

You Did Not Come Here Alone

Melanie-Préjean Sullivan

On this 75th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (SSM), I remember when and where I first 'met' Merton and first read what he called his *autobiography of faith*. One would expect that an American Catholic woman who had enlightened high school religion teachers steeped in the Second Vatican Council and the call to justice would have read at least something memorable of his in class. But I do not recall studying Merton then.

Almost a decade later, my father-in-law told us how he had met Fr. Louis while on a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. As a Catholic and an English scholar, my father-in-law was impressed by Merton's intellect and excellent writing. He also remarked how Merton had seemed equally accomplished when they watched him later, working in the fields around the Abbey. We left our visit to my in-laws with a copy of the bestseller. I read it late into the night, without wanting to put it down. For this reflection, I read it again in one long sitting and gained a few new insights.

Dozens of quotes from Merton have been part of my chaplaincy. I've used them in accompaniment with young adults and retiring senior women, as I've introduced the importance of spiritual autobiography within vocational discernment. While re-reading SSM, I noticed one other important idea. Merton's references to his parents as 'in the world and not of it ... because they were artists (p.3),' is a lovely invitation to use creative and imaginative thinking when discerning our next steps, to find the hidden artists in ourselves.

I am an enthusiastic traveler, so it is no surprise that Merton's descriptions of his life in New York, France, and England were extremely appealing. They were so vivid that I imagined I was there; it was better than any travel journal I've read. His descriptions serve as metaphors for the spiritual landscapes we navigate as pilgrims on earth: wandering, wondering, stumbling, reflecting, and questioning.

A few years ago, I had a conversation about Merton with an older scholar who reminded me that SSM was the journal of an immature young man who thought he'd 'arrived and had all the answers.' Later Merton learned that was not the case. It reminds me of a little poster in a friend's office that reads, 'God isn't finished with me yet.' Indeed, reading

his later works reveal how much he also understood that: discernment continues until our last breath.

Finally, while reading SSM again, I was most captivated by the words Merton remembered from his confessor, Father Odo who said, 'Who knows how many souls are depending on your perseverance in this monastery? ... in any case, you did not come here alone (pp.421-22).' This is a poignant invitation to intentional stability in our troubled times. Who knows how many depend upon our fidelity to prayer, to commitments, to the places we are called? *The Seven Storey Mountain* reminds me as we climb to our respective summits, we never arrive at any place alone.

Note

Page references are from *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt/Harvest, 1999); reprinted in 2015 for The Thomas Merton Centenary.

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She has published journal articles on spirituality, discernment, and sacramental imagination. Her most recent book is her own story: *An Apartment Next to the Angels: Interfaith Imagination, Discernment, Spiritual Legacy* (Mystic Peregrine, 2022). She facilitates retreats, workshops, and courses on spirituality, interreligious encounter, comparative religious history, and spiritual growth for people of all faiths and none. Her website is www.mysticperegrine.com