

The Point That Belongs to God: Thomas Merton and the Universal Heart

Reflections on the True Self, Contemplation, and Compassion

A 45-minute talk for adults | Using the See, Judge, Act Framework

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, everyone — and thank you for being here.

I want to begin with a small confession. When I was first asked by Mike to give this talk, I went back and reread some Thomas Merton — being a teacher and student of comparative religions, I realized, not for the first time, that Merton is one of those writers who seems to have an uncanny ability to describe your interior life more accurately than you can describe it yourself. Or for that matter most humans. If you haven't spent time with Merton, I hope what you heard today from the two amazing speakers gives you a reason to start. And if you have, I hope what you hear now gives you a reason to go back and dig deeper.

The full title of our talk this afternoon is *The Point That Belongs to God: Thomas Merton and the Universal Heart — Reflections on the True Self, Contemplation, and Compassion*. **That phrase — the point that belongs to God — comes from one of the most extraordinary passages Merton ever wrote, and we'll get to it in full before the night is over. But** I want to start somewhere simpler: with the question of masks. Think of all the religions in history and their beginnings, not necessarily what they may have evolved into at certain periods.

We all wear them. The mask of competence at work. The mask of having it together in public. Sometimes the mask of piety in church. We perform versions of ourselves for different audiences, and after a while, it gets genuinely confusing — even to us — which version is the real one. The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this the "buffered self," the modern tendency to seal ourselves off from anything deeper than our immediate thoughts and feelings. Merton would have recognized the diagnosis immediately, though he had his own language for it. He called the

performed, defended, approval-seeking version of ourselves the *false self*, and he spent the better part of his adult life — in a Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky, of all places — writing about how we might find our way back to something more real.

Think of the “founders” of all the major religions of history. Think of saintly people and their lives, we see this struggle vividly; heck, St. Francis is a great example.

This afternoon we're going to follow that path together. We'll use a framework that has become very useful in Catholic social and spiritual thinking — the *See, Judge, Act* method — not as a rigid formula, but as a kind of map for the journey. We'll *see* ourselves and our world more honestly through Merton's eyes. We'll *judge* — or better, *discern* — what that seeing means in light of our faith and our deepest values. And we'll ask what *action* looks like when it flows from a contemplative heart rather than from anxiety or ego.

There's a lot to cover, so let's begin.

PART ONE: THOMAS MERTON AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE TRUE SELF

Who Was Thomas Merton?

Before we get to the ideas, it helps to know something about the man, because Merton's biography is inseparable from his theology.

Thomas Merton was born in 1915 in Prades, France, to an American mother and a New Zealand father, both of whom were artists. His childhood was marked by profound loss — his mother died of cancer when he was six, his father when he was fifteen — and by a restless, peripatetic existence moving between France, England, and eventually the United States. By the time he arrived at Columbia University in New York, he was, by his own admission, a mess: brilliant, charismatic, self-destructive, and spiritually empty. He drank too much. He fathered a child out of wedlock. He pursued pleasure with the kind of urgency that masks a deep unhappiness.

And then, in 1938, he was received into the Catholic Church. And in 1941, to the astonishment of his friends, he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Cistercian monastery tucked into the hills of Kentucky, and became a Trappist monk. He was twenty-six years old.

He would spend the rest of his life there — twenty-seven years — and he would write some of the most widely read spiritual literature of the twentieth century. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948, became an international bestseller. **But his thought continued to deepen and broaden over the following decades, moving from a somewhat triumphalist Catholicism toward something more universal: an engagement with Zen Buddhism, with Sufism, with the Civil Rights movement, with the anti-war movement. He died in Bangkok in 1968, accidentally electrocuted by a faulty fan while attending an interfaith conference, just twenty-seven years to the day after he had entered the monastery. He was fifty-three years old.**

He packed several lifetimes into that brief span. And the thread running through all of it — the obsession he never shook — was the question: *Who am I, really?*

The False Self and the True Self

This is where we begin: with Merton's foundational distinction between the false self and the true self.

The false self, as Merton describes it, is the self we construct. It's the persona we build to protect ourselves and win others' approval. **It feeds on external validation — on achievement, on reputation, on being seen in the right way by the right people.** There's nothing dramatic or villainous about it; most of us spend most of our time operating from this place, and it feels completely normal because everyone around us is doing the same thing. But Merton insists that this constructed self, however functional and socially successful, is ultimately a kind of fiction.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he writes with characteristic bluntness:

"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."

Notice what he's doing there. He's not saying the false self is wicked. He's saying it's *unreal* — and more than that, it's *lonely*, in the deepest possible sense, because it exists in a space where God isn't. And for Merton, to be outside of God's gaze is to be truly alone.

Over against this false self, Merton posits the true self — what he sometimes calls the "inner self" or simply the self that God created and continually knows.

"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."

This is from *New Seeds of Contemplation* again, and it rewards sitting with. Merton is making a radical claim: our identity is not primarily something we construct or discover through self-examination alone. It is something given — hidden in God, and gradually revealed as we open ourselves to God's love. Our deepest self is not the self we perform. It is the self God holds in being at this very moment.

This is not a comfortable idea for a culture that has made self-creation into a kind of secular religion. We are told, constantly, to "be yourself" — as though the self were simply there, ready-made, needing only to be expressed. Merton would gently but firmly push back. The self that needs to be discovered is not beneath the surface of your personality. It is at the very ground of your being, where you are most radically dependent on God and least able to claim credit for your own existence.

The Point of Nothingness

And this brings us to what I think is the most luminous image in all of Merton's writing: the "point of nothingness" at the center of the soul.

This passage comes from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, written in the mid-1960s. I want to read it in full, because it really does need to be heard whole:

"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, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God

in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. 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."

It is in everybody.

Not just in the saints. Not just in the devout. Not just in those who have it together. In everybody. In a difficult colleague. In the estranged family member. In the stranger on the bus who is lost in their own quiet suffering. At the center of every human being there is a point that belongs entirely to God — pure, undefiled, uncorrupted by everything they have done or failed to do.

I want to note something important here: the "**point of nothingness**" is not a technique or a practice. It's not something we create through prayer or achieve through effort. **It simply is.** Our work — and contemplation is the name Merton gives to that work — is to become aware of it. To stop drowning it out with noise. To let it be what it already is.

PART TWO: CONTEMPLATION AS A PATH TO SELF-DISCOVERY

What Contemplation Is — and Isn't

The word "contemplation" can put people off. It sounds like something reserved for monks or mystics — people with a great deal of time and very little to do. **Merton knew this objection well, and he addressed it head-on. Contemplation, he insisted, is not primarily a technique of prayer. It is not sitting in a particular posture, emptying your mind, or achieving some blissful state. It is, at its core, a way of being — a fundamental orientation of the whole person toward God.**

Here is how he describes it in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

"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 a

spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source."

Fully awake. Fully active. This is not passivity or withdrawal — or at least not *merely* that. Contemplation, in Merton's understanding, **is the fullest possible engagement with reality as it actually is, rather than with the story we tell about reality.**

Think about how much of our mental life consists of commentary. Something happens, and immediately our minds are running: *Is this good for me? Is this threatening? How do I look in this situation? What should I say next?* We are rarely fully present to what is. Contemplation as explained by Merton and what we see in the East, is the practice of learning to be present to reality, to others, and ultimately to the God who is present in all things.

Merton was deeply influenced here by the Christian mystical tradition — by Meister Eckhart, by *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by St. John of the Cross — and he saw contemplation as the fulfillment, not the abandonment, of ordinary Christian life. But he also found unexpected resonances with Zen Buddhism and other contemplative traditions, and he was not afraid to learn from them.

The Inner Journey: Unmasking the False Self

If contemplation is a way of being, it is also — unavoidably — a journey. And like most important journeys, it involves passing through some uncomfortable territory.

What happens when we begin to quiet the noise of the false self and turn inward? Often, what we find first is not peace. It's restlessness. Distraction. The uncomfortable discovery of how much of our inner life is driven by anxiety, comparison, and the desperate need to be enough. This is not a failure of contemplation. This *is* contemplation, in its early stages. We are beginning to see ourselves as we actually are.

Merton describes this stripping away of illusion with characteristic honesty:

"We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others, yet at the same time, before we can go out to others, we must first find ourselves."

This is one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life. You cannot give what you do not have. You cannot genuinely love others if you are perpetually performing for them, needing something from them, using them to confirm the story of your false self. The inner journey is not navel-gazing; it is the prerequisite for genuine outward engagement.

Merton was also emphatic that this journey is not something we undertake alone. God is not waiting at the end of the path to be encountered only after we have done all the spiritual housework. God is present to us throughout — indeed, it is God's own presence within us, at that point of nothingness, that first calls us deeper.

In one of his most quoted passages, Merton frames the paradox beautifully:

"What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous."

Union with God

The destination of this interior journey, in Merton's framework, is union with God. And immediately, I want to address the misunderstanding that the word "union" can provoke.

Merton is not describing the dissolution of the self into a cosmic soup, in which the individual disappears. He is describing something more like what we mean when we talk about two people who are deeply, genuinely in love. They are still two people. Their distinct personhood is not erased. But there is a closeness, a transparency to each other, a sharing of life so deep that the boundary between "mine" and "yours" becomes less important than it used to be.

In contemplative prayer, Merton says, we become — for moments at least — aware of God's presence not as something external and distant, but as the ground of our very existence. And when that awareness deepens, everything changes. Actions that once felt like obligations become expressions of gratitude. Other people

become not rivals or means to an end but fellow creatures held in the same loving gaze that holds us.

Merton puts it this way in *Seeds of Contemplation*:

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

There is a kind of release in that sentence, if you let it land. So much of our spiritual life is understood in terms of searching — seeking, striving, earning our way to some awareness of God. Merton is suggesting that the direction runs the other way as well. We are being found, continuously, by a Love that has never lost track of us.

One note on the practicalities, before we move on: **Merton was quite clear that contemplative prayer requires certain conditions — silence, some regularity of practice, a willingness to sit with discomfort rather than immediately reaching for distraction.** For most of us, in our harried modern lives, creating those conditions requires real intention and some sacrifice. But Merton did not think it required a monastery. He wrote for ordinary Christians living ordinary lives, insisting that the contemplative dimension of the faith was available to all, not just to religious professionals.

PART THREE: THE UNIVERSAL HEART — COMPASSION AND ACTION

The Louisville Vision

I want to take you now to the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. It was 18 March 1958. Thomas Merton had been a monk for seventeen years. He was in the city — one of the occasions when his schedule took him there — and he was standing in a busy shopping district, watching the lunchtime crowds move through the streets. And then something happened to him.

He recorded it in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and I think it is one of the great mystical testimonies of the twentieth century:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, 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, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."

He goes on to describe what the experience felt like from the inside:

"Then it was as if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could not possibly matter anymore, to the extent of stopping you from seeing the radiance of God's mercy working itself out in all these people... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Now, it's worth pausing on what is happening here — and what Merton himself makes of it. **He had entered the monastery partly as an act of *separation from the world***: the world was fallen and dangerous, and the monastery was a fortress of holiness. **By 1958, seventeen years in, he was beginning to understand that this separation had contained its own form of illusion.** The world was not simply "out there," to be protected against. The people in that shopping district — ordinary people, caught up in ordinary concerns, probably not thinking about God at all — were carrying within them the same point of nothingness, the same hidden glory of God, that he had been cultivating in his monastic cell. They were not separate from him. They were, in some profound sense, him.

The experience shattered what he called "**the dream of separateness.**" And it reoriented his entire understanding of what contemplation is for.

Compassion as a Way of Seeing

Merton came to believe that genuine contemplation necessarily produces compassion — not as a conclusion we argue ourselves into, but as a direct perception of reality. When you actually see the world as it is — when you see that every human being carries within them a point of light that belongs to God — compassion is not an effort. It is the natural response.

He defined compassion with great precision:

"Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all living things."

Not sympathy. Not pity. Not even charity in the transactional sense. *Awareness of interdependence*. We are bound together, all of us, in a web of shared existence. What wounds one part of that web wounds the whole. What heals one part heals the whole. Compassion, in this sense, is simply accurate perception — seeing things as they actually are.

This is where Merton's thought begins to feel strikingly contemporary. We live in an age of radical individualism, where the basic unit of moral consideration is the autonomous self. Merton — drawing on both the Christian mystical tradition and, by his later years, Buddhist perspectives — insists that this individualism is not just spiritually impoverished but empirically wrong. We are not isolated atoms. We are constituted by our relationships, by our history, by the vast network of people and places and practices that have made us who we are.

And if we are that deeply connected — if there is, in Merton's phrase, a "universal heart" that beats beneath our differences — then justice is not charity. It is simply the recognition of what already is.

Contemplation and Social Action: The Inseparable Pair

I want to address something directly, **because it sometimes comes up when people engage with Merton: isn't all this interior focus — the true self, contemplation, union with God — a kind of spiritual luxury? While people suffer, while injustice persists, while the world burns, are we really supposed to be sitting in silence, attending to our inner life?**

Merton anticipated this objection and rejected it outright. In his view — and this is one of his most important contributions to Catholic social thought — **contemplation and social action are not competing priorities. They are the two movements of a single breath.**

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 others' actual needs. The history of well-intentioned

social movements is littered with the wreckage of people who acted from ego dressed up as altruism.

But without action, contemplation becomes self-indulgent. If we have genuinely encountered the God who is present in all people, and we do nothing about the suffering of those people, then something has gone wrong in our contemplation. We have mistaken a private spiritual experience for an encounter with the God of the Gospels.

Merton wrote extensively about the great social crises of his day — racial injustice, the arms race, the Vietnam War — and he did so from explicitly contemplative premises. His social writing is among the most prophetic of the twentieth century, precisely because it is grounded not in ideology but in genuine spiritual insight.

Here is how he describes the proper relationship between the interior life and the exterior world:

"The whole point of contemplation is that it is a deep realization of what is already there: God's love for us and in us, and our love for one another. This love moves us to action, not because we are driven to prove something, but because we cannot help it — it is the nature of love to go out of itself."

When action flows from this source — from genuine love, from actual awareness of the other's dignity and suffering — it has a different quality than action driven by guilt or obligation or political alignment. It is patient. It is attentive to the actual person in front of it rather than to the abstract cause. It is capable of solidarity rather than just sympathy.

Merton writes, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

"Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can."

PART FOUR: APPLYING THE SEE, JUDGE, ACT FRAMEWORK

A Note on the Framework

Before we apply it, I want to say a word about the *See, Judge, Act* framework itself, because it deserves proper attribution and a little context.

This method was not developed by Thomas Merton. It was developed by a Belgian priest named Joseph Cardijn — later Cardinal Cardijn — who founded the Young Christian Workers movement in the early twentieth century. He designed it as a practical tool for ordinary working people to reflect on their experience in light of the Gospel and take concrete action. Pope John XXIII praised it explicitly in his social encyclical Mater et Magistra in 1961, and it has become one of the most influential frameworks in Catholic social teaching and liberation theology. It's worth knowing where it comes from — it arose not from a monastery but from the factory floor, from young workers trying to understand how their faith connected to their daily lives.

What makes it a fitting companion to Merton's thought, even though Merton himself didn't use it, is that it embodies the same integration of contemplation and action that Merton championed. It begins with *seeing*, which is a contemplative act. It moves through *judging*, which requires exactly the kind of discernment Merton associated with the contemplative life. And it arrives at *acting* — which, for Merton, is the natural overflow of genuine contemplation.

So let's walk through it, keeping Merton's insights in mind.

See

***See* means looking honestly at reality — at ourselves, at our communities, at the world. Not the reality we'd like there to be, or the reality that confirms our existing beliefs, but actual reality.**

This is harder than it sounds. We are remarkably skilled at not seeing what we don't want to see. We look at our own lives and see what we've achieved; Merton would invite us to look also at what we're avoiding, what we're afraid of, what we're

defending so hard we can't question it. We look at our communities and see what is familiar; *See* asks us to notice who isn't there, who isn't being heard, whose suffering is invisible to us because it's inconvenient.

Merton's entire spiritual project begins with this kind of honest seeing. The recognition of the false self is an act of seeing. The Louisville vision — looking at strangers on a street corner and *really seeing them*, in all their hidden glory — is an act of seeing. Contemplation, at its most basic level, is training in this kind of perception.

Practical question for reflection: What in my own life am I currently looking at but not truly seeing? What in my community is present but invisible to me?

Judge

***Judge* is perhaps the most misunderstood word in the framework. It does not mean to criticize or condemn. It means *discern*: to reflect on what we have seen through the lens of our deepest values, our faith tradition, our genuine wisdom.**

For those of us formed in the Christian tradition, this means bringing what we've seen into dialogue with Scripture, the tradition, the social teaching of the Church, and our own experience of prayer. What does what I've seen mean? What does it call me toward? What is God's word for this situation?

Merton's contribution to this stage is decisive: genuine discernment requires contemplative depth. If we rush from *See* to *Act* without this middle stage — without sitting with what we've observed and allowing it to be illuminated by wisdom — our action will be reactive and superficial. We need the interior silence to hear what is actually being asked of us, rather than simply responding to the loudest or most urgent voices.

He writes:

"The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little."

That temptation is never more powerful than at the *Judge* stage. We settle for a comfortable, manageable response rather than the genuinely transformative one.

We address the symptom rather than the cause. We perform the action that makes us feel better rather than the one that actually helps.

Practical question for reflection: What does my faith tradition say about what I have seen? What does my experience of prayer say? What am I tempted to settle for — and what might a deeper, more honest response look like?

Act

Act is where everything becomes concrete.

But note what Merton would say about the source of genuine action: it must flow from the interior. Not from guilt. Not from the need to be seen as a good person. Not from anger or ideology. From genuine love, genuine compassion, genuine solidarity.

When action flows from that source, several things are different. It is sustainable — it doesn't exhaust us in the way that anxious, compulsive action does. It is attentive — it listens to the people it's trying to serve rather than imposing predetermined solutions on them. It is humble — it knows its own limits and isn't trying to be the hero of someone else's story. And it is patient — it understands that genuine transformation, whether interior or social, takes time.

Action rooted in contemplation can take many forms. It might be a conversation you've been avoiding. It might be a commitment of time or resources to a cause that genuinely needs you. It might be a change in your own habits and choices. It might be something as large as public advocacy or as quiet as the quality of attention you bring to the person sitting next to you.

Practical question for reflection: Given what I have seen and discerned, what is one concrete step I can take? What would it look like to take that step from a place of love rather than obligation?

CONCLUSION

Let me bring us back to where we started: to the masks we wear, and to the question of what lies beneath them.

Thomas Merton spent twenty-seven years in a monastery, which is about as far from the ordinary rhythms of modern life as it's possible to get. And yet he speaks to us with peculiar directness, across six decades, about things we recognize immediately. The exhaustion of the false self. The longing for something more real. The hunger for connection that is genuine rather than performed. The desire to act in the world from a place of integrity rather than anxiety.

He was not a perfect man. He struggled with pride, with restlessness, with the tension between his desire for solitude and his compulsive need to write and engage. He fell in love with a nurse while recovering from surgery and went through a turbulent period in his final years that he wrote about with painful honesty. He was, in short, recognizably human — which is perhaps why his spiritual writing carries such authority. He was not describing a path he had completed. He was describing one he was walking.

And the heart of that path is this: that at the center of each of us — at the very bottom of all our noise and performance and fear — there is a point that belongs entirely to God. Not to our ego. Not to our reputation. Not to our achievements or our failures. Entirely to God. And in that point, we are all one. The billions of separate lives we lead, the billions of differences that divide us, are real — but they are held within a deeper unity that nothing can touch.

Merton's great invitation is to stop running from that center, and to learn — slowly, imperfectly, with much backsliding and many returns — to live from it.

He captures it in a prayer that has become perhaps his most beloved piece of writing, from *Thoughts in Solitude*:

"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. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. 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 hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be

lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

We are, most of us, somewhere in that prayer. We do not see the road ahead clearly. We do not know ourselves as well as we'd like to. We are not sure, on most days, whether we are following God's will or our own preferences dressed up in religious language. But we have the desire. And Merton — drawing on the whole depth of the contemplative tradition — assures us that the desire is enough to begin.

Begin with *seeing* — honestly, without flinching. Move through *judging* — patiently, in light of what you truly believe. Arrive at *acting* — humbly, from a place of love rather than ego.

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

Thank you.

APPENDIX: KEY SOURCES AND QUOTES

The following Merton works are quoted or referenced in this talk:

- *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962) — primary source for true self/false self theology; quotes on the illusory self, identity, and love of others
- *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) — source of the "point of nothingness" passage and the Louisville vision
- *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958) — source of the closing prayer
- *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949; revised as *New Seeds* in 1962) — source of the "God's discovery of us" passage

A note on the "See, Judge, Act" framework: This method was developed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967), founder of the Young Christian Workers movement, and was not created by Thomas Merton. It was commended by Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and has been widely used in Catholic social teaching and pastoral practice. It is applied here as a complementary framework to Merton's spirituality, not attributed to him.