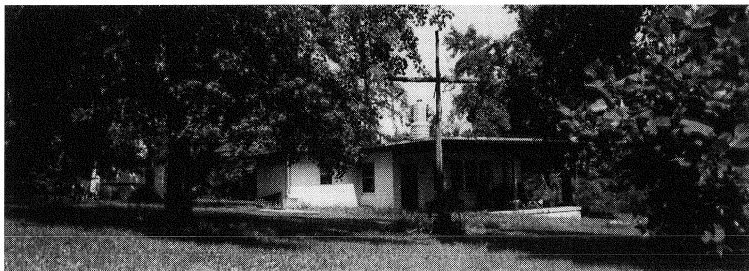


*The Sound of Listening*





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# *The Sound of Listening*

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*A Retreat Journal from  
Thomas Merton's Hermitage*



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*For Brother Patrick Hart*

*Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action.*

*—Thomas Merton*

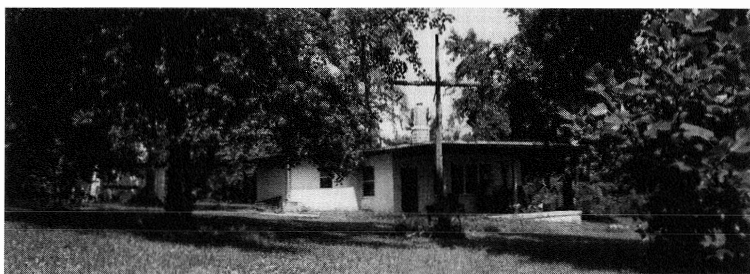
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## *Introduction*



Few Catholic Christians except perhaps John XXIII, John Paul II, Dorothy Day, and Mother Teresa have made as great an impact upon the twentieth century as Thomas Merton, the celebrated Trappist monk, poet, author, and critic who died in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, twenty-seven years to the day after he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani near Louisville, Kentucky.

After publishing one of the most widely read religious autobiographies of all times, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and writing countless poems and over fifty books of spiritual reflection and political critique, Merton retreated further in the early 1960s to a small hermitage built just over a mile from the monastery on a hill in the middle of the woods. There he spent what were to be his last years, fervently writing urgent essays on nuclear disarmament, nonviolence, racial equality, social justice, civil rights,

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Gandhi, Vietnam, and Buddhism. There he received some of the leading figures of the times, people like Thich Nhat Hanh, Daniel Berrigan, Joan Baez, Jacques Maritain, Denise Levertov, John Howard Griffin, and Czeslaw Milosz. In March, 1968, he prepared to welcome Martin Luther King, Jr. for retreat—until he received news of Dr. King's assassination. Merton had stepped further apart from the world, becoming the first "public" hermit in modern Christian history, and yet, in doing so, he reached out farther into the world than ever before.

At the heart of Merton's voluminous message emerges a simple invitation to peel away our illusions and violence and come together in peace and truth before the living God. For Merton, the spiritual life was life itself—pure and simple. Because he spent his days grounded in prayer (with at least seven hours for private meditation and community prayer each day for twenty-seven years), Merton experienced God's presence everywhere. He became a true mystic, and because he sought God so authentically, listened so faithfully, and loved so deeply, he was compelled to proclaim the truth of peace and justice to the world. He became a prophet to the nation, and as such, was duly dismissed.

Merton knew that the God of life wants us to live life to the fullest and to let others live life abundantly as well. His prayer pushed him out to the world with an urgent appeal to stop the wars, abolish nuclear weapons, overcome racism, eradicate poverty, and wake up to the reality and unity of human existence. His message was deeply spiritual because it was profoundly political. That is to say, it broke loose of any categories or ideologies: it was human to the core.

Perhaps the greatest joy in Merton's last years was the freedom he discovered in the hermitage that the community built for him in 1960. A simple three room cinder block structure,

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it sits on the edge of a sloping field, nestled among pine trees and woods. The main room features a large window looking out at the field and a great stone fireplace. In these simple rooms, Merton prayed, wrote, laughed, and lived.

Merton's hermitage still stands today, a quiet place for retreat and meditation on holy ground. Since his untimely death in 1968, the hermitage has been used by monks of the community for week-long private retreats. It is not usually open to the public and remains hidden away in the hills.

In mid-November, 1996, I spent nine days on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Through the hospitality and generosity of the Trappist community, particularly Brother Patrick Hart and the abbot, Father Timothy Kelly, I was able to stay in Merton's secluded hermitage.

The pages that follow give an account of those quiet days of solitude, silence, and intimacy with the God of peace. I arrived that November afternoon exhausted from a relentless year and half as the Executive Director of the Sacred Heart Center, a community center for low-income families in the impoverished Southside section of Richmond, Virginia. Serving nearly five hundred people a day, the Sacred Heart Center offers a variety of programs, including a licensed day care program for two and a half to five year olds; after school and summer programs; a Family Resource Program (with academic training and parenting skills for adult women and child care for their children); an adolescents' program; employment opportunities for local residents; emergency fuel and food assistance; kindergarten, first and second grade classes each for twelve at-risk children; a parents' support group; a lay health-workers program; classes for new or expecting mothers; and various recreational opportunities and community events. By working directly with neighborhood children and parents to

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meet their specific needs, the center strikes at the roots of violence and poverty.

Though my work focused on fundraising, administration, personnel management, and public relations, I spent most of my time trying to fix the leaky roof, the broken bus, or the ever-flooding bathroom. By the time my religious superiors decided to send me to my Jesuit tertianship year (a year of study and renewal, culminating in final vows), I felt quite burnt-out. At the same time, two close relationships had ruptured. Tired and despairing, I pulled up to the monastery seeking relief. I received much more.

"The contemplative life must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices—beyond routine choice—become manifest," Merton writes. "It should create a new experience of time . . . one's own time, but not dominated by one's own ego and its demands; hence, open to others, compassionate time."

Merton calls us to discover "the happiness of being at one with everything in the hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations," and that "what is important in nonviolence is the contemplative truth that is not seen. The radical truth of reality is that we are all one." Merton plumbed the spiritual depths of the truth of human unity by entering the solitude of his own heart, safe in the woods of Gethsemani in his concrete hermitage.

After a few hours in those quiet rooms, I too began to feel a new inner peace and freedom. It seemed as if the peace of God's own presence had descended upon me in the silence. Those days remain with me, deep in my heart. I hope to remain faithful to the gift of those days, to go forward into the world with a listening heart and a word of

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peace and love, truth and nonviolence, rooted, like Merton, in the silence of God, in the peace of Christ.

“The contemplative life has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart,” Merton tells us, “you will truly recover the light and capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained.”

I hope these pages, this little journal, will encourage us all to pursue that inner recovery, the holy journey into the peace of God.

JOHN DEAR, S.J.