

THE POINT THAT BELONGS TO GOD

Thomas Merton and the Universal Heart

Reflections on the True Self, Contemplation, and Compassion

30 May 2026 Talk: ITMS & Dominican University

We All Wear Masks

The mask of competence at work.

The mask of having it together in public.

Sometimes the mask of piety in church.

After a while it gets genuinely confusing — even to us — which version is the real one.

Thomas Merton's
Question:

*“Who am I,
really?”*

*The obsession Thomas Merton
never shook.*

Who Was Thomas Merton?

1915

Born in Prades, France

1938

Received into the Catholic Church

1941

Entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky — age 26

1948

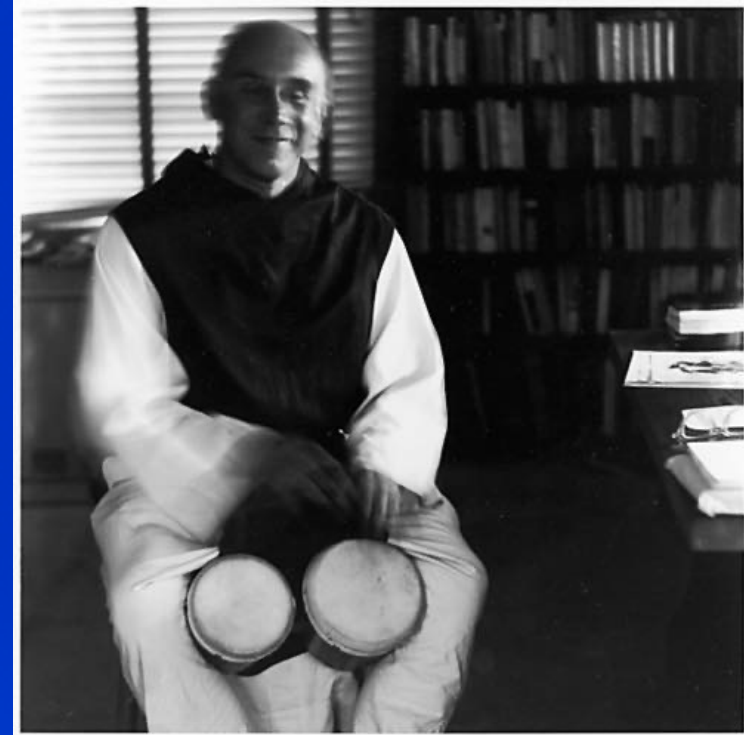
The Seven Storey Mountain — international bestseller

1950s–60s

Deepened engagement: Zen, Sufism, Civil Rights, anti-war

1968

Died in Bangkok at 53 — 27 years to the day after entering the monastery



The False Self

The persona we build to protect ourselves and win approval.

What It Feeds On

- External validation
- Achievement and reputation
- Being seen the right way

Why It Feels Normal

- Everyone around us does it
- It is functional, even successful
- It never announces itself

Why It's a Problem

- It is ultimately unreal
- It exists where God isn't
- It is the loneliest place possible

“

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.

Thomas Merton · New Seeds of Contemplation

The True Self

Our identity is not primarily something we construct.

It is something given — hidden in God.

“The secret of my full identity is hidden in Him. He alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when at last I fully begin to be.”

— New Seeds of Contemplation

Key Insight

We cannot find the true self through self-examination alone. It is revealed as we open ourselves to God's love — at the very ground of our being.

The Point of Nothingness

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.”

Thomas Merton · Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander

Is Contemplation Discernment?

Not a technique. Not a method. A way of being.

“Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive... It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being.”

— New Seeds of Contemplation

What It IS

- Full presence to reality as it is
- Training in genuine attention
- The fullest engagement with life
- Available to ALL, not just monks

The Inner Journey

1

Quiet the Noise

We begin to still the constant commentary of the mind — the self-monitoring and approval-seeking that drives the false self.

2

See Clearly

What we encounter first is rarely peace. It is restlessness — the uncomfortable discovery of our anxiety and need. This is the beginning, not a failure.

3

Be Found

We do not search for God alone. God is present throughout — at that point of nothingness — calling us deeper all along.

“What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?”

— New Seeds of Contemplation

Union with God

Not the dissolution of the self — but a closeness so deep that the boundary between 'mine' and 'yours' becomes less important than it used to be.

“Our discovery of God is, in a way, God's discovery of us. We must let ourselves be found by Him.”

— Seeds of Contemplation

The Direction Runs Both Ways

We are being found, continuously, by a Love that has never lost track of us.

*Merton was clear: contemplation does not require a monastery. **Silence**, some regularity of practice, and willingness to sit with discomfort are enough to begin.*

The Louisville Vision

March 18, 1958 · Corner of Fourth and Walnut
· Downtown Louisville, Kentucky

“I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness...”

“There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander



The Louisville Vision

March 18, 1958 · Corner of Fourth and Walnut
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Shift in the understanding of spirituality

Thomas Merton's Fourth and Walnut experience exemplifies a profound spiritual revelation that has significantly influenced contemporary religious thought. It highlights a pivotal shift in understanding spirituality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all people and the unity of life. This experience has catalyzed a global spiritual movement in which the sacred is recognized in secular cityscapes and universal brotherhood transcends social, cultural, and religious boundaries. Merton's vision has become a cornerstone in modern spirituality, broadening the concept of mystical experience and affirming that spiritual events can unfold in everyday settings. It has shaped the perspectives of many individuals and institutions seeking a spirituality that combines contemplation with active engagement in the world.



Compassion as Accurate Perception

“Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all living things.”

Not Sympathy

Sympathy keeps a safe distance. Compassion closes it.

Not Pity

Pity looks down. Compassion stands beside.

Not Transaction

Charity can be calculated. Compassion cannot.

Awareness of Interdependence

We are constituted by our relationships. This is not sentiment — it is reality.

Contemplation and Social Action

For Merton, they are the two movements of a single breath.

Action Without Contemplation

- Without contemplation, action becomes anxious, compulsive, and self-serving.
- We burn out. We become ideological rather than truly compassionate.
- We impose our vision rather than serving the actual needs of others.

Contemplation Without Action

- Without action, contemplation becomes self-indulgent.
- If we have encountered the God present in all people — and do nothing about their suffering — something has gone wrong.
- Merton: justice, poverty, war — all addressed from contemplative premises.

← INSEPARABLE →

The See, Judge, Act Framework

Developed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967), founder of the Young Christian Workers movement. Commended by Pope John XXIII in Mater et Magistra (1961).

SEE

Observe and experience the realities of individuals and communities honestly, without flinching.

JUDGE

Discern — reflect on what we have seen through the lens of faith, tradition, and genuine wisdom.

ACT

Advance proposals for dialogue and action, flowing from love rather than obligation or ego.

SEE

Look Honestly at Reality

Not the reality we'd like there to be. Actual reality.

- Look at your own life: what are you avoiding, what are you afraid of, what are you defending so hard you can't question it?
- Look at your community: who isn't there? Whose suffering is invisible because it is inconvenient?
- For Merton, this is the beginning of contemplation — training in honest perception.
- The Louisville vision IS an act of seeing: strangers on a street corner, truly seen.

Reflection: What in my life am I currently looking at but not truly seeing?

JUDGE

Discern — Not Condemn

Reflect on what we have seen through the lens of faith, tradition, and genuine wisdom.

“The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little....A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying God. It “consents,” so to speak, to God’s creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree. — Thomas Merton

What does genuine discernment require?

Interior silence deep enough to hear what is actually being asked of us — not just the loudest or most urgent voice.

- What does Scripture say about what I have seen?
- What does the tradition say? What does the social teaching of the Church say?
- What am I tempted to settle for — and what would a deeper, more honest response look like?

Reflection: What does my faith tradition say about what I have seen?

ACT

From Love, Not Obligation

Action that flows from genuine love has a different quality than action driven by guilt, ideology, or the need to be seen as good.

Sustainable

It doesn't exhaust us the way anxious, compulsive action does.

Attentive

It listens to people it serves rather than imposing predetermined solutions.

Humble

It knows its own limits. It is not trying to be the hero of someone else's story.

Patient

It understands that genuine transformation — interior or social — takes time.

Reflection: What is one concrete step I can take — from a place of love rather than obligation?

Why This Matters Now: The Age of AI

The Problem

- AI generates convincing voice, face, writing, and identity — pure surface, no interior life.
- Social media amplifies the pressure to perform and curate the false self to an unbearable degree.
- We risk losing the ability to distinguish genuine interiority from a convincing simulation of it.
- The false self problem Merton diagnosed has been turbocharged by technology.

Merton's Response

- There is something at the center of a human being not reducible to output, performance, or function.
- The point of nothingness cannot be replicated or automated by any algorithm.
- The antidote to a world of surfaces is deeper interiority — not better technology.
- Contemplation is not a retreat from modernity. It may be a form of resistance.

The Invitation

Somewhere beneath all of it — undisturbed by anything you have done or left undone — there is a point of light that belongs to God. It is blazing, right now, in you.

SEE

Stop and look honestly. At yourself. At your community. Without the protective filter of what you wish were true.

JUDGE

Bring what you see into the light of your deepest wisdom, your faith, your prayer. Resist settling for too little.

ACT

Take one concrete step from a place of love rather than obligation. Start small. Start now.

A Prayer for the Journey

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end... But I believe that the desire to please you does please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

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