a jeep or truck that had passed after a recent rain, but it was filled with tadpoles jotting back and forth.

At several spots along the way there are make-shift picnic tables, usually formed by several planks being placed across a couple of stumps or some stacks of cinder blocks. No doubt they're the same tables Father Louis and his guests used for their picnics. One, in fact, is located very close to the lake that was formed in 1938 when Dom Frederic<sup>7</sup> built the dam for the monastery's water system, and later used by Merton and his friends for occasional illicit swims. Today a sign, shattered in a couple of spots by hunters' bullets, says, "No Swimming, No Fishing" and explains that the lake is the source for Gethsemani's water.

*1:30 p.m.*

On my walk this morning I also discovered two other items of interest. First, I found huge, perfectly shaped mushrooms of a size I never before have seen. The stems were about the circumference of a dime but stood easily six inches tall. The cap was an umbrella shape and at least five inches in diameter. Also I discovered a lean-to that obviously has been lived in at some time by someone from the monastery because it had a chair in it similar to those found on the grounds. Inside was one room with a fireplace and a long wooden table. Outside a basketball hoop had been mounted to a tree. There was no running water or electricity and the place was in disrepair.

*4:15 p.m.*

I have been able to read some things about Father Louis that I never have seen before. I was especially moved by a section in a small book in which Dom Flavian<sup>8</sup> recollected his relationship with Merton and the occasion of his death.<sup>9</sup> Another was some pictures of Merton that I never had seen before, including one of him laid out in Bangkok after his body had been dressed.<sup>10</sup>

My major reason for coming on this retreat was to get my life in order to face the days ahead: bookstore,<sup>11</sup> election, work, family. Instead, so far, all my time has been devoted to straightening out my *soul*. But maybe with my soul in order my life too will fall into shape. Frankly it is difficult for me to think about anything but God while I'm here. It has not been possible for me to draw the roadmap for the rest of my life that I thought would come out of these days. At least, it has not been possible to draw the kind of roadmap that I had planned.

My ego is such a powerful force within me that it is hard to write anything with the total honesty that is required so I might look back on this experience in days ahead and find strength in the recollections that these words stimulate. If this retreat is to have a lasting presence for me, I will need these notes as nudges to my soul when my will wants to go in directions away from God.

It is my prayer, Lord God, that the experience of oneness with you that the climate of this holy place has inspired might remain with me all the days of my life. Keep me ever mindful of the joy that comes with your peaceful presence, and given me strength to reject the temptations toward the worldly and fleshly activities that cause me to forget you, to separate myself from you. All things are possible with your divine graces.

This experience has given me insight to the spontaneous outbursts of praise that erupt from the writings of some spiritual authors, *e.g.*, Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich. I can

understand why they interrupted their own writing to give glory to God, because they were filled with the wonderment of God's kindly and loving presence. I too want to scream praises to God. It is as though the words are pushing themselves out of my mouth, out of the tip of my pen.

I cannot say it enough: Lord Jesus, I thank you for ignoring my unworthiness and bringing me to this point of rapture. Your friendship, I know, is mine for as long as I want it. Please keep my selfishness from turning me away from you and in favor of temporal things of no value.

9:30 p.m.

Father Matthew's<sup>12</sup> conference this evening consisted mostly of personal recollections of Father Louis. It was the first time I had heard anyone who knew him personally speak of Merton. Having been one of Merton's novices, then one of the transcribers of some of his writings, and a close personal friend who shared Father Louis' desires to find new expressions of monastic solitude, Father Matthew is an excellent Merton source. His observations had not only the retreatants amused but also brought belly laughs from an old monk who sat in on the conference.

Father Matthew said Merton seemed to know that he was destined for greatness and that this fostered the intensity of his spirituality. It is as if recognizing his potential for unity with God, he moved to have it fulfilled as greatly as possible, and in so doing he increased the potential, etc.

Father Louis himself talked a lot in his writings of contemplative union with God as a special gift not given to everyone. He also emphasized the importance of responding to the gift as fully and eagerly as possible. Before I go to bed tonight I will read a little more of what he says in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

Aside: the little lay cemetery here is an interesting place. Among the unmarked graves, according to a large black monument, rests Abraham Lincoln's first school teacher (Lincoln was born nearby). Father Dan Walsh,<sup>13</sup> who was a philosophy teacher and not a priest when he encouraged Merton to visit Gethsemani, also is buried there. Finally, I found a family plot (father, mother, son in his 20s) and discovered that both the father and son died on their birthdays.

**Thursday, July 16, 1992**

7:30 a.m.

The last full day of retreat. There is so much more that I must cover, but I know I won't be able to do it all in the short time remaining. I must be careful not to fall into spiritual arrogance, with thinking that I and I alone have found the right and proper path to God's kingdom. I must remember that there are many keys that unlock sincere spirituality among people, and that some gain admission to God's inner chambers by "breaking the lock," as Father Louis says in one of his lectures. There is a particular path for me that I must follow, but I cannot judge others on the paths they have chosen (or been given by God).

At mass this morning I was in wonder about the holiness of this place, with so many people lifting their souls to God simultaneously. Unconsciously I began to contrast this setting with others back home, and I realized suddenly that I know people who are just as good as the holy monks, only their vocations are different, and the time sequences of their jobs, or the interruptions of their children, keep them from "thinking" about God as much as do the monks. But does that make them any less worthy of the kingdom of God? I think not.

This, perhaps, is what Father Louis means about some being chosen to receive the greater gift – not that they receive anything different, or more than someone else, but that they also have the gift of awareness, of knowing that God is with them 24 hours per day, and that they never

truly experience aloneness.

Many people live *quiet* lives of sanctity: that is, they don't lift their inner voice to conversation with God because they are not aware that the opportunity for that even exists. And so they do what is expected of them: they carry out God's mission in this world without ever realizing that God is there to be talked to whenever they desire, that God is there as their strength. Their works, however, are just as pleasing to God as are those of the monks.

I pray, Lord God, that I ever may have awareness of your presence and that my works ever merit your approval.

9:30 a.m.

My long walk took me to Bethany<sup>14</sup> and back. At least, "Bethany" is what the sign said. It was little more than a hillside congregation of eight to ten homes. Another sign said "Bethany Springs"<sup>15</sup> and pointed up a knob toward an old metal row building with a large water tower next to it. Coming from this building were the only human sounds I heard during the entire walk: there was some chatter and then sounds like gunfire. I surmised that the owners of the voices were using the long shed as an indoor shooting range.<sup>16</sup> In front of the building were concrete troughs, but they appeared empty. At some time, perhaps, this was a mineral water center or something like that.

Further down the road I came to a gravel circle drive around a center of weeds. At the back side of the circle was a railroad track, long unused. The rails were rusted, spikes were removed in places, weeds grew between the white rock that held the rails in place. Standing on the tracks, looking in both directions and up the hill from which I had come, I saw no one in sight; no one stirred in any of the yards; none of the houses seemed to have an occupant, even though an abundance of cars in driveways obviously indicated otherwise. The only sound was the combination of bird and insect noises. And it was utterly peaceful and beautiful.

I don't know if the Trappists picked this part of Kentucky for their abbey because it was so naturally silent and peaceful, or if their presence here for these last 150 years has given the locale that acquired quality. I do know, however, that I never have experienced anything similar, anywhere, ever. It's like being in the very center of those distant still spots one always sees from interstate highways but which never really exist the way they look. Well, here it is – this is where the rainbow ends.

One observation: I think there are more birds in this part of the country than anywhere else in the world! Though you can't see them all (even though I've seen several here that I've never seen before), you can *hear* them. What sweet songs! I had long ago noticed background sounds on some of the tapes of Father Louis' talks to the novices that indicated a wide variety of singing birds near the monastery. It's even greater than I had thought, however. This music is particularly sweet in the morning, in the quiet time in chapel before the monks sing Lauds, and again in those moments following Lauds and preceding mass when the church briefly goes black. It's like a concert of birds, monks, birds. How can one not think of God and God's majesty when surrounded by so much beauty? It is this beauty, perhaps, that awakens us to the realization of God's internal presence with us, for what other of God's creatures can appreciate the wonder of this creation except for humankind?

God is with us, in us, because of Christ's saving presence in the world as man: salvation. Because God is beyond human concepts of time, the same spirit of God was present before the

birth of Jesus the man as after, for in God's time Pentecost precedes Genesis and is simultaneous with Genesis, and at the same time follows Genesis. It is given to humankind, as Father Louis points out in *New Seeds*, to say "yes" to God's presence. "Even though my soul may be justified, yet if my mind does not belong to Him then I do not belong to Him either," Merton says.<sup>17</sup> I think, then, that the unforgiveable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit, is to be face-to-face with the awareness of God and to say, "no." Not everyone, of course, will be tempted to sin in that fashion: if you are not aware, you cannot be tempted toward rejection. To be given the gift of awareness, however, and to ignore it, is sin at the highest level.

But this kind of sin is *different* from the kind of sin we generally talk about. Even knowing God in the way the mystics have, in the way contemplatives such as Father Louis have, will not relieve us of our concupiscence, or our pride, or our selfishness. As Christ was man tempted in the desert, driven to anger in the temple, moved to tears over Lazarus, so we humans – even at the apex of our awareness of the contemplative unity with God that is ours – nonetheless will be plagued by our humanness. And to deny that humanness is to commit a sin of pride.

Lord, fill me with awareness of your presence. Open my heart to speak freely with you. Help me recognize that I am but a human and yet a human elevated by you to the opportunity for divine kinship.

5:15 p.m.

Read several good things this afternoon in periodicals from the guest library here. I have especially enjoyed reading *Spiritual Life*, a Carmelite publication, and *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*. The latter had a piece on Merton's spirituality written by William Shannon.<sup>18</sup> It was excellent in showing how Merton's "oneness with God" approach works. I made several notes, especially some referring to the role of contemplation as a response to God's presence. Shannon points out that Merton could not contend that any particular time is the right time to pray, but that *all* time is right for prayer – and in fact should be our prayer.

Before I forget, I want to comment on the prayers for the faithful said here at the monastery. I am very impressed with the concern for our world environmentally, for the concern for native Americans, and even the prayers for "former priests and their families." The monastery is very much a part of the world – would that some of our parishes were so aware.

I am one with God. Thank you, Lord, for your wondrous presence, for giving me life with the breath of your spirit. Bless me that my awareness of you always might remain and grow.

8:15 p.m.

One last long walk to the top of the hill to Father Louis' hermitage. I lingered on the pathway outside his yard thinking about all the trips through the same grass he no doubt made.

On the way up the hill I noticed large ant mounds that had escaped me on my last walk there. I humorously imagined that was how these knobs were formed – years and years of tiny rows of ants lifting the dirt to the top of the tunnel and then down the sides.

Another observation: Kentucky may be famous for raising horses, but it should be equally notorious for its *horseflies*. Walking through the brush, sweating from the heat and humidity, I was a prime target. They've buzzed about my head on every walk I've taken this week.

9 p.m.

A dark storm is approaching the monastery from the southwest. So I've lifted the blinds of my small window and moved my chair over in front of it so I can observe the fast-moving clouds,

and occasional distant cracks of lightening. Against the purple sky the green of the trees is darker than they've been any of the earlier days of this week. Just seconds ago I opened the window – even with the air conditioning on – to feel the night air of the storm. Leaning out and looking across the front lawn of the guest house I was suddenly startled by a crackling sound right outside and then by an immediate clap of thunder. Needless to say, I'm back at my desk to continue this writing and – even over the sound of the air conditioner – hear rain drops against the building.

Well, tomorrow morning ends this retreat and I wonder if I will return home tomorrow night with answers to the questions of my life: probably not. There are no road maps for life; instead, we all must follow our instincts, make our decisions one at a time; trust our judgment long enough to give everything a try but be wise enough to know when the time to change course is at hand.

Spiritually, I am renewed. I have done what was necessary psychologically with my inventory and sacramentally with confession. I know God is with me, in me, and that my acceptance of God's loving presence will help me to be my *true* self, the person intended by God, and not the false self I have created to compensate for and accommodate my selfishness. All that in only three days: Oh, the magnificence of God.

One other thing: I started this afternoon to tape the monks in choir. I'd like to get at least 30 minutes of their singing on tape.

**Friday, July 17, 1992**

7:15 a.m.

And so the appointed hour has come. I feel as though I can hear that voice from T. S. Eliot: "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME."<sup>19</sup> I have a sad, heavy feeling; maybe it's the fear that I am not capable of keeping alive, outside of a place like this where everything encourages it, the contemplative awareness of God. I must have faith in myself, and in the power of God's constant presence.

This retreat has not led me to any sweeping resolutions, to any schema for my daily living, or to any answers for the "overwhelming question" brought on by the streets I've already traveled (more Eliot). Perhaps old T. S. had something there: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit."<sup>20</sup> And I have gone and made my visit and found that God loves me, is with me, and wants only the best for me, wants – in fact – that I spend all my life and eternity with God. That's the path.

There is one thing I have to do when I get back: continue to recognize God's ever-presence. If I do, I will fulfill my obligations – to family, to job, to destiny – and I will accomplish all that needs to be accomplished. Furthermore, I will love – I will see that if God is present in me God also is present in everyone else too. I must help others become aware of God's presence by demonstrating what a benefit it is to have that presence and awareness myself.

I will be back to Gethsemani – retreats of this kind are necessary to my spiritual development. I cannot believe I took so long to get here.

My friend God, your friendship is remarkable. It is consoling. It is the most loyal and trustworthy I ever have known. And it is the most honest and loving. Thank you for sharing yourself with me, who is made worthy of your friendship only by the dignity you have given me in creating me.

And now, friend God, I go back to where you want me to be, to do what you want me to do, in the way you have chosen for me to do it, with the talents you created and blessed me with. And

I will strive, with your help, to remind myself than I am perfect in your sight not in my physical presence but in my spiritual presence. I will strive, with your help, to overcome my slavery to selfishness by giving my will to you and letting your will be mine.

So, what have I learned in these four days? I have learned that I can live a life of relatively constant recollection of the presence of God, if the conditions are right. What I have yet to learn is whether that recollection can be maintained in less favorable conditions. I must trust both God and myself in that regard. I have learned that my family is precious and that I have not been led to this monastic life – at least at this point – because they and I have remarkable God-filled experiences to share with one another. God is love, and my family is the greatest love in my life, and so my family is filled with God. What I have yet to learn is whether I can sufficiently control my selfishness so as to allow those I love truly to be themselves and find God within themselves too. I have learned that all the trappings – the election, bookstore, job – are things given to me by God to do, not out of slavery to them but for his greater honor and glory. What I have yet to learn is whether I can keep them in their proper place and from becoming the be-all and end-all of my existence. I have learned that God forgives, that he has given us a sacramentally forgiving action that we should use – just as we use the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist – to enhance inner contact with God. And I have learned that more beauty and goodness is present in the world than I realize. I must always remember the Zen saying I learned here: “If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are.”

Lord Jesus-God, I thank you for the wonderment of this special experience with you. May you be praised forever and ever, and may I, in your infinite mercy and goodness, forever be aware of your loving, creating presence within.

1. Sometime during 1962, when I was a junior in high school, I made an inquiry to Gethsemani about the possibility of a monastic vocation. I received back a couple of form letters from the vocation director with suggestions on what should be done to enhance such a decision on my part. Also enclosed was a small pamphlet titled *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* by Thomas Merton. I still have both the letters and the pamphlet. As it turned out, I decided to join the Clerics of St. Viator (Viatorians), the priests and brothers who taught me in high school, when I graduated in 1963. I learned much later that had I selected Gethsemani instead of the Viatorians, Father Louis would have been my novice master.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 321.
3. Jonathan Daniels was 26 years old and working on voter registration for African Americans in Lowndes County, Alabama when he was killed by a shotgun blast fired by a part-time law enforcement officer on August 20, 1965; on the commemorative statuary, see Bill Goodson, “Jonathan Daniels and Thomas Merton: A Meditation,” *The Merton Seasonal* 30.2 (Summer 2005) 25-29.
4. Richard Jackson, my stepson, who died in an automobile–bicycle accident on March 15, 1991.
5. Culvertown, Kentucky is approximately 6 miles north of the monastery.
6. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 286-88.
7. Dom Frederic Dunne, OCSO (1874-1948) was abbot at Gethsemani when Merton entered; see William H. Shannon, “Dunne, Frederic,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 121-22.
8. Dom Flavian Burns, OCSO (1931-2005) was abbot at Gethsemani when Merton died; see William H. Shannon, “Burns, Thomas (Fr. Flavian)” (*Encyclopedia* 35).
9. See Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 103-11.
10. See James Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 99; this book was later expanded as Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991; rev. ed., 2008).

11. At the time, my wife and I owned and operated a small bookstore and coffeehouse, Changes Coffeehouse & Bookstore, in Park Forest, Illinois.
12. Matthew Kelty, OCSO (1915-2011) was guest retreat master at Gethsemani; his reminiscences of Merton, entitled “The Man,” are included in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974); enlarged edition, Cistercian Studies vol. 52 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 19-35; and in “Looking Back to Merton: Memories and Impressions,” interview by Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988) 55-76.
13. Daniel Walsh was a visiting professor of Philosophy at Columbia University from whom Merton took a course on the theology of Thomas Aquinas. He subsequently was the person who first introduced Thomas Merton to the Abbey of Gethsemani, encouraging him to make a retreat there. In 1967, at age 60, Walsh was ordained as a priest of the Archdiocese of Louisville, uniquely without the requirement to receive formal seminary training. He died in 1975; see William H. Shannon, “Walsh, Daniel” (*Encyclopedia* 515-16).
14. Obviously I was incorrect, as Bethany, Kentucky is approximately 50 miles north of the monastery and certainly too long a distance for me to have walked on that occasion. Perhaps the sign was an indication that the route I took on my walk headed toward Bethany.
15. Bethany Springs, founded by Sister Madelyn Abdelnour, was a popular small retreat center sponsored by her community, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, for over thirty years until the Institute for Contemplative Living took supervision of presenting retreats and hospitality at Bethany Springs. Located one mile from the Abbey of Gethsemani in New Haven, Kentucky, the former retreat property is now a guest house for a tourist center sponsored by the J. W. Dent Bourbon Distillers on grounds where its original bourbon distillery was located; it opened in 2021 and features a new bourbon, “Monks Road” (special thanks to Jonathan Montaldo for this information).
16. So evidently not the retreat house!
17. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 43.
18. William H. Shannon, “The Spirituality of Thomas Merton,” *Cistercian Studies* 25.3 (1990) 233-45.
19. T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land” (ll. 152, 165, 168, 169) (T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952] 41-42).
20. T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (ll. 10-12) (*Complete Poems and Plays* 3).