



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 12 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## **New England Road Trip**

It's October 12, 2016, and, aside from the simple pleasures of road-tripping and getting some warm, fall-colored photos for my walls, there is no mission on this eight- or nine-day trip. I have my list of used bookstores and other places of interest to visit but it takes at least two weeks to shed a skin on the road so I'm not expecting much to happen. I don't expect to get much reading done either and only three titles will eventually become part of the narrative of this trip: a book on Zen, Thomas Merton on solitude and an obscure book about time by John S. Dunne.

Day 1 is nice and the colors and vistas in the hills of New Hampshire are magnificent, but each town I drive through or stop in seems the same - a bit too quaint - and I have a hunch cities and towns won't feature much, if at all, in this trip. New England is always a bit depressing for some reason to begin with and now the car radio is obsessed with Trump and the looming apocalypse.

As expected, I can't find a used book store on the first day so I begin the trip with Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*, a book from my home library I read forty years ago while taking an archery course in college. The central idea in the book is to take a shot without aiming, and it actually worked almost immediately way back then: twice I managed to "be one with the target" and hit the bullseye without aiming, but it would never happen again. Now instead of a bow and arrow, maybe I'll get Zen with the camera.

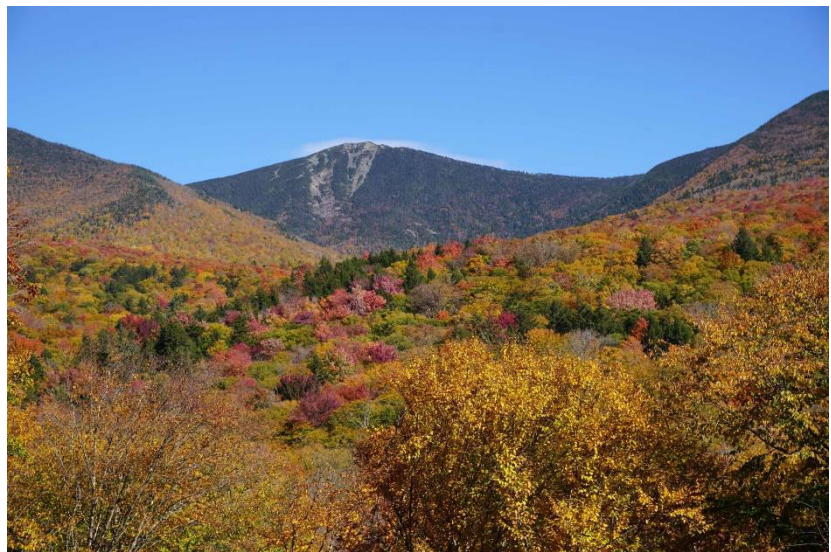
I'm exhausted at the end of the day after visiting Echo lake, the Flume Gorge and driving the Kangamangus Highway. It was a long way up the stairs at the gorge, dark and gloomy, impossible to photograph, but still one of those things a tourist has to do. It seems I'm only really good at photographing landscapes. Thomas Merton says in *Thoughts on Solitude*, a book I will find a few days later, that a landscape "calms and pacifies the imagination and the emotions and leaves the will free to seek God in faith." I find a nice *Live Free or Die* New Hampshire fridge magnet before settling in for the night at the Briar Cliff Motel in North Conway.

After a night of what seemed like conscious sleep, I wake up to a laptop that refuses to be turned on. This could be a serious problem. There's always a feeling of dread at the beginning of a trip and now I'm sensing external forces trying to interfere or tag along on the pilgrimage. On the eve of the trip I had spent a lot of time looking for my eyeglasses, going from room to room, training my eye over every possible surface. I even called the restaurant where I had just eaten dinner, thinking maybe I had left them on the table.

Finally, I moved through the house as slow as I could, pretending I didn't live there and was seeing everything for the first time, and there they were in plain sight on a cushion in the living room. But it wasn't over. I had purchased two cords to let my eyeglasses hang from my neck when taking photos, and now they were gone too, vanished into the same dimension perhaps, but I was tired of scouring so I just let them go.

As usual, at the beginning of each trip, I wonder why I impose these pilgrimages on my quiet, comfortable life. Herrigel says the spiritual man is the man who is actively seeking God, and Merton will say that God is only actually present when he is being sought. We are irrevocably separated from God, he says, so the best we can do is feel him in the seeking. He doesn't approach us, we have to approach him.

During breakfast at McDonalds, I find a suggested fix for the laptop on my phone that involves holding down the power button for thirty seconds and, to my great relief, it works. Then, back in the car, the two glass ropes appear in the well between the front seats and I experience a weird sense of flexible reality and demons successfully dodged.



I was 22 when I first read the Zen book forty years ago, working in the same college where the course was taught. I remember vividly how big the bow was and how much strength it took to pull the string back and steady it before release. It wasn't easy, which made the two bullseyes in a row even more unlikely. It's hard to remember much else about that previous life but the building where I worked for eight years is, for some reason, where many of my dreams take place.

The plan on Day 2 is to drive up Mount Washington, but not if it stays grey and overcast. Not much point being high up in the sky if you can't see anything. But the sun comes out a few minutes after I hit the road and it's all systems go. There are beautiful spots along the way as well and I get a nice shot of colors reflected in the calm waters of the appropriately named Mirror Lake. I make a note to be careful not to take too many easy shots like this.

The famous 25-minute 15-mile-an-hour ride up to the top of the 6000-foot mountain with no guardrails and the car in low gear is spectacular. The road has been privately owned for 150 years with the sole purpose of allowing people like me the thrill of slowly driving up into an arctic climate, with a CD to explain the history and changing flora along the way. The air gets progressively thinner and colder and the vegetation slowly changes until I find myself above the clouds, where it's very cold and extremely windy.

There are many steps to climb up to the Visitors Center at the peak and I have to pause several times to catch my breath at this altitude. Once there, warm and protected from the icy winds outside, I sit down with hot coffee to read a chapter of Zen.

The master instructs his disciple to use a 4-step breathing technique to steady the body. First, press the air down gently after taking in as much breath as you can. Second, hold it down for a bit. Third, breathe out as slowly as possible. Fourth, draw quick breaths, in and out continually, in a rhythm that will gradually settle itself. I'm pleased with my visit and come away with a complementary *This car drove up Mt. Washington* bumper sticker which will eventually end up on the side of my fridge.



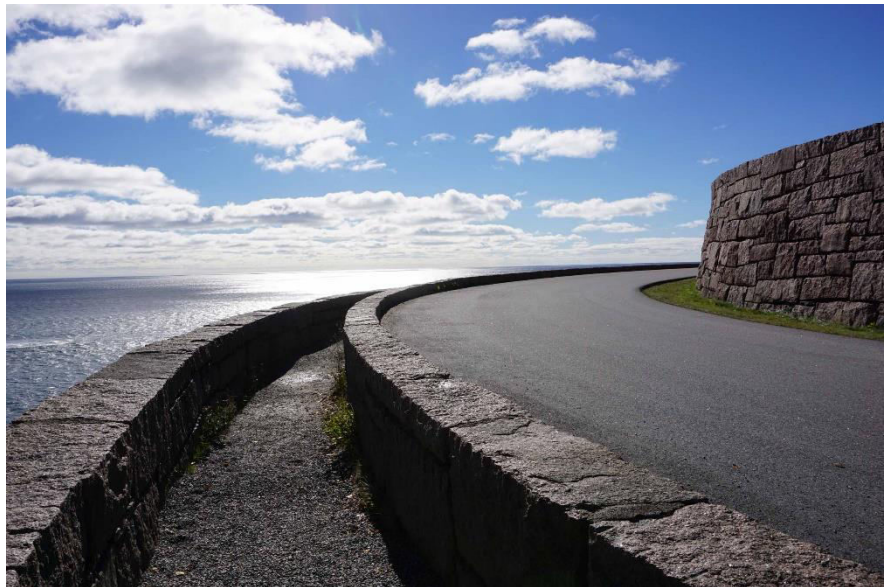
Now I head to the sea, which always feels like coming home. The drive through the entire width of Maine is slightly grim and Stephen-Kingish, with plenty of old cemeteries on the side of the road. It's almost dark when I get to the White Birches Motel near Bar Harbor where I experience another night of semi-conscious sleep, full of dreams. Inevitably I dream of Trump who seems to be the only news being reported in this land of people terrified, not so much that he might win the election (which we are told seems mathematically impossible), but that the demons he is releasing will cause havoc if he loses. Maybe even civil war.

If aliens are watching us, this might be the time for them to step in. But if civilization is not brought down by Trump, the culture shock of aliens popping up might accomplish the same thing. Either way it seems we're screwed. A sign in front of a motel on the road today said *Welcome leaf peepers*. I'm a leaf peeper!

I need a book. The Zen book is seeming almost silly with its rituals of veneration and master-worship, making something simple into something demanding years of practice and training. What does it accomplish to become a master? Merton says there's no such thing as human perfection and that "the beginning of wisdom is the confession of sin". I understand the goal is not to hit the target but to find a way to separate thought from action, - be one with the target and rise above the ego - but the slavish deference to the master irks. A teacher might be useful to keep a person motivated, but I prefer the Jesuit motto, *For the greater glory of God*, where the effort is offered to God, not to the void or some guy in robes. The Zen master says all right doing is only accomplished in a state of true selflessness, but I have more faith in Merton's assertion that only the Holy Spirit can conquer the ego.

Yet I know from experience that the Zen exercise is valid and worthwhile. I played Zen pool over a period of a few years not too many years ago and eventually managed to make about one shot in five that felt (and looked) like it was making itself. But I never imagined becoming a "master" - it seemed enough to see proof that it was possible.

Acadia National Park is wonderful in the morning of Day 3. The vistas are spectacular, with lots of places to stop and access to cliffs overlooking the sea. But there's too many cars and people when I return in the afternoon after finally finding a book, *The Sociopath Next Door*, at the Mystery Cove Bookstore. It might be useful to know more about these creatures if the Trump gets elected.





I head south along the coast with a feeling that the trip is going too fast and may finally be too short for any kind of narrative to emerge. I spend most of the morning lost, thanks to my GPS gadget which I almost throw out the window in Cape Elizabeth where it can't find the famous lighthouse known as "Two Lights" and keeps ordering me to make a U-turn over and over when I fail to obey. It's constantly losing its satellite connection too, demanding I fondle and jiggle its wire to keep it talking.

But the lighthouse is worth the trouble when I finally find it, thanks to some friendly local humans. And the sky and haze clear up so I get a pretty nice shot. A plaque on the structure says the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used to walk to Two Lights from Portland often and there's a verse from a poem he wrote on the spot that gives voice to the lighthouse:

Sail on!' it says, 'sail on, ye stately ships!  
And with your floating bridge the ocean span;  
Be mine to guard this light from all eclipse,  
Be yours to bring man nearer unto man!'

Merton says we can only reach our harbor if we stay alert. I take a break at a picnic table to finish the Zen book with a beautiful view of Two Lights and the sounds and smells of very rough surf in front of me. I can't help wondering what could be more egocentric than five years of study to master the art of archery (or flower arrangement, which his wife chose to study while he was shooting arrows).

Herrigel says that even when you finally grasp that "it" shoots the shot, if "you" feel any joy or pride, "you" need to start all over again. What could be more annoying? I end up further down the coast at the Rockland Harbor Hotel where I take a photo of a harvest moon hanging over the harbor.

After a great complementary hotel breakfast, Day 4 is mostly cloudy so there's lots of driving back into New Hampshire and hardly any photos. But I find a couple of titles at Sheafe Street Books in Portsmouth where I have a nice conversation with Ken, the owner. I see young white men on the sidewalk wearing red *Make America Great* caps and will later learn that Trump was here today. Just missed him.



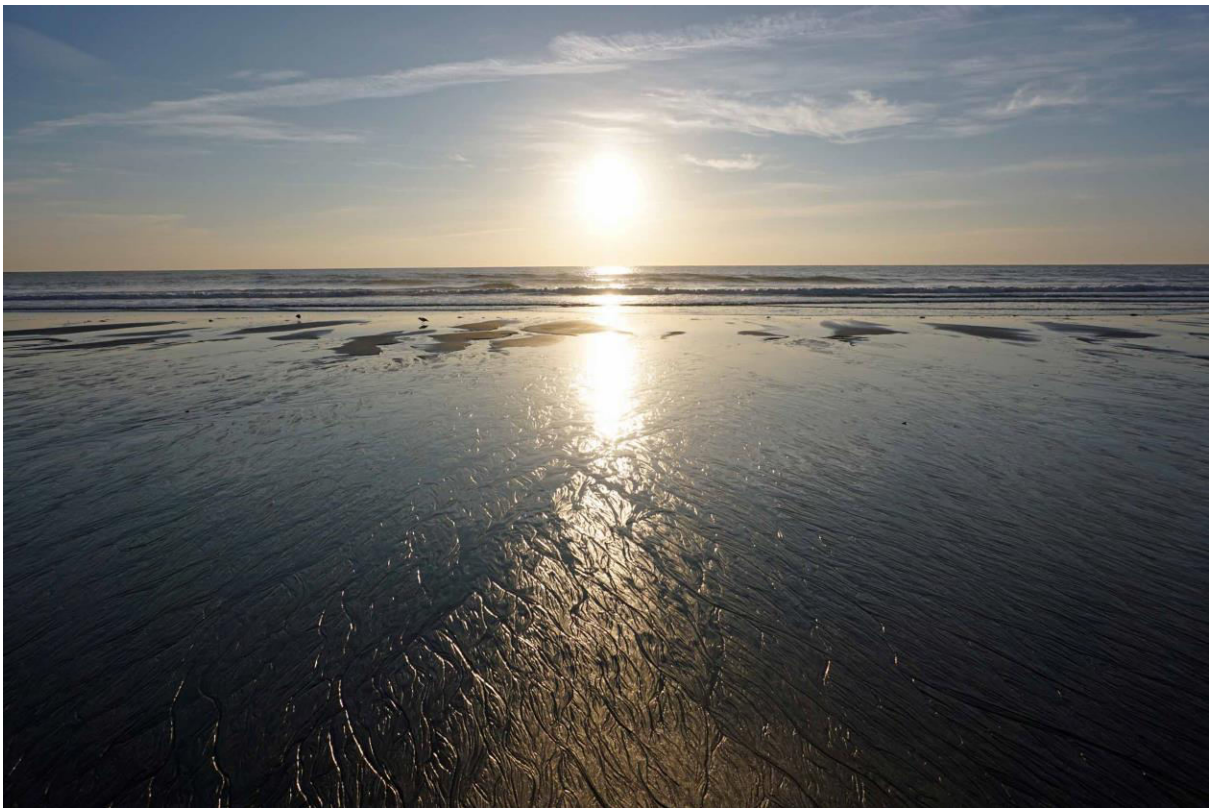
I check in at the Hampton Falls Inn and check out the abandoned beach before it gets dark. I take a photo of the Kentville Hotel where I spent a few happy days with my boys twenty-three years ago. I was thirty-nine at the time, just entering middle age, confused and in a state of constant apprehension.

John Dunne says there are three stages to an adult's life journey. In the first, a man sets out to discover everlasting life. The search inevitably fails and he comes back with a new consciousness of mortality. He has finally discovered death and can begin to glimpse his own inevitable demise, which grounds him in the reality of his own life. Then, after a while, he gets restless and so he sets out to discover what comes after death – what part of himself might live on. Each new discovery is a discovery of God. The light is fading and it's cold on the beach. I'll come back in the morning.

After getting a couple of very nice shots of tidal sand and sunrise the next morning at Hampton Beach, it's slow driving down Highway 1 towards Boston on Day 5, through small towns like Newbury and Salem. The leaves haven't peaked down here yet so it would seem like a good time to take a break from peeping and spend the day in Boston, but the traffic is horrible and parking, even on a Sunday, is ridiculous. Doesn't seem like there's much for me to see here anyway so I cross the river into Cambridge and find a perfect parking spot on Massachusetts Avenue across the street from Rodney's Bookstore, a very fine establishment.

Further down the Avenue I find a service of the Alethea Church about to begin in the YMCA. The service opens with great music performed by young people who, like most of the congregation are probably students from M.I.T. and Harvard which are both down the street in opposite directions. I listen to the young pastor's sermon for a while but it's too long and too much like a lecture.

It feels like it's been a frustrating day of pointless driving and buying a new GPS gadget in a mall in Cambridge. This part of the world feels like it's not for me. 23 years ago, I drove into Boston from Hampton Beach with the kids and ran over a seagull, the only time (to my knowledge) that I have ever run over a creature. I don't feel like lingering. I'll be very happy to get back to peeping and small towns. The light was bad all day so I end up with just one shot. I find a room at the Courtyard by Marriott outside of Boston.



In the morning of Day 6 I continue down the coast. It's only two-and-a-half hours to my destination, New Haven, but I'll pass through three states along the way. I'm feeling a bit out of place. I'll feel better when I find some more books. First stop is for breakfast at a Dunkin Donuts in the deserted seaside town of Narragansett, Rhode Island, where I still feel like an alien but get some nice shots, which is what matters. I love abandoned beaches.

Dunne says that the sea can represent the abysmal, and possibly sickening, infinity of time. It's better to see such things in another person's eye, made human and manageable through the mediation of another. Maybe this is why my favorite books are biographies or memoirs. There's something soothing about them, like looking at photos that make messy and ordinary life appear sensibly ordered and even beautiful. But the camera doesn't create beauty and order – they are already there, we just don't see them (like a god that has to be sought or rendered).

I get a couple of mediocre shots at Rocky Point in Connecticut but it seems like the rest of the day will be about books. The Book Barn in Niantic is actually a large compound of quirky little shacks and paths and carts, with thousands and thousands of books. One of the employees tells me they take in 12,000 books a week. The town put a stop to expansion of the compound so there are three satellite shops further down the road in the center of town. I find a couple of books and a bookmark but it's all too much, and not well curated. It's here that I find *Time and Myth: A Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death*, by John S. Dunne, one of the three books that will define the trip.

The wind picks up on the road to New Haven and at one point I round a bend and it's snowing leaves, turning upside down the elegant Zen metaphor of an archery shot not needing to be released but falling like snow on a leaf suddenly slipping to the ground without the leaf having stirred.

The Book Trader Cafe on Chapel Street in New Haven, down the street from the Yale Art Gallery, is a perfect 10. Excellent books at great prices, good coffee and a nice setting. I find two books, one of which is *Thoughts in Solitude*, yet another Thomas Merton book. Merton pops up on every trip I take, stocked it seems by every used bookstore, maybe because he wrote so many books which sold well a long time ago and are now being passed on as the original owners die off. The monk has achieved a kind of immortality.



It got summer-warm today and it's forecast to be 27 tomorrow, which is a bit disorienting - this being a fall trip. I've felt dizzy at times on this trip. Too much driving? Lack of sleep and conversation? Dunne says we like to see ourselves in another person's eyes. He quotes Herman Melville's Captain Ahab who says, "Let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky, better than to gaze upon God." We have a need to be seen and heard that denies solitude and the insight that comes with it.

I decide to dive into the Merton book to add some monkish texture to the trip. At first, Merton seems to be speaking in riddles like a Zen master, but then I begin to grasp what he's saying which plays nicely with the Zen book just finished. Merton says we need solitude and silence to hear God speak and to detect what Dunne calls the "rhythm beneath the rhythm". Dunne says that nothing less than our eternal life depends on how we relate to this hidden rhythm, so it's kind of important.

The rest of the trip is planned and weather predictions are promising. I like the five or six shots I got today at the beach, especially one of a seagull in front of wave. I experience a difficult night of semi-sleep at the Best Western Plus in North Haven during which a possible meaning of the trip (a convergence of Zen, Merton and Dunne) is suggested in a dream.

The great D.T. Suzuki, in the introduction to the Zen book, says that Zen is everyday mind – sleeping when tired, eating when hungry. As soon as we reflect, this unconscious connection is lost. Dunne says that when we return from the quest for eternal life we can begin to live the authentic (mortal) life that we have been given. But this state of what he calls "unmediated existence" can be either a state of unhappy loneliness or happy solitude. Merton says the "solitary life is above all a life of prayer." Alone, we find God in our own being and we find our being in the actions we take. The pilgrimage is a major act.

On Day 7, Holyland, the abandoned theme park in Waterbury, Connecticut, is very difficult to find, even with detailed directions from the nice lady who works in the John Bale Bookstore/Café, and when I finally find it, it's the wrong time of day with the sun directly behind the hill upon whose side everything is built. The hill-top neighborhood is poor and depressing as well. Someone on the radio says 13% of Americans fall below the poverty line, 20% of children, according to census figures which presumably don't include the undocumented.





Back on the road, I reach my destination by 2 o'clock. I'll spend the rest of the afternoon at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, a beautiful museum in a stunning location with several galleries and outdoor trails. I begin my visit with a coffee and croissant in the museum café, certain that this will be a memorable afternoon, despite the record-breaking heat.

The newer buildings, designed by the architect Tadao Ando, are gorgeous, the light is perfect and my camera couldn't be happier. I get a nice shot of countryside framed by an outdoor, walk-in art piece called *Crystal*, by Thomas Schutte, and a beautiful shot of a meadow and fence that will end up in a large frame in my living room. I spend what will be my last night of the trip at the Villager Motel in Williamsburg, reading and editing photos.

In the morning of Day 8, with the leaves fading already and poor weather forecast for tomorrow, I decide to return home tonight rather than spend one more night in a hotel. It will mean six hours of driving, but I'll go slow and spread it out.

It's bright and sunny when I get to Graniteville, Vermont. The Rock of Ages mine and factory in the middle of nowhere are impressive. Did the headstone on the family grave on Mount Royal come from here? Almost certainly. (Three weeks later I will walk up the mountain and on the way visit the grave of Leonard Cohen who will die the day before the dark day that the Trump is elected, the two events seeming somehow connected.)

After lunch in Burlington, home is the destination. It's a nice easy drive until I get off the Champlain Bridge onto the island of Montreal and experience the worst traffic ever in my home town. It takes 90 minutes to get home, when it should take only 20. Streets are blocked everywhere. I thought I would be smart and drive over the mountain but for the first time ever I witness bumper-to-bumper traffic on Mount Royal. I get extremely agitated. I really want to return the car today rather than tomorrow, but the shop closes at six and time is running out as I sit in traffic.

After literally dumping my things in my entranceway and rushing to return the car just under the wire, it takes a while to calm down. I normally love the ritual of unpacking but this time I have to goad myself. I look up the breathing exercise in my notebook and use it to steady my nerves. Breathe in... hold it in... breathe out slowly... breathe in and out quickly until it settles into a conscious rhythm. It works. Maybe I can apply the Zen breathing to each moment.



Merton says every breath we draw is a gift of God's love, and every moment of existence a grace. He says our knowledge of God is perfected by gratitude. Our gratitude for life is accentuated when we contemplate dying, but Dunne warns us not to become fascinated with death. There is something strange and rich about it, "like bones that have become coral or eyes that have become pearls." He warns against becoming a "lotus eater". Don't eat the leaves and waste time dreaming of eternities.

Just know that each breath and moment is a gift of God and live accordingly. Even in a world that will soon become a darker and more dangerous place, have faith and act accordingly, because it's only through action that we enter into reality. Good trip.



*Rock of Ages Mine, Graniteville, Vermont*