

Fifty Years and Counting

By J. T. Ledbetter

Sometime back in the 1960s, I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*,¹ and in the words of Robert Frost, “that has made all the difference.”² I did not, of course, foresee the path before me, though it had been laid and paved by others since time began; but little did I know that my life of roaming half-naked in the farming country of Southern Illinois would lead to Sunday school, church and eventual ordination as a Lutheran minister. God and Thomas Merton knew.

Teaching at a small Lutheran school in Harbor City, California, then Lutheran High School in Los Angeles, then Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, and finally California Lutheran University, I picked up *Seven Storey Mountain*, and my path was set, if not secure. But this is not a story of my life, so suffice it to say that Merton grew on and with me and flowered at CLU in Thousand Oaks, California, where for forty-five years I taught in the English Department and, for forty-five years, I read and taught Thomas Merton.

During those years, my wife Dolores and I visited Cistercian monasteries in America, as well as Tintern Abbey in Wales, whose hallowed ruins spoke to William Wordsworth in his poem, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.”³ The abbeys spoke one word, or rather, many words that sounded like one: “Come in and rest awhile and know God.” So I listened, internalized the beauty, wisdom and power of the Church and knew I would continue reading and teaching Thomas Merton. Now, 50 years on, I’ve left my teaching duties, but I still read on.

In those years at CLU, I mentioned Merton in American Literature or English Literature, Modern Poetry, Freshman English or Creative Writing and in Independent Studies. The last twenty years, I concentrated on novels, poems and essays of a variety of authors, from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, Faulkner and Fitzgerald to Robert Frost and e.e. cummings and a myriad of others. At the end of each course we were required to ask students which books they liked best. In twenty years, *Seven Storey Mountain* was number one!

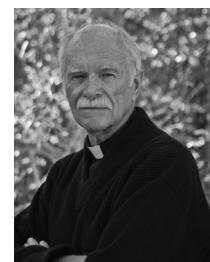
In 1987, after I had written numerous poems and essays about Merton, I received a letter from William H. Shannon, president of the newly formed International Thomas Merton Society, inviting me to become a charter member of the ITMS. Through the society I met many people whose knowledge and love of Thomas Merton filled me with hope that I could find help with my students’ questions, arguments, dreams and fears.

If there was one statement they had in common, it was this: “Thomas Merton is like me.”

And comments such as:

- I went to church once but didn’t like it. All that standing and sitting . . .
- Merton got into some scrapes and still managed to become a priest?

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- My father (mother – teacher – pastor) told me he was just another guy who found God who was with him all the time and he didn't know it. Sometimes, I think he lost my address . . .
- He screwed up a lot in the monastery just like he did at school and all the parties . . .
- If he could get kicked out of Cambridge and become Father Louis, then there's a chance for me . . .
- I hope my life can amount to something good and clean like his, doubts and all . . .
- Merton's funny . . . Jesus must have been funny at that wedding . . .
- I think he was a good man through everything, just lost and searching, then he found God who was not lost in the first place . . .

The more they read, the more they liked this guy Merton: "He's like me." They seemed to revel in Merton's doubts, and his dreams of faraway horizons. They had plenty of those. Their reading went from Merton's wrestling with Catholic law and custom, to his wrecking the Order's jeep,⁴ to writing movingly about the burning of a barn⁵ and the equally passionate plan of living at the top of a watch tower⁶ – words and scenes that reminded students of their dreams and fears and the everlasting yearning to be free!

But free? Merton was not free, they said. Look at the hours of prayer, singing, working in the fields, writing, dealing with the abbot and yes, finally, dealing with a love that almost tore him in two. "I'll bet he never got over that," they said. After class one day, a young man told me he received a "Dear John letter from my girlfriend." He was big kid, strong, but he put his head in his hands and went inside himself as best he could; finally, he looked at me and said, "Doc, I don't think I'm ever going to get over it." Talk about angst!

Merton said he had all kinds of angst.⁷ This boy had it too, a terrible load of it. After a silence, I said, "I don't think you're supposed to get over it." He turned at that. "What do you mean? Never?" "Maybe not ever," I said. "I won't throw you any platitudes like 'we all have our problems,' or 'wait till you grow up.'" Instead, I told him to remember our reading of Merton's love poems.⁸ "Do you think he got over her? We're all made of the same stuff, Bob. I've had disappointments and heartaches and caused others to suffer; but this one is yours, so I won't soft-soap it. But, since you brought up Merton's love affair, remember that it came to a close, painfully, and died; maybe, from its own weight. Vows come in many shapes and shades but they are always strong, and breaking them leave scars that only God's love – and good friends – can heal."

A doctor told me that scars don't move or get better; the body just grows around them; muscles and tendons and bones – and, yes, hearts – live with the memories. And then I told him of a conversation I had with one of the monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani who had been "behind the walls" for thirty years, and how he dreamed of his sweetheart that he loved dearly but gave up to come to the abbey.

"It ruined my nights," he said. "I tried to stop thinking of her, but she kept appearing no matter what I tried to think about. I was miserable. Finally, after a long struggle, I decided that what we had in my other life was good and fine and something not to brush away or try to forget, so at night, when my sweetheart came into my thoughts, I relaxed and remembered her and the good times we had together. After awhile, she fades away and cares of the day come in. I never forget her and I'm happy for the good times we shared. I think of them as a grace that I have received, and remember."

Students, like everyone, have doubts, I said: "DOUBTS?" One said: "I gottem." So did a

particular young lady in my class. One day, she came to my office and shared her story. She said, “I remember when you quoted Cardinal Newman saying ‘10,000 difficulties do not make one doubt,’ so yesterday, after a big family dinner where aunts and uncles gave me advice about jobs and futures and this and that, I brought out my chintz suitcase and said, ‘I’m leaving college and going to South America to join an order that will feed the poor, clothe the naked, and help me find, me.’” She said the room was quiet! Then her mother cried, and her father shouted, “But what are you going to do?” I picked up my suitcase and opened the door and turned and said, I love you all, but I’m not going there to *do* – I’m going to *be*.⁷⁹

I don’t remember her well from class, except that she loved *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* where Merton said, “the more I am able to affirm others, to say ‘yes’ to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone.”⁸⁰

Fifty years on, I often get an email or card asking me if I’ve read this or that of Merton. I usually say “Yes”; sometimes, “I’ve forgotten . . . but it’s on my list to read.” The names and faces of students are often hazy, but I’m pleased they still talk about Thomas Merton, and often close with: “Thomas Merton is like me.” And sometimes: “I’m like Thomas Merton.”

Fifty plus years on, it comes down to: “Me too.”

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
2. Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” l. 20, in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) 105.
3. William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 61-66.
4. See Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 387-88 [12/27/1949].
5. See Thomas Merton, “Elegy for the Monastery Barn,” in Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 99-100.
6. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 286-88.
7. See Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 291 [2/4/1967 letter to Edward Rice].
8. See Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985); see also Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 188-219.
9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 129.