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Merton's New Novices: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Monasticism in a Freshman Seminar

David King

In a familiar and often quoted passage from Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the new monk and young writer, brimming with idealism, proclaims that 'October is a fine and dangerous season in America... You go to college, and every course in the catalogue looks wonderful. The names of the subjects all seem to lay open the way to a new world'.¹ Oh, that it were always true for my students!

I teach at Kennesaw State University, a large, suburban university in Metropolitan Atlanta, the third largest institution in the state system. Though a few of our students reside on campus, most of them commute to school, often after long days at work and excruciating waits in interminable traffic jams. For these, college is hardly an adventure. It is instead their logical, required, practical duty as pragmatic and motivated members of our society. Some view their education as a chore, their classes as yet another weekly task to be completed along with the yard work, the laundry, and the care of children. Often, they seem to plod from course to course – uninspired, disengaged, unsympathetic to new ideas. Most of our students will major in the programs offered in our large College of Business, and many of them will retain Merton's own early '[suspicion] of literature, poetry – the things towards which [his] nature drew [him] – on the grounds that they might lead to a sort of futile estheticism, a philosophy of "escape"'.²

It is indeed a bleak and vulgar picture, and the university adminis-

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 50th anniv. edn, 1998), pp. 165-66.

2. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 196.

tration would no doubt rise up and admonish me were they ever to hear this appraisal of the institution. But as an idealist myself, I refuse to accept that this approach to education is true of all our students. Whether they know it or not, upon their matriculation, they open themselves to the very real possibility that their lives will be touched, and changed, by mystery and wonder. As a student at Columbia, you will recall, Merton himself almost walked out one of the most exciting experiences of his entire education. Realizing that he has entered the wrong room, 'that this was not the class I was supposed to be taking',³

I got up to go out. But when I got to the door I turned around again and went back and sat down where I had been, and stayed there... It was the best course I ever had at college. And it did me the most good, in many different ways. It was the only place where I ever heard anything really sensible said about any of the things that were really fundamental – life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity.⁴

Now, I do not presume to possess the gift for teaching that Professor Mark Van Doren had, nor do I assume that most of my students share Merton's sensitivity and insight. Yet, as a teacher, I have to believe that my own freshman seminar does in fact have the potential to touch my students, and I have to elevate my own prejudices about their often rough and untested abilities.

In my freshman seminar, therefore, I am constantly looking for texts that will challenge and motivate my students toward a new level of imagination and analysis, that will also grant them insight into a different way of life from their own. I have already described our typical adult student, that person whom administrators persist in calling 'non-traditional', but my campus also has an abundance of typical 18-year-old students. Most of them are bright, at least by the standards of the state of Georgia, which grants roughly 80% of them access to the HOPE Scholarship, a program that waives tuition and textbook fees for entering freshmen who maintained a 3.0 grade point average throughout high school. Nearly all of them work at mundane jobs, positions that occupy far more of their time and thought than the coursework they pursue. Most of them seem to come to college on a whim; since the state pays the bill, they think, why not take a chance? What have we got to lose? They are likely to view college as an accelerated thirteenth grade, in which they will be coddled, and guided, and tolerated, just as they always have been. They are bemused. They are entitled. They are also, perhaps, a little scared. In the back of their minds, they sense, they *know*, that

3. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 197.

4. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 197.

college is supposed to be different. They are simply waiting for someone to show them how. This is where my course and I become important.

Whatever they happen to be called — ‘first year experience programs’, ‘orientation courses’, ‘transitional experiences’, or ‘freshman seminars’ — classes such as these have proliferated on campuses across the United States. No self-respecting college or university would be without one, so important assessors tell us are they to enrollment, retention and student success. They have attracted the attention of the publishers, who have churned out volumes of first-year textbooks; the affection of educational theorists and motivational speakers, who conduct workshops, publish bulletins, post data on websites, host large and expensive national conferences; and the adoration of high level campus officials who, while they rarely stoop to actually *teach* one of the courses, are simply delighted by the prospect of elevated retention percentages. Is there anything wrong with all of this? No, I believe, and yet, yes.

We do students an injustice and a disservice if we only teach the pragmatism of campus resources, study skills, and soft-pedaled ‘values’. What these courses ought to promise students is what lured Merton back into Van Doren’s classroom: the opportunity for challenge, intellectual rigor, meaningful ideas. In short, they should educate, not merely orient. At Kennesaw, happily, we are given a great deal of freedom in how each faculty member chooses to organize the course. I often relate my course to a specific theme, through which I am able to give my students applied practice in reading, writing and thinking at the college level. One of the most popular approaches to the course I offer is religion.

Several years ago, I vowed never to deal with religion in the classroom again. While teaching an introductory literature course for an early morning audience of bleary-eyed sophomores, I read an answer to an exam question that so tickled me — and saddened me — that I have never forgotten it. Our class had finished a unit on short stories, and the exam consisted of a series of quotes from the stories that the students were to identify according to author, title, speaker, and thematic significance. One quote was taken from the parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke’s Gospel. Most of the students were native Georgians, and living in the buckle of the Bible Belt, as they did, the story was quite familiar to them. But one student, who had never read the story before — nor much of anything else, I suspect — was confused by the language of the King James Version. The quote I selected for the exam was simple enough, I thought. It’s the moment when the older son, baffled by his father’s loving forgiveness, protests the welcome his wayward brother receives. The older brother says, ‘Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a

kid, that I might make merry with my friends'. Now, we had spent some time on this story. We had discussed its theological implications and its insights into human nature, including the indiscretion of youth, the capacity of the human heart to forgive, and its sad leanings as well toward jealousy. I thought the quote was a give-away question, a generous gesture that would be welcomed on the exam. So I was surprised, dismayed and, I admit, amused when I read this particular student's answer: *In this passage, the boy says to Lo, his father, that he wants a son of his own to give a party.* It's a true story, I swear, and I've never told it to a fellow English professor who didn't break into fits of laughter upon hearing it.

Merton, I think, would laugh too. In *The Sign of Jonas*, he remarks of his scholastics that 'they refresh me with their simplicity'.⁵ In fact it was Merton's own views of teaching that led me again to attempt using religious materials in my freshman seminar. When he began teaching the novices at Gethsemani, Merton seized upon his students' own elementary understanding of the religious life as perhaps the ideal place from which to begin. 'The young ones', admits Merton, 'do not have half the problems I used to have when I was a scholastic. Their calmness will finally silence all that remains of my own turbulence. They come to me... sometimes with an even more intelligent absence of questions'.⁶ And as their teacher, Merton '[didn't] use special methods. I try to make them love the freedom and peace of being with God alone in faith and simplicity'.⁷

My own introduction to *The Seven Storey Mountain* came at a time when I was far removed from the bliss of Merton's – or my own – students. I discovered the book when I was the graduate research assistant for Professor Victor A. Kramer, who is still of course on the editorial board of *The Merton Annual*. When Victor and I first met, I had no idea who Thomas Merton was; as a Southern Baptist, I had never even heard of him. But Victor's fascination with Merton, his enthusiasm for monasticism, and his own Catholic faith likewise inflamed me. I became interested in Catholicism, then obsessed with it; it captured my imagination, appealed to my intellect, and ultimately touched my soul. I discovered *The Seven Storey Mountain* one afternoon while compiling the

5. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 191.

6. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 191.

7. William H. Shannon (ed.), *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 368.

index for a volume of *The Merton Annual*. The book sounded interesting, so I bought a copy. To put it succinctly, the book changed my life. It led me further on a quest to absorb and understand Catholicism, and three years later I was confirmed and accepted fully into the Catholic faith at the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel at Georgia State University. Three years after that, I taught the book for the first time in a world literature course. Some time later, I had the idea of using it in my revamped freshman seminar.

If my students at Kennesaw are mired in a routine approach to work and school, they are similarly content in a deeply rooted Protestant religious tradition. They are likely to be devout and practice an enthusiastic evangelical approach to the gospel. The Campus Crusade for Christ is one of the largest and most successful student groups on campus, and the Baptist Student Union also has a prominent presence. It rarely fails that upon learning I am Catholic, some concerned student will meekly, though earnestly, approach me after class to inquire if I am 'saved'. Why, then, would I teach *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a book that is unabashedly Catholic and often piously so? Why use a text whose tone often implies and at times asserts Catholicism's superiority to Protestant faiths? At the time of the book's publication, Merton had not come to a full appreciation of ecumenism; in fact, he often apologized for the book's piety, and the introduction by William H. Shannon in the fiftieth anniversary edition takes pains to remind readers that 'At the time Merton wrote his book, Roman Catholic theology had become a set of prepackaged responses to any and all questions. Polemical and apologetic in tone, its aim was to prove that Catholics were right and all others wrong'.⁸ Shannon also reminds readers that 'the Roman Catholic Church you encounter in this book is almost light years removed from the church that we recognize as the Roman Catholic Church today'.⁹ Though Shannon ultimately assures that 'Readers today will be better able to put this narrowness in historical perspective and thus be less bothered by it',¹⁰ I still encounter students who, as one put it, are 'put off' by Merton's tone even when they learn how much he changed in later life. I must admit, as well, that when I first taught the book as a new convert, I adopted some of Merton's own exclusive attitude.

The book's strong religious message also becomes tricky when one considers that I am teaching in a public university; as one of my students

8. Williams H. Shannon, 'A Note to the Reader', in Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. xx.

9. Shannon, 'A Note', p. xx.

10. Shannon, 'A Note', p. xxi.

exclaimed, 'I can't believe I read this book in college!' So, I use the book for other reasons. On the one hand, I believe the world in which my students live is remarkably similar to the one Merton and his contemporaries inhabited. As Robert Giroux explains, '*The Seven Storey Mountain* appeared at a time of great disillusion...and the public was depressed and disillusioned, looking for reassurance'.¹¹ In the wake of the Great Depression, the Second World War, the arrival of the atomic bomb, and the dawn of the Cold War, Americans were wracked with anxiety and uncertainty. Surely, the book delivers a profound message of hope for troubled times. My students today exhibit this same sense of fear and frustration. They worry about terrorism and impending war. They fret over the economy, yet seem lost in an avaricious consumer society. It is no exaggeration to say that some of them are convinced they may not live to be 30. In the wake of September 11th, when their generation was changed in an instant, many of them feel that there is little purpose in old values and traditions, especially those espoused by a religious text. Yet they do not seem to believe that the answer lies in hedonism; instead, I think they are looking for something lasting. If one looks past the superficial 'story' in Merton's book, there are great themes of assurance and comfort. At the same time, as Monica Furlong has written, 'What also appeal[s]...[is] the note of heroism, of idealism, of reckless self-sacrifice for a cause...and many of the young were profoundly influenced by [Merton's] example'.¹² Though times change, universal human nature does not; even if my students were not living in an age comparable to Merton's, they could still relate to his struggles and dreams, which are common to all youth, at all times.

On the other hand, I also teach *The Seven Storey Mountain* because it lends itself so readily to teaching the kind of analysis and thoughtful reading my freshmen need to learn for success in their later coursework. Merton's students, he once remarked, 'come in with the jitters in the first place. They come in with a false notion of the monastic life'.¹³ Likewise, my students arrive at the university worried about the difficulty of the coursework and obsessed solely with maintaining their grade point average. So, like Merton, who wrote of his students 'The novices here have their breviaries full of very sad holy cards, and I am secretly planning to descend on them, take away all their favorite trash, and impose

11. Robert Giroux, Introduction, in Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. xvi.

12. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 156.

13. Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO (ed.), *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 58.

on them something good',¹⁴ I also want to give my students something of substance. For my freshmen at Kennesaw, *The Seven Storey Mountain* is no easy read. It is full of references to places unknown to many of my students. It includes obscure and non-translated quotations in Latin and other languages. It references a religious tradition, and a way of life, that is absolutely foreign to them. Finally – I don't mean to be comical – the book is long. I can hardly count the times I have heard the complaint, 'but it's so long'. I have no sympathy for these expressions of woe. College reading should be challenging, difficult, time-consuming. It shocks me to hear that most of my students have graduated – with a 3.0 GPA, remember – from good suburban public high schools without having read anything. Many of them brag about it, as though graduation from high school without having read a word is a badge of honor.

I am, however, patient. I assign the book at the beginning of the semester and give the students eight weeks to finish reading. I teach them rudimentary approaches to a lengthy text. 'Establish a routine', I tell them. 'Read ten pages a day for eight weeks and you'll be done!' I teach them simple skills such as highlighting and note-taking. On a more involved level, we discuss fundamental means of textual interpretation. We discuss context – authorship, genre, tradition, historical and social backgrounds to the text. This is especially relevant to a discussion of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for I am able to relate the book to their own experience, even as I also introduce them to spiritual classics ranging from St. Augustine's *Confessions* to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. We also consider subtext – theme, meaning, symbolism, metaphor – and we talk about basic textual elements such as tone, style, setting and character. While these are elementary concepts, they are nonetheless essential skills for the more involved courses in history, philosophy and literature that my students will later encounter.

For the instructor who wishes to supplement the reading of the text with other materials, there is an abundance of relevant secondary resources that are ideal for loosening the monotony of a college course. I always show Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn's *Merton: A Film Biography* early in the semester. It introduces students to Merton and often encourages them to begin reading. Later in the course, at about the time most of the students have reached the Gethsemani part of the book, I show Robert G. Maier's documentary *Trappist*, which intersperses a historical overview of monasticism alongside fascinating glimpses of life at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina. Finally, at Kennesaw, we are fortunate to have the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit in

14. Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity*, p. 109.

Conyers, about an hour's drive from campus. I sometimes take small groups of students on field trips to the monastery, or I encourage them to go in pairs or groups themselves. By the time the students have finished the book and seen the films, most of them are so fascinated by monastic life that they want to see it firsthand.

That *The Seven Storey Mountain* addresses so well the monastic life – a life peculiar and unknown to most Americans – is perhaps its greatest attraction for younger readers. As Furlong has written, 'Those who are not exposed to the rigors and monotones of religious life all too easily grow romantic about it. The book unconsciously exploits this weakness, which was one of the reasons for its success'.¹⁵ According to Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Although it would be an exaggeration to say that his book triggered an explosion of interest in the monastic life...it certainly did contribute to a fascination with the life of the spirit'.¹⁶ Furthermore, 'what distinguished Merton's book from the lot was that it told a tale that was so thoroughly modern. Here was the story of a hard-drinking, cigarette-smoking, jazz-loving, left-leaning, poetry-talking, bilingual, New York intellectual with European roots who chucked it all for the monastic life'.¹⁷ As one of my students said, 'The book makes me see what is happening to a lot of youth who get caught up in cigarettes and drinking!'¹⁸ As another said, giving the book perhaps the highest praise from a young audience, 'Cool'.

Of course, many of my students are wary, if not downright horrified, by even the thought of monasteries. They are like Flannery O'Connor's Mrs Flood, who disdaining the asceticism of Hazel Motes, says of him 'He might as well be one of them monks...he might as well be in a monkery'.¹⁹ Many of my students express as well Mrs Flood's indignation that 'it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing – like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats. There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it'.²⁰ Here in the South, even nearly 40 years after the Second Vatican Council, a lingering suspicion of the Catholic Church persists, especially in rural counties from which many of my students come. In light of

15. Furlong, *Merton*, p. 159.

16. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 32.

17. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, p. 33.

18. This quote and all student comments that follow are taken from student essays. They have been edited only for spelling.

19. Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1952), p. 218.

20. O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, p. 224.

recent controversy and scandal regarding priests and cases of sexual abuse, these prejudices may be more easily expressed. Many of my students report having been taught anti-Catholic attitudes from an early age at home and in their churches, and while many mainline Southern Protestant denominations have adopted a more Catholic approach to liturgy and worship, archaic ideas about Catholics—'they follow a foreign leader', 'they worship the Virgin Mary', 'they can't ask God for forgiveness'—still present a challenge. Monasticism, especially, is subject to ignorance and confusion. Why, my students want to know, would anybody ever want to retreat into the cloister, live a life of silence and celibacy, and hide from the world? To agitate them, I sometimes answer, given the state of the world, why *wouldn't* anybody want to?

To be honest, some of my students will never understand the appeal of monasticism, nor will they ever embrace the valuable lessons it has for the world. And yet I believe for these students as Merton believed for the country: 'America is discovering the contemplative life'.²¹ This may be particularly true for our college freshmen. If, as Merton says, 'The monastery is a school',²² might we also suggest the converse, that the school should be like a monastery? Monastic life embraces community, encourages civility, celebrates love. I hear all the time on my campus that we are part of a community, and I usually heed this assertion with distrust, but I do believe that the study of monasticism may very well add to the sense of community among 25 freshmen in an introductory seminar. I listen to complaints from colleagues all the time that students are disruptive, unruly, disengaged, but I am sure that 16 weeks spent in the company of St Benedict's ideal do much good in terms of students' emotional and intellectual maturity. I am often met with scoffs and smirking when I suggest that a good college course ought to incorporate the spirit of love—of learning, of teaching, even of one's fellows—but I fail to see how people studying a text based on love cannot also begin to feel some of that love themselves.

Yet even if we do not accept spiritual parallels between a monastery and a university, surely we can see the practical aspects the two have in common. Merton's description of Trappist monasteries in *The Waters of Siloe* as 'places full of peace and contentment and joy'²³ represents precisely the ideal atmosphere students should find on a college campus. The life of a monk, I tell my students, is in many ways not unlike your

21. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 453.

22. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 409.

23. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (ed. Thomas P. McDonnell; New York: Image Books, 1989), p. 183.

own experience as a college freshman. Like a new monk, you too are a novice. You face new challenges, new hardships, and paradoxically, new freedoms. Merton, I tell them, disdained 'the artificial public image which [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] created'.²⁴ Monks, contrary to what many of my students believe, are not perfect nor do they always seek to attain perfection. In fact, monks suffer the same temptations, and are susceptible to the same trivial concerns, that college students are. I sometimes use Merton's poem 'A Practical Program for Monks' in class to illustrate the comparison. Though Merton and his brother monks were on a spiritual journey of profound complexity, they still had to be concerned with 'mind[ing] both the clock and the Abbot'.²⁵ The monastery, like the university, had to worry over the often unpleasant business of being a business — 'in Kentucky there is also room for a little cheese'.²⁶ And each monk, though he had a lofty spiritual purpose, might want to bend the rules just a little, for 'I believe it is easier when they have ice water and even a lemon!'²⁷ All of this is obvious to the seasoned reader of Merton, and it is apparent to anyone who has studied monasticism. But for my audience, college freshmen, it is a revelation.

Ultimately that is what I am after: revelation. The study of any classic text, and especially the study of a classic religious book, should in the end result in an epiphany. My students arrive at these affirming realizations all the time. This semester, one student wrote 'Thomas Merton understands that so many young people in America fail because they don't realize that a successful future is meaningless without God'. Another said, 'Just recently, I was having a hard time, and I thought to myself "How would Merton handle it?" I can honestly say this book has changed my life...it's almost like a second Bible to me'. Still another wrote that 'Our world today is afraid, just like Merton's generation was afraid. That was what I really took from the book, that people of all times have fear, whether it's of atomic bombs or pipe bombs. But Merton teaches us that we don't have to be afraid if we have faith'. These comments represent wisdom, maturity, understanding. Aren't these the aims of all education? Merton knew that all monks sensed the futility of a life based on materialism; in *The Waters of Siloe* he writes that 'there is something in their hearts that tells them they cannot be happy in an atmosphere where people are looking for nothing but their own pleasure

24. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 16.

25. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 180.

26. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 181.

27. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 180.

and advantage and comfort and success'.²⁸ It is not as eloquent as Merton's prose, but when an 18-year-old boy tells me 'Merton has shown me that it's not the size of your bank account that matters, but the size of your soul', hasn't he arrived at the same important conclusion? I'll share two other comments from student essays that express how my students learn from the book what I hope they will learn. One young man writes that 'Merton reminds me that all of us have a void, or emptiness, that needs filling. Most of us, myself included, try to fill that void with the things of the world. The book was difficult for me to read, and I found some of it boring, but it has a universal message of hope that all college students need to know'. Finally, another student writes 'For me, the best part of the book was that Merton teaches that silence, or quiet time, is often more important than all the demands and responsibilities of life that don't really matter in the long run'.

Comments such as these thrill me as a teacher, and I believe they would also thrill Merton, who once wrote to a group of Smith College students who had read his books that 'for a writer there is surely not much that can be more rewarding than the fact of being really read and understood and appreciated'.²⁹ Do all of my students arrive at this sort of insight? Of course not. I still suffer comments resembling these: 'There is too much Latin in this book, why I'll never know'; 'It's obvious through this boring book that Merton was an intelligent man'; 'I feel that Merton was more of a writer than a monk'; and 'There was so much information in this book, my mind and body physically ached', but the majority of my students experience, often for the first time, the impact a great book can have on one's own life.

For most of my students, the book bolsters their own already secure religious beliefs; it offers an affirmation of their own Christian faith, as well as the values and ideals they already strive to live by. But for a few, the book steers them in an unexpected direction toward a spiritual awakening or conversion. I have described the effect the book had on my own young life, how it moved me to become a Catholic, and I suppose in some subversive sense I hope the book might attract others to the Church. As a professor in a public institution, I cannot proselytize or list religious conversion among my teaching objectives, but I am pleased when a student admits that '*The Seven Storey Mountain* has really made me think for the first time why I am Catholic. It made me appreciate the mass for what it truly is, not just a boring ritual', or when one acknowl-

28. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 182.

29. Christine M. Bochen, 'From Monastery to University: Teaching Thomas Merton to Undergraduates', *America* 159.11 (22 October 1988), p. 280.

edges that 'I never even thought about monasteries, but now I can say I would love to visit one. I was always skeptical of Catholics, but now I want to learn even more, and have even attended a Catholic church this semester'. Merton may not have wanted to be 'a Catholic myth for children in parochial schools',³⁰ but I am sure he would be satisfied.

Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a modern classic. It has never been out of print, and it has been read now by generations who came of age during and after the Cold War era. Each audience finds something new in the book, as audiences discover their own truths in any great text. Upon its publication, following the Second World War, the book led many men to monastic life. In the 1950s, it offered a message of individualism and anti-consumerism. For the young people of the 1960s and 1970s the book was counter-cultural. Now, for my own students of the twenty-first century, it has become a practical means of teaching college skills as well as a primer on alternative and spiritual approaches to living. It has become an invaluable feature in my freshman seminar, and has endowed my own teaching with the presence of grace.

30. Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn (producers), *Merton: A Film Biography*.