



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

Summer 2009

Place-Making as Contemplative Practice

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Christie, Douglas E., "Place-Making as Contemplative Practice" (2009). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 108.

https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/108

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

Place-Making as Contemplative Practice

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE*

“Where are we going? Always home.”—*Novalis*

In an age of chronic and widespread displacement, the work of place-making—the discovery and cultivation of a sense of place—has gained new significance and meaning. In this essay, I propose to consider how place-making can be understood as a form of contemplative practice. Anthropologist Keith Basso describes place-making as a work of “retrospective world-building” that enables a person or community to see a place in all its richness and complexity and hold that place in the imagination. Following the work of photographer Robert Adams, I want to suggest that what makes this work contemplative in character is the integration and interplay of geography, autobiography, and metaphor. The example of Thomas Merton’s attention to place as part of an encompassing spiritual vision will serve as a focal point for arguing that the work of place-making can and ought to be considered a genuine part of contemplative practice.

A week before his death in December 1968, Thomas Merton stood barefoot and alone, gazing up at the huge Buddhas at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. He had journeyed halfway across the world and across the entire span of his life, it seemed, for this moment. His account of this experience, recorded in his journal four days later, has been justly celebrated as a singular moment of awakening in Merton’s life, a breakthrough that left him unalterably transformed. Consider this description of the experience: “Looking at these figures, I was

* Douglas Burton-Christie is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California. He is the author of the award-winning book *The Word in the Desert* and serves as editor of the journal *Spiritus*. An earlier and somewhat different version of this essay was presented as a keynote address at the Thomas Merton Institute for Contemplative Living Conference in October 2008 in Louisville, Kentucky. The author would like to thank Robert Toth, the Merton Institute Director, for the invitation to address the conference.

suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya*—everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running through one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains."¹

Merton's account leaves no doubt about the power and profundity of this experience. And yet, it is maddeningly dense, its meaning elusive. *Something* important about his own spiritual identity shifted as he stood there, gazing up at the faces of the Buddhas. But apart from his sense of deepened *clarity*, it is difficult to say, really, what this experience meant for him. Nor do we have the benefit of further reflections on the experience from Merton himself: six days later, he lay dead on the floor of his room in the Red Cross center outside Bangkok, Thailand.

I want to respect the mystery of this experience and the silence that surrounds it. Still, I think it is rich with possible meaning for us and would like to reflect further on the experience. In particular, I would like to consider what it can tell us about the significance of *place* within contemplative practice. For, whatever else may be said about Merton's encounter with the Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, I believe it was without question a profound experience of *place*, or what anthropologist Keith Basso calls "place-making." And if one wants to press further to ask what kind of an experience of place it was, I would call it an experience of *homecoming*, a sense of having arrived home after a lifetime spent searching for it.

Merton's own experience of place can, I believe, help us grapple with the growing concerns about the significance of place in human experience as a whole and in contemplative experience in particular that have become so characteristic of our own age. In what follows, I want to examine some of the reasons for this concern, considering in

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Seven: 1967–1968, ed. Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 323.

particular the widespread sense of displacement or homelessness that has come to characterize contemporary experience. It is this sense of homelessness, I believe, that can best account for the growing sense of urgency to make a place for ourselves in the world and in relation to God. The contemplative work of place-making, I want to suggest, is crucial not only to the ongoing work of spiritual renewal, but also to the work of tending to an increasingly fragile world.

Place and Place-Making

What is place-making and how does it shape contemplative living? Anthropologist Keith Basso, who has worked on mapping the place-names of the Western Apache people near Cibecue, Arizona, for over thirty years, describes place-making as “retrospective world-building,” a form of cultural activity that is “a universal tool of the historical imagination.” In the Western Apache world, places and place-names are dense with meaning, holding and embodying the entire history of the people. To say the name of a place, to tell a story about a place is to waken memory, conjure up everything that ever happened there, and make it present again to the community. For the Western Apache, this is more than mere reminiscence; remembering what happened in a given place becomes woven into the personal and collective identity of the people. “What people make of their places,” Basso suggests, “is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth. . . . We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.”² In Western Apache culture, the land and each particular place in the landscape teach, impart lessons, through the remembered stories of what happened in these places.

² Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apaches* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 5, 7. The literature on place and place-making has burgeoned in recent years, something that reflects perhaps, at least to a degree, the pervasive sense of displacement and longing for place in contemporary culture. See, for example: Robert Root, ed., *Landscapes with Figures: The Nonfiction of Place* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Steven Feld and Keith Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1996); Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 2001); Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 2001); Deborah Tall, *From Where We Stand: Recovering a Sense of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1993) [Reprinted: Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1997]; Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London/New York: Verso, 1995).

The landscape holds and embodies the accumulated memory and experience of the community. As one Apache elder memorably expressed it: “Wisdom sits in places.”³

This is a bold claim for the power of place to shape human identity, and for the capacity of human beings to imagine “place-worlds” that they can subsequently inhabit. One might wish to raise questions about such a close identification between place and self; surely I am more than the sum total of the places in which I have lived. Still, these insights about the power of place arising from the Western Apache world have a deep resonance, and have much to teach us about what it is to be a human being alive and aware in the world. In this sense, place-making can be understood as a deeply contemplative work. This is because, as Basso notes, “places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become. And that is not all. Place-based thoughts about the self lead commonly to the thoughts of other things—other places, other people, other times, whole networks of associations that ramify unaccountably within the expanding spheres of awareness that they themselves engender.”⁴ This is, I believe, a lucid description of how contemplative awareness, rooted in a sense of place, gradually comes into being. It is not unlike what the early Christian monks described as the work of rumination, that long, thoughtful chewing-over of experience aimed at helping to surface in the soul the deep significance of that experience.

One can test the truth of this insight by a simple exercise of rumination. Pause for a moment to consider for yourself the places that have marked you: the place you were born, your first home, a secret childhood refuge, your grandmother’s home, a place where loss or death visited you. Allow yourself to feel the resonance of the names, the associations these names have with crucial elements of your experience. Consider, even if briefly, how the person you have become (and are still becoming) has been shaped by these places and what happened to you there. We can also expand such reflections to include not only personal places, but also public places, where our collective historical identity as Americans has been and continues to be formed: Gettysburg, Wounded Knee, the Vietnam Memorial, Ground

³ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 121.

⁴ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 107.

Zero. Such places are dense with feeling, even if we often feel at a loss to say precisely what those feelings are or what to make of them. Nor is it any easier when it comes to determining what these places mean to us, or understanding how they can mean so many different things at once. Often, precisely because the associations with such places are so potent, their meaning is contested. We struggle, individually and collectively, to say what these places mean and what they have to teach us. Sometimes it is difficult to reach agreement, but there is little doubt that they mean *something*, and that this meaning includes us and invites our most careful attention and reflection. There is a sense here, as with the Western Apache landscape, that “Wisdom sits in places.”

The contemplative work of place-making—of seeking and finding the wisdom of places—is complex and delicate. As Basso’s work among the Western Apache makes clear, it involves a subtle interplay of diverse elements of reality and experience that, if artificially or prematurely separated from one another, can diminish the potential meaning of place. Robert Adams, the great American landscape photographer, offers in his description of what makes for compelling photographs of the landscape what I believe is a helpful framework for understanding this work of place-making. “Landscape pictures can offer us,” he notes, “three verities—geography, autobiography, and metaphor. Geography is, if taken alone, sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial, and metaphor can be dubious. But taken together, as in the best work of people like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston, the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact—an affection for life.”⁵

This elegant and economical account of the multiple ways of seeing and knowing a place reflects the kind of self-conscious awareness of place as constructed and ever-shifting in its meanings that has come to characterize much contemporary thought on this subject. Seamus Heaney, in his essay “The Sense of Place,” offers a comparable assessment of the delicate relationship between geography and imagination: “It is the feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind . . . that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation.”⁶ In a similar way, Lawrence

⁵ Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1996), 14.

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 132.

Buell notes that “place is something we are always in the process of finding, and always perforce creating in some degree as we find it.” Buell distinguishes between what he calls “map knowledge,” the concrete, particular knowledge of a place, including its ecological character, and “experiential place sense,” the imaginative, affective response to a place that allows it to become significant for a person or community, arguing that both are necessary if the meaning of place is to achieve both weight and depth within human experience.⁷

Geography, autobiography, and metaphor: why do they have such little power when considered separately? And how does their integration help deepen our perception of place, and of our own experience? Beginning with geography, Adams acknowledges that taken by itself it can be boring, even banal; but he recognizes also that it provides us with “a record of place . . . a certainty that is a relief from the shadow world of romantic egoism.” That is, in gazing upon and reflecting upon a particular place, we are compelled to reckon with the place as it presents itself, in all its concreteness and specificity, not as we imagine it or wish it to be. And in so doing we are, if only for a moment, drawn out of the often stultifying atmosphere of our own preoccupations and asked to confront the otherness of the place. Still, Adams argues that “making photographs [of place] has to be . . . a personal matter; when it is not, the results are not persuasive. Only the artist’s presence in the work can convince us that its affirmation resulted from and has been tested by human experience.” So, even as geography acts to check the all-consuming force of the ego’s concerns, truly to see a place and to give artistic expression to this vision requires deep personal engagement. A landscape photograph (or any meaningful work of art for that matter), if it is to move us, must arise from and be informed by *experience*. It must somehow express this experience. And what of metaphor? Here we are invited to consider the work of imaginative meaning-making that Basso describes in terms of “networks of associations” that emerge as we reflect on the wider meaning of a given experience of place. Adams observes, “If a view of geography does not imply something more enduring than a specific piece of terrain, then the picture will hold us only briefly.” That is, while we do want and need a sober and honest “record of place,” we

⁷ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 261, 268–279.

want more than this. We want to understand who we are in this place, what it means for us, why it matters. "What we hope for from the artist," says Adams, "is help in discovering the significance of a place. In this sense," he says, "we would in most respects choose thirty minutes with Edward Hopper's painting *Sunday Morning* to thirty minutes on the street that was his subject; with Hopper's vision we see more."⁸

We see more. I want to note and hold onto that tantalizing phrase, for I think it points to what is perhaps the central feature of place-making when understood as a contemplative work. It is a way of seeing the world, a way of being in the world that allows us to cherish it with all the feeling we are capable of. It is a way of seeing that enables us to gauge the true significance of what we gaze upon. This kind of seeing is akin to what the early Christians meant when they spoke of *theoria*, that way of seeing into the heart of reality that sometimes revealed the very face of the divine. Or like what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins meant when he spoke of "inscape," the luminous, utterly singular texture of a thing that emerges with blazing clarity when a person actually looks upon that thing with care and sensitivity. A capacity to "see into" all that is there.

Returning for a moment to Thomas Merton's encounter with the great Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, we notice that it is, perhaps more than anything else, an experience of seeing. Or as Merton himself described it, a moment of recognition that until that moment, he had not been able to see at all: "I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious." He was looking at the Buddhas, at the rocks. But while Merton claims that the light, the illumination, the emerging clarity, seemed to be "exploding from the rocks themselves," it was in fact bursting forth from his own consciousness. *He* was the one who had been living with the "habitual, half-tied vision of things"; *he* was the one who had been seeking liberation from that narrow, conventional way of seeing; and in that moment *he* was freed to see things as they truly are. In Robert Adams's terms: *autobiography*. And yet, there is no question that the rocks, those Buddhas carved into that stone ridge at Polonnaruwa, mediate this breakthrough. A reminder of the importance of *geography*, even if it is in this case a culturally and religiously dense geography. And what of *metaphor*? The entire

⁸ Adams, *Beauty in Photography*, 15–16.

experience spins inward with tremendous centripetal force to touch on a central question of meaning: “The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya*—everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.” Here Merton is seen to arrive at an experiential awareness, a felt sense of a truth about existence that had, up until this very moment, eluded him. It is not possible to grasp the full significance of this experience, in part because Merton himself offers us no further reflections about it, and in part because of the very nature of the experience itself. But it seems clear that this was for Merton a moment of profound recognition, in which he came to see who he is most deeply in the world, and came to understand something new and important about the very nature of reality. “I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for,” he says. Nothing else remained.

Homesickness as “Soul Loss”

These final, cryptic comments leave unanswered the question of what exactly Merton was looking for. Or how long he had been searching. I do not wish to attempt an answer to that question here. Rather, I want to ask about the seeking itself, the longing, the restlessness, and the hope that seem to have shaped Merton’s entire monastic life. For without some sense of these concerns, it will likely prove impossible for us to understand what Merton’s work of place-making—in Asia as in the rest of his life—was really about. And if his journey to Asia and his experience at Polonnaruwa in particular represented for him a kind of homecoming, which I believe they did, it seems important to reflect on the meaning of home and homecoming—for Merton but also more generally. In reflecting on the meaning of home, it will be necessary to consider also the meaning of homelessness and exile, and how the experience of homelessness or loss of place can sharpen the longing for home, and give the search for a home greater urgency. If the contemplative work of place-making is at least in part about seeking a place to lay one’s head, a safe, secure place where one feels known and loved, it is also about grappling with the sense of vulnerability and precariousness that marks the experience of the one for whom the prospect of homecoming remains a distant dream.

It was St. Augustine who famously remarked: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God.” That cry from the heart at the beginning of the *Confessions* reveals what for Augustine is the true character of the soul’s predicament: we have become exiled from our true home in God and will be forever restless until we find our

way back. His own autobiographical account of loss, longing, and restoration sits nested within that quintessential account of loss and homecoming in the New Testament, the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15). Augustine feels the pathos of the son's predicament deeply and sees the son's self-imposed exile as a fundamental metaphor for his own condition: lost and alone and bereft. It is indeed the condition of every soul. This sense of deep, primordial loss runs throughout Christian art and literature. Nowhere is it more powerfully expressed than in Masaccio's great painting "Expulsion from Paradise," in the Brancacci chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence. Eve's head is thrown back, her face a mask of agony, her hands covering her body in shame; Adam's hands are drawn up over his eyes in a moment of sudden, convulsive grief. Behind them: the gate to paradise, from which they have been forever banished. The haunting pathos of this image arises in no small part because we recognize in these figures our own condition. We are, in the words of the *Salve Regina*, "poor banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears."

This is no mere abstraction; nor is it remote from us. The sense of having been banished from paradise, of being homeless wanderers, is deeply etched into modern and contemporary experience. "To be rooted," Simone Weil once famously remarked, "is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."⁹ This was a conviction that Weil came to amid one of the most severe crises of displacement of the twentieth century—as tanks and troops rolled across Europe during World War II, leaving in their wake devastated landscapes and communities, with huge numbers of persons killed and made homeless. Rebuilding Europe, Weil was convinced, would require an honest reckoning with our chronic rootlessness, and a complete rethinking of what it means for human beings to belong to a place and take responsibility for it. This question has only become more urgent in the half-century since Weil made her pointed observation. Elie Wiesel, who was himself uprooted and made an orphan by the events of World War II, asks: "Isn't the twentieth century the age of the expatriate, the refugee, the stateless—and the wanderer?"¹⁰

⁹ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wils (New York: Harper, 1952), 43.

¹⁰ Elie Wiesel, "Longing for Home," in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *The Longing for Home* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 19.

Nor has the twenty-first century seen any significant reduction of this chronic homelessness. Enforced movement, driven by chaotic social, political, or economic forces, is increasingly common; persons, indeed whole communities are turned, sometimes overnight, into chronic wanderers. The condition that Peter Berger described over thirty years ago as a kind of “metaphysical homelessness” seems to have become in our own time even more pervasive. Berger associated this condition with the effects of secularization and the increasing pluralization—especially as manifested in the multiple, shifting, and often conflicting places that persons and communities must constantly negotiate—that has come to define postmodern society: “The secularizing effect of pluralization has gone hand in hand with other secularizing forces in modern society. The final consequence of all this can be put very simply (though the simplicity is deceptive): modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of ‘homelessness.’ The correlate of the migratory character of his experience of society and of self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of ‘home.’ It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear.”¹¹

A poignant example of this phenomenon can be seen in the experience of the Hmong people’s displacement from their home in the highlands of northwest Laos after the Vietnam war and their fitful attempts to make a place for themselves in the United States. Upwards of 150,000 members of the Hmong community were forced by persecution to flee their homeland, many of them ending up in the Central Valley of California. In Anne Fadiman’s moving account of their experience, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, it becomes clear that for the Hmong loss of place was almost always also an experience of what they called “soul loss.” Often “soul loss” manifested itself as physical illness, a sickness of the soul that pervaded every aspect of a person’s life. This was baffling to most of the North American physicians who were asked to care for the Hmong in California. For them, what the Hmong considered the most significant underlying causes of their diseases simply did not exist; these were not diagnosable using the categories of Western medicine. But for the Hmong, the underlying causes, which they understood to be spiritual in nature, were at the root of everything. Consider, for example, one of the

¹¹ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 82.

most commonly reported diseases among the Hmong in North America, *Nyab Siab*, or “difficult liver.” The causes were believed to include loss of family, status, home, country or any important item that has a high emotional value; the symptoms included excessive worry, crying, confusion, disjointed speech, loss of sleep and appetite, delusions.

Bill Selvidge, a North American physician who worked with the Hmong in Central California, describes the first Hmong patient he had ever seen as suffering from what seemed to him to be a broken heart. In Hmong terminology, he would have been diagnosed as having a difficult liver. He relates his impression this way: “Mr. Thao was a man in his fifties. He told me through an interpreter that he had a bad back, but after I listened for a while I realized that he’s really come in because of depression. It turned out he was an agoraphobe. He was afraid to leave his house because he thought if he walked more than a couple of blocks he’d get lost and never find his way back home again. What a metaphor! He’d seen his entire immediate family die in Laos, he’d seen his country collapse, and he *was* never going to find his way home again. All I could do was prescribe anti-depressants.” Mr. Thao was the first of many Hmong patients whom Bill Selvidge would treat over the years who suffered from what could only be described as a “profound loss of ‘home.’”¹² Everything in America was unfamiliar to them; this was an especially acute problem for newcomers who, in their initial attempts to find a place in America, “wore pajamas as street clothes; poured water on electric stoves to extinguish them; lit charcoal fires in their living rooms; stored blankets in their refrigerators; washed rice in their toilets; washed their clothes in swimming pools; washed their hair with Lesotil; cooked with motor oil and furniture polish; drank Clorox; ate cat food; planted crops in public parks; shot and ate skunks, porcupines, woodpeckers, robins, egrets, sparrows, and a bald eagle; and hunted pigeons with crossbows in the streets of Philadelphia.”¹³ But loss of home was not only about the inability to interpret and fit into what were for the Hmong baffling new social mores; it went deeper, touching on the unfamiliarity of “the sound of every birdsong, the shape of every

¹² Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 203–204.

¹³ Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 187–88.

tree and flower, the smell of the air, and the very texture of the earth.” Fadiman notes that for many, “the ache of homesickness [could] be incapacitating.”¹⁴

What is striking about this account is not only the severity of the affliction the Hmong endured in their displacement, but also their strong sense of its spiritual significance. Rooted in actual losses that are concrete and particular, the feelings associated with these losses nonetheless extend outward toward the far horizon and down into the darkest reaches of the soul. Nor is this an isolated or singular instance of homelessness. The art and literature of our time is filled with the ache born of such loss. Sometimes it is etched into the most mundane and ordinary circumstances. Joseph O’Neill traces the shadow world of expatriates from India, Pakistan, Trinidad, Jamaica, South Africa—even Holland—who meet to play cricket in obscure green fields in and around New York City. “I’ve heard that social scientists like to explain such a scene—a patch of America sprinkled with the foreign-born strangely at play—in terms of the immigrant’s quest for subcommunities. How true this is: we’re all far away from Tipperary, and clubbing together mitigates this unfair fact. But surely everyone can also testify to another, less reckonable kind of homesickness, one having to do with unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history; and accordingly it’s my belief that the communal, contractual phenomenon of New York cricket is underwritten, there where the print is finest, by the same agglomeration of unspeakable individual longings that underwrites cricket played anywhere—longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event lost long ago, tantalisms that touch on the undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others.”¹⁵

What are those “unsettlements” that we feel so strongly, but which “cannot be located in spaces of geography or history”? And what is the character of the longings that arise in response to them? There may be no adequate way to completely account for or explain these elements of our experience. But the continuing efforts at naming and describing them seem to me significant. If nothing else, these efforts point to our capacity for honest reckoning with our shared condition as orphans. And they offer us real opportunities to reflect on why our longing for home runs so deep.

¹⁴ Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 203–204.

¹⁵ Joseph O’Neill, *Netherland* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 121.

The Need for Roots: Thomas Merton at Gethsemani

One of the challenges of reckoning honestly with these questions as part of the work of contemplative living has to do with how fluid our experience of place is, how rapidly and mysteriously our sense of it shifts and changes within us—and how difficult it can be to reconcile the distinct elements of our experience of place. Returning to Robert Adams's framework—geography, autobiography, metaphor—we might ask, for example: is it possible to understand our inchoate feelings of homesickness or our longing for home without reflecting seriously on the specific character of the geography that has shaped us? Also, can that geography speak to us unless we make a serious effort to reflect on what happened to us there, and how we have been affected by those events? Adams is surely right to note that geography taken on its own can sometimes seem banal—why *should* we care about this or that place unless we can discern its significance for us? But there is also a danger in moving too quickly to metaphor, in considering the larger significance of a place without giving due attention to the gritty and very particular realities of geography and autobiography. Contemplative living, especially if understood within the context of Christianity's deep commitment to the Incarnation, demands our most careful attention to all these dimensions of experience. It invites us to consider how we can hold them together as part of a single, simple ground of awareness and how we might learn to live from that ground.

Thomas Merton's story, in particular his lifelong search for home, offers us a useful lens through which to reflect on this aspect of contemplative living. He offers us a vision of contemplative living that takes place seriously—on its own terms, as part of his own unfolding story and as a profound metaphor for the search for God. Born to itinerant artist parents and orphaned at a young age, his restless movements through the world during childhood were both unavoidable and deeply painful for him. It seems clear that Merton's joyful embrace of Gethsemani as a kind of refuge or home owes at least something to the chronic rootlessness that afflicted him as a young man. But his arrival at Gethsemani, consoling as it was for him, did not put an end to his search for a place to belong. In fact, one can sense his hunger for place deepening as he lived further into his monastic vocation. For Merton, the contemplative work of place-making involved a subtle interweaving of the distinctive geographies that shaped him, his own most formative experiences in these places, and a growing

awareness of the presence of God, whom he came to understand as a kind of dwelling place, or a movement out toward a horizon glimpsed but not yet fully known. In these concluding remarks, I want to reflect briefly on how and why Merton sought to make a place for himself in the world and what his efforts to do so can teach us about the importance of place-making for contemplative living.

In January 1966, Merton made the following entry in his journal: "I realized today after Mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had. Around the age of 7–9–10, when Mother was dead and Father was in France and Algeria. How much it meant when he came to take me to France. It really saved me."¹⁶ There is no doubting the truth of this statement; yet it is only a partial truth. Merton does not address his feelings about his mother here. However, in *The Seven Storey Mountain* he described how devastating it had been for him as a young boy that he was unable to see his mother before she died; perhaps out of a desire to protect her son, she instead wrote him a letter to say goodbye. He read it without comprehension. Nor was Merton bathed in parental love in France. Not long after his arrival there, he was placed in a boarding school, where he later described himself as having been deeply unhappy, while his father went off to paint. Sometimes the young Merton accompanied his father on painting trips, but often during this period he was left behind under the care of a series of "substitute fathers": an uncle, a godfather, a grandfather, a couple of headmasters. Only a few years later, while attending yet another boarding school in England, word would arrive by telegram informing him that his father was dead. That this memory of his childhood should arise so suddenly and painfully into his conscious awareness all these years later is suggestive of the lasting potency of these experiences in his life. While there is no reason to doubt that he was indeed grateful for his father's saving gesture, his comments also reveal another truth, which was perhaps of greater enduring consequence in his life: the memory of his "desperate, despairing childhood."¹⁷

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Six: 1966–1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 11–12.

¹⁷ For a perceptive reading of this chapter in Merton's life, see David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Revolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 67–88.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard notes how deeply rooted the idea of home is in childhood. For the child, says Bachelard, home is “our corner of the world . . . our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.” The sense of home can and often is extended to include other places that conjure up in the imagination a sense of deep belonging. “All really inhabited space,” he suggests, “bears the essence of the notion of home.”¹⁸ Finding a home means finding a niche, a nest, a refuge, a graspable space. Bachelard says this “nesting instinct,” which is natural to children, runs deep within us and endures in our consciousness. “When we discover a nest, it takes us back to our childhood or, rather, to *a childhood*; to the childhood we should have had . . . the nest image is generally childish.” The truth of this can be seen in the habits of any small child—venturing out on occasion, but drawn naturally and deeply to nests, refuges, small, manageable spaces. But our attraction to the nest goes deeper even than childhood, says Bachelard, perhaps recalling an ancient animal wisdom that is encoded deep within us: “Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed. If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements engraved within our muscles.”¹⁹ Considering the potency of home in the childhood imagination, it would be difficult to overstate the immense emotional cost of a rootless, homeless childhood. I note this not in an attempt to reduce Thomas Merton’s hunger for home to a single cause, but simply to suggest that we cannot fully grasp the meaning and pathos of this hunger apart from his deeply painful experience of having become at a young age an orphan.

Years later at the age of twenty-seven, Merton entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemani as a kind of refugee. In this he was certainly not alone; the rhetoric of *fuga mundi* or flight from the world was woven deeply into the Trappist ethos at this time, and both during and after the Second World War young men poured into monasteries seeking refuge from a world that no longer made sense to them. Bachelard’s insights regarding the power of the “nesting instinct” are

¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 4–5. On the sense of place developed in childhood, see Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

¹⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 91.

instructive here, not as a way of explaining these diverse vocations under a single rubric, but as a means of shedding light on what was surely one of the abiding concerns of those who entered monastic life at this time: the need to find a secure place to dwell. Merton's initial response to Gethsemani reveals what kind of place he imagined it to be: "the center of America . . . a paradise . . . the most beautiful place in America . . . one of the last good places in the Universe."²⁰ This was high praise for a place he hardly knew at all. Yet his praise of Gethsemani says so much about the kind of place he hoped it would be for him: a paradise the likes of which he had never known. Initially at least, this was little more than an idea. The monastery symbolized something he had not yet made real for himself. In time, though, as he lived into his monastic vocation, he began to cultivate a real sense of intimacy with the place. This was a challenging work, for he struggled at times to overcome a deep-seated tendency to idealize. In a telling entry from his journal from April 1947 he describes his delight at working outdoors, helping to prepare a field for planting oats. "And here and there in the green wash that covers the woods you see a little cloud of pink, where there is a wild peach tree, or whatever kind of tree it is that has those blossoms." Then he adds: "I wish it would be a wild peach tree—the idea is attractive."²¹

The notion that the *idea* of a wild peach tree would be more interesting to him than the tree itself says a lot about how difficult it was for Merton to approach things on their own terms and avoid symbolizing or idealizing them. Apparently, he sensed this himself. By the time he came to revise this particular journal entry for inclusion in *The Sign of Jonas*, he had learned the actual identity of the tree and made note of it: "Here and there in the pale green wash that covers the hills you see a little cloud of pink where there is a redbud tree."²² One finds no discussion in the *Jonas* passage of the *idea* of a tree, no indication that Merton wished it were anything other than what it was. The redbud, it seems, could stand on its own. So too could the hickory tree that Merton describes in a journal entry from May of the

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume One: 1939–1941, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 333, 341.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Two: 1941–1952, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 67.

²² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Image, 1956), 50–51.

same year: "Last night there were thunderstorms: but today how beautiful! The leaves on the hickory tree by the cemetery are so small and the flowers fill the branches with fringes of green lace. I hear the engine running down at the mill, it is so quiet. Only that, and the birds singing."²³

By the early 1950s, Merton was spending an increasing amount of time in the woods, delighting in being part of the wild world within which the monastery was situated. He was reading Thoreau and reflecting in a new way about his place in the world. In March 1951, he rhapsodized: "How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors . . . they form our contemplation." He renounced the idealizing supernaturalism that had led him to reject and refuse the world as a young monk, and now declared: "I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find my place, I will be wasting my time in the monastery."²⁴ By June of that year, he had decided to take the momentous step of becoming a citizen; he was finally learning to be at home in his chosen country. "And to think," he writes, "that I had lived in Kentucky all this time without ever questioning the fact that I belonged to the place and the place belonged to me."²⁵

This sense of having a place in the world became increasingly concrete and particular for Merton during the decade of the 1950s. He learned the names of the trees, the birds, and became more attuned to the subtle rhythms of weather and the seasons. In his role as Novice Master, he also entered more fully into the life of the monastic community, taking responsibility for the formation of younger monks who were just embarking on monastic life.²⁶ But he was also growing more critical of certain complacencies in himself and in the monastery community that seemed to him to undermine the possibility of living an authentic contemplative life. As the decade unfolded, Merton was becoming increasingly preoccupied with the question of how the monk ought to engage the wider world. This had been a relatively simple question when, as a young monk, the contemplative life

²³ Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 73. The same entry contains a complex, even tortured reflection on the natural and supernatural and the role of the senses.

²⁴ Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 450–451.

²⁵ Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 460.

²⁶ Even during this period, however, Merton displayed a certain restlessness, writing to the superior at Camoldoli in Italy, pleading for a transfer there.

had been presented and understood as entailing a complete separation from “the world,” not only spatially, but morally and spiritually.²⁷ A monk was one who had fled the world and entered another cosmos inside the monastery. But this conception of monastic life had gradually lost its meaning for Merton. Something about his experience of the life itself—its gentle, steady rhythms, its rootedness in place, its deep stillness, its invitation to live into the communal life—as well as Merton’s ever-widening correspondence and reading, convinced him that the monastic ideal of separation from the world was rooted in an illusion. It turned the monk into a displaced person, a person alienated and exiled from his own existence. But by now Merton had come to see and experience his contemplative vocation very differently, not as a flight from the world, but as a means of engaging the world honestly and deeply, of finding a place in the world.

This movement toward a more honest and open engagement with the world helps to illuminate the significance of Merton’s justly celebrated experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville in 1958. And, if understood as an experience of “place-making,” it offers a fruitful way of understanding what it was about this moment that mattered so much to Merton, and how it enabled him to orient his contemplative vision so strongly toward the world from that point forward. “Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, [I] suddenly realized that I loved all the people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness, of the ‘special’ vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially, juridically. I am still a member of the human race—and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member

²⁷ This ideal was certainly in place when Thomas Merton entered the monastery of Gethsemani in 1941. That it was presented and constructed as being consistent with the ideals of the ancient Christian monks does not mean that the earliest monastic tradition in fact promoted such a uniform vision of flight from the world, something that Merton himself gradually came to understand. Recent scholarship on early Christian monasticism presents a much more complex picture of the monks’ relationship with the world and of their understanding of the relationship between solitude and community. See David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982); Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

of the Human Race!”²⁸ Merton was in this moment given a simple gift of seeing his place in the world, not the idealized, detached place he had created for himself as a young monk, but a place of intimacy and wonder which he now realized he shared with every other human being. Far from being a betrayal of his monastic vocation, he saw it rather as an honest response to the call to live in the world responsibly, and with a contemplative awareness. This vision of the contemplative life is utterly consistent with what Simone Weil means when she speaks about the need for roots. “A human being has roots,” she claims, “by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.”²⁹ Within Merton’s evolving understanding of place-making, community had come to include not only his fellow monks, or even the church, but the whole of humanity, indeed the entire living world—what Thomas Berry has called “the earth community.”

Wonderful Life: Turning Toward Home

The early 1960s was a period of increasing tension for Merton as he worked to locate himself more clearly in relation to the world, especially to the suffering and violence in the world, even as he struggled to commit himself more seriously to the discipline of monastic solitude. At the same time, he questioned whether it was really possible to live the authentic contemplative life he sought at Gethsemani. Was it no longer the right place for him? He would wrestle with this question for the rest of his life. But part of an answer in this moment came in his sudden realization of how much he loved the community at Gethsemani. “I have paid too little attention to a great reality—my love of my monastery and the love of the community for me.”³⁰ So too the time he was able to spend at the newly constructed hermitage during the autumn of 1960 had a healing, renewing effect on him. “If I have any desire left in the world,” he noted, “it is to live and die

²⁸ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Three: 1952–1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 181–182.

²⁹ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 43.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, in *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume Four: 1960–1963, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 46.

here.”³¹ He begins to spend long afternoons at the hermitage, prompting this observation: “Places and situations are not supposed to matter. This one makes a tremendous difference.”³² And on the day after Christmas, in a journal entry that has the feel of a year-end examination of conscience, he speaks of his sense of “a journey ended, of wandering at an end. *The first time in my life* I ever really felt I had come home and that my waiting and looking were ended.”³³ There is a sense of finality to this statement that is perhaps deceptive. Merton was to live eight more years, and his “waiting and looking” continued unabated. Still, one can sense something in him beginning to settle, integrate, heal; he is truly beginning to feel at home—perhaps for “the first time” in his life.

Keith Basso observes: “When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination.”³⁴ It seems important to note that even as Thomas Merton was learning to pay attention to the geographical and ecological particularity of Gethsemani, he was also feeling the impact of the work of place-making on his inner life, his imagination, and his memory. A noticeable wave of memories, dreams, and reflections from the late summer and autumn of 1961 reveals Merton to be poised on a knife’s edge, looking back toward where he had come from and forward toward a still-unknown future. Place became the language for negotiating this complex transition. On August 6, 1961, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, pausing to reflect on the cultural influences that had shaped his interior life, Merton found himself filled with a sudden memory of places of his life that had moved him and remained part of him—mostly from his childhood. “That I have known the hill town of Cordes; that I have walked from Caylus to Puygarde and know Caussade and Chars and the church of Saint Jacques by the bridge in Montauban. . . . That the quarterboys of Rye never cease to ring in my ears and that I know that silence of the broad marsh between Rye and Winchelsea, and listen to it forever . . . or the fens at Ely, or the backs behind Clare and Kings and Trinity . . . or the bell in the cloister tower of St. John’s as heard in Bridge Street, Cambridge. . . . All this is important, for it has all been in some

³¹ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 63.

³² Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 73.

³³ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 80.

³⁴ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 107.

[sense] sacramental.”³⁵ Merton had once rejected all of this (along with most of the world), as part of a past that he believed had nothing to do with his monastic vocation. Now he names the places as if reciting a litany, tenderly and with feeling. It is a gesture of retrieval, one might even say a kind of homecoming.

But Merton’s imagination was also straining against the horizon of his still-unfolding future, working to find a place for himself in that landscape. Two days after making this catalog of places, he records a dream “of being lost in a great city, and ‘walking toward the center’ without quite knowing where I was, and suddenly coming to a road’s end on a height overlooking a great bay . . . and realizing that, though I had far to go, I knew where I was because in this city there are two arms of the sea which one always encounters, and by this one can get his orientation.”³⁶ On September 12, he records another dream he describes as “beautiful and moving . . . [a] hieratic dream.” He is invited to a party and meets a woman who is also going to the party, but there is an estrangement and he finds himself “alone by the waterfront of a small town.” He is offered the opportunity to take a small schooner over to where he wants to go. But it does not move from the shore. Then, Merton says, “I am out swimming ahead in the beautiful water, magic water, from the depths of which comes a wonderful life to which I am not entitled, a life and strength that I fear. I know that by diving in this water I can find something marvelous but that it is not fitting or right for me to dive as I am going to the further shore, with strength that has come from the water, immortality.”³⁷ Eventually he makes it to the further shore, where he is greeted by a child who brings him two pieces of buttered white bread.

There is so much longing in these dreams, especially longing for a center, for that “wonderful life” to which the dreamer does not feel entitled. He does not quite know where he is, or where he is going; and yet he recognizes the place, almost as if he had been there before. There is also anxiety that he might miss it, might lose his way or simply lack the courage necessary for finding what he had been seeking for so long, and succumb to what he has described elsewhere as his “stubborn, interior refusal of happiness.”³⁸ But he keeps swimming, moving through the beautiful, magic water, seeking that “wonderful

³⁵ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 148.

³⁶ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 149.

³⁷ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 161–162.

³⁸ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 112.

life.” This is a powerful image of a place Merton had been seeking but which had eluded him for most of his life, a place of acceptance and love. Now, standing at the threshold of a great moment of transition in his life, he could almost taste it: home.

A little less than a month later, during a visit with the sisters of Loretto near Gethsemani, he *did* taste it. He had noted in his journal that week his growing awareness of the “need for compassion and tenderness towards the infinite fragility of the divine life in us which is *real*.”³⁹ Now, sitting at table and sharing a meal with these dear friends, he was touched by just such tenderness. “It was,” he said, “utterly wonderful, and I am completely grateful for their love. . . . Never anywhere . . . have I felt so much at home, so much with real friends with whom there could be a complete and unreserved understanding. . . . This is a treasure beyond estimation and it manifests something that is absolutely dear to me about Kentucky . . . and shows me really why I am here.”⁴⁰ This is surely a crucial moment of recognition for Merton, akin to that extraordinary moment when he stood in his bare feet gazing up at those gently smiling Buddhas at Polonnaruwa. A moment when he recognized not only *where* he was, but *who* he was. He was beloved. He was home.

Conclusion

To feel at home—to be known and loved with simplicity and depth—is an extraordinary and precious thing. It is no wonder that this metaphor should surface so strongly within the discourse of spiritual longing. Nor is it easy to imagine, once such awareness becomes real, how one could ever lose hold of it. And yet it happens. The old restlessness returns. The wounds inflicted by all the losses one has endured turn out to be still tender. The sense of exile resurfaces with renewed force, and the search for home recommences. It is strange, even disturbing to consider how fleeting such a realization can be, how easily one’s sense of place can be undermined. Yet, such precariousness appears to be woven deeply into the very longing for home. Part of this surely has to do with the very character of loss itself; whether arising from the actual loss of place and home or touching on those “unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history,” it runs deep. But it also has something to do with the dynamic process of a soul’s gradual awakening to the reality of God and

³⁹ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 167.

⁴⁰ Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 168.

the meaning of home. Gregory of Nyssa, the great Cappadocian theologian and mystic, conceived of this process in terms of an idea he called *epectasis*, the infinite and ever-widening longing through which the soul comes to know and live in God. There can be no end to our longing for God, Gregory argued, because there is no end to God. So it is with our longing for home, our ever-deepening feeling for place.

During the years that remained to him, Thomas Merton would struggle more or less continuously with his own intense longing for home. This struggle appears to have been rooted at least in part in the psychological fragility that had haunted him since childhood. But over time, this fragility became incorporated into a longing akin to Gregory's *epectasis*, leading Merton to the conviction that authentic commitment to the contemplative life required a continual movement and deepening that precluded any simple accommodation to this or that place, whether understood in geographical or metaphorical terms. Still, the restlessness that moved him during his latter years was profoundly ambiguous, provoking him at once to seek a safe, secure place to dwell and to relinquish any attachment to false security, to abandon himself to the unknown. This ambiguity came to expression in various ways—he committed himself ever more deeply to a disciplined contemplative practice in his hermitage at Gethsemani, even as he continued to explore the question of whether faithfulness to his vocation might require him to seek a different place to live; he deepened his resistance to the growing tide of violence and war, even though this resistance alienated him from many in his own order and in the church at large and left him feeling profoundly displaced; he became vulnerable enough to fall in love, but also struggled for the rest of his life with the challenge of dwelling deeply in what he called “the hidden ground of love.” Ultimately, the hunger for home, for a safe place to dwell, could not be separated from the desire to keep moving ever deeper into the mystery that was beckoning him forward.⁴¹

On October 15, 1968, shortly after his plane took off from San Francisco on its way to Asia, Merton wrote: “The moment of take-off

⁴¹ Much of Merton's most compelling writing during the final years of his life concerned the question of what it meant to belong. In this sense his writing about place and his writing about love should be seen as part of the same movement of the soul. See Merton's “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 9–26; “Day of a Stranger,” *Hudson Review* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 211–218; and “Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message,” in Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart, eds., *Love and Living* (New York: Bantam, 1980) [Reprint: New York: Harcourt Trade, 2002], 25–37.

was ecstatic. The dewy wing was suddenly covered with rivers of cold sweat running backward. The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground—I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around. May I not come back without having settled the great affair. And found also the great compassion, *mahakaruna*. . . . I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body.”⁴² What a strange idea: going home to a place where one has never been—at least in the body. And yet this is how Merton framed his journey to Asia: as a homecoming to an as-yet-unknown place. This comment reveals much about Merton’s shifting interior landscape during the last years of his life, and his growing sense that his own Christian monastic vocation could only be understood fully in light of insights from Asian spiritual traditions. He felt at home there, more so than he often felt within his own Catholic tradition, and he sensed that his journey to Asia might reveal to him the full meaning of this intuition.

Yet only a month before leaving for Asia, while staying at Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico, Merton had reflected in very different terms about his upcoming journey. “A journey is a bad death,” he noted, “if you ingeniously grasp or remove all that you had and were before you started, so that in the end you do not change in the least. The stimulation enables you to grasp more raffishly at the same, familiar, distorted illusions. You come home only confirmed in greater greed—with new skills (real or imaginary) for satisfying it. I am not going ‘home.’ The purpose of this death is to become truly homeless. . . . There is,” he said, “no place left.”⁴³ Here we sense a person struggling with himself, with his own deeply ingrained tendency to squander the gifts given to him. In the case of his trip to Asia, this meant remaining vigilant against the temptation to turn the journey—and the landscape of Asia—into an object, or a kind of currency to be hoarded. Whatever the journey might hold for him, he had to let go of attachment to any particular outcome, any ideal image of what the trip should mean. He had to let himself go into the unknown, “to become truly homeless.”⁴⁴

⁴² Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 205.

⁴³ Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 174–175.

⁴⁴ Merton’s final journey to Asia had a particular and personal significance for him insofar as it enabled him to enter more deeply into a landscape and culture within which he felt himself so surprisingly at home. But it also represented a complex and delicate work of cultural and religious exchange, an experience of dislocation and

There is no simple way to reconcile these two statements, no way to make them add up to a single, coherent idea. Better I think to allow them to stand together as a kind of Zen koan. Merton was going home; and he was *not* going home, seeking instead to become truly homeless. Home and homelessness had by now become powerful metaphors for him, metaphors he could not do without when engaging the deepest concerns of his life. And yet, I would argue that there are traces of geography and autobiography hidden within these comments, and that these trace elements can help us understand better the power these metaphors had for Merton, and the power they can have for us in helping us understand the role of place in contemplative living. Merton's journals reveal a deep preoccupation with the meaning of place, a preoccupation that seems to have been rooted to a great degree in painful memories of his own rootless childhood. His reflections on place required him to face these wounded places in himself as part of the larger work of opening himself to the healing work of God. As such, they were crucial to his growth and development as a contemplative. But it seems clear that he also experienced healing and deep joy in learning to pay attention to and cherish the places to which he believed God had providentially guided him. In so doing he learned to cherish the world itself, to feel at home there.

"Where are we going? Always home." So claims the poet Novalis. Thomas Merton claimed he was "going home, to the home where I have never been in this body." Is this geography, autobiography, or metaphor? It is difficult to say. These elements of experience, it turns out, are so intricately bound up together that it seems hardly possible to think of them separately. So it is with our efforts at place-making. We want, as Robert Adams suggests, "to see more." To do so means learning to trace the contours of our lives as they are shaped by the particular places in which we have lived, as well as by the places we have lost. We are also called to see and notice and cherish the places themselves in all their intricate complexity. And we are invited to inhabit a rich interior landscape, rooted in the concrete particularities of our lives, but expanding outward toward a metaphorically resonant, endlessly receding horizon, toward "the infinite fragility of the divine life in us which is *real*."

reorientation that was, in itself, a crucial part of his work of place-making. For a critical assessment of Merton's final trip to Asia within this context, see John D. Barbour, "The Ethics of Intercultural Travel: Thomas Merton's Asian Pilgrimage and Orientalism," *Biography* 28, no. 1 (2005): 15–26.