



Our Lady of Gethsemani

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 18 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Gethsemani

Spring 2018 Road Trip

It's May 14, 2018, and I've never been this excited about a trip before. Road trips are the best, especially ones that don't begin with a flight to a starting point but the moment you pull away from the curb in front of your house. Nothing is planned and there's nowhere I have to be for the next three weeks, aside from the projected turning point, which is the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, the home and burial site of Thomas Merton.

I've tried to reserve a room at the monastery, but the monks still haven't got back to me, so I've decided to just show up, uninvited, which people are welcome to do, if only to tour the site and visit the gift shop famous for its bourbon-flavored fudge. I'll just go: a road trip/pilgrimage needs a destination. I start the trip not quite finished reading the book that made Thomas Merton famous in 1948: *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith*.

Merton was an agnostic intellectual who converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-three, then became a Trappist monk at Gethsemani three years later. He would go on to become the world-renowned author of more than thirty books while at the monastery, his primary motive always being the mystical quest for union with God. His books, a common find in most used bookstores, have accompanied almost every pilgrimage I've taken in the last ten years.

It's spring and the trees are in full bloom when I set out with a list of possible cities and places to visit, beginning with an easy two-and-a-half-hour drive to Notre Dame Cemetery in Ottawa to pay respects to my grandparents before experiencing the *World of Tulips* that the Ottawa Tulip Festival purports to be. But first, I visit Black Squirrel Books on Bank Street for coffee and a scone and the first book-find of the trip: *Selections from the Thoughts of Pascal*.

The Tulip Festival turns out to be just a bunch of tulips, so I park the car to search for lunch in Bytown near the U.S. Embassy where a crowd is protesting the Idiot Trump's latest despicable act. Today, Palestinians are being killed to celebrate his decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel-Aviv into their colonized country.

Ottawa, as usual, feels dull and prim. After an overpriced lunch of pizza and beer, I decide to head off to the Diefenbunker, a Cold War shelter thirty minutes away where, except for the occasional herd of loud, over-excited high school students on a field trip, I'm alone in the underground facility built between 1959 and 1961 to house the Canadian government led by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in the event of a nuclear war.

Such a waste, having never been put to use, but also fascinating and a bit nightmarish, claustrophobic and very quiet. I watch a short film about the engineering required to accommodate the shock of an atomic blast, with even the toilets mounted on one-inch thick rubber disks to absorb the impact. These bureaucrats had their escape from the apocalypse all planned out. But you had to be inside the facility before the blast after which the heavy doors would be sealed. Everything in this encapsulated world is frozen in time: the conference room, the hospital, the prime minister's office and bedroom (with private bathroom), and the cafeteria.

I decide to drive to Kingston to visit the infamous decommissioned penitentiary tomorrow morning before driving to Toronto. I like Kingston and find a room easily in a nice motel on Princess Street where I start to read Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts*, a collection of short religious and philosophical pieces. The way he describes bourgeois 17th-century Parisian society sounds contemporary: "In those circles the believer tends to assume a pose of indifference in matters of religion in order to conform to the moral and intellectual tone of the social group." We think people used to be more religious but levels of faith have probably always been the same.



Ottawa Tulip Festival



Entrance to the Diefenbunker

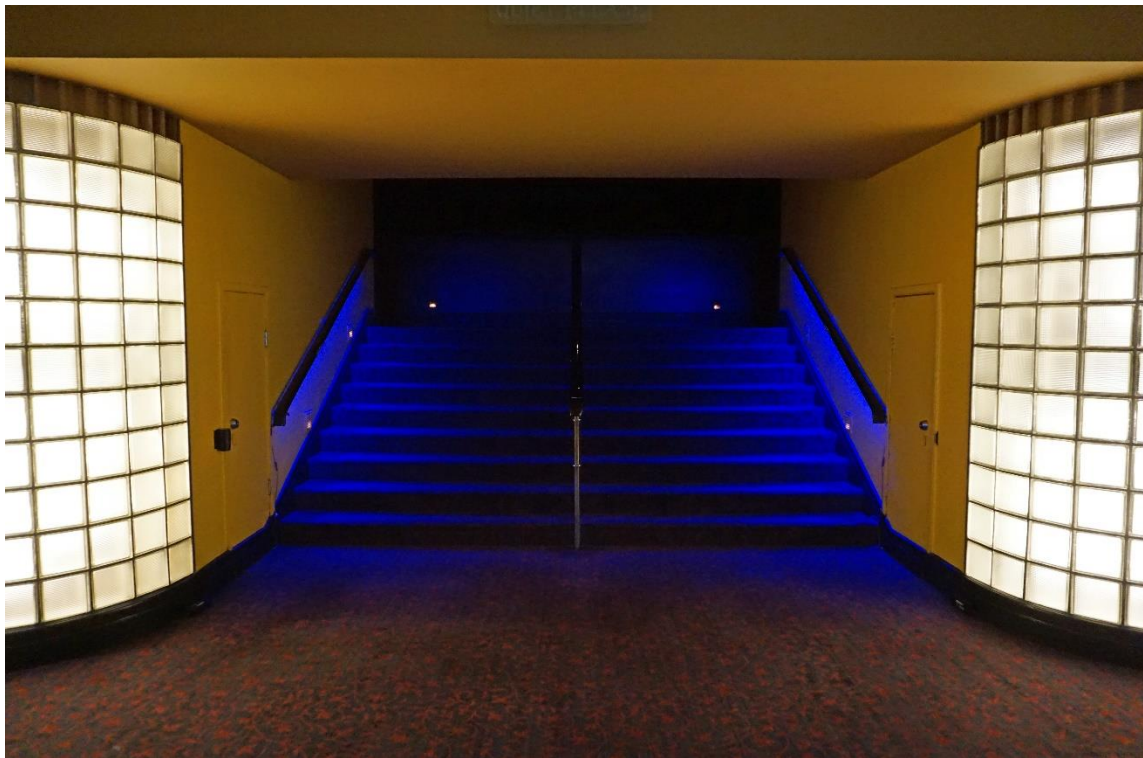
His criticisms of know-it-all intellectuals are sharp and judgemental: “Some men study nature as though it could be brought within their grasp.” Arrogance obstructs their relationship with a God who “has not revealed himself to those proud in their learning, for they are unworthy.” Much of the book is devoted to convincing atheists they are wrong, culminating with his famous *Wager*.

It’s pouring rain in the morning of Day 2 and I linger in my hotel room till nine, feeling lazy. The penitentiary, shrouded in fog beside Lake Ontario, is unfortunately closed on Tuesdays but the museum in the former warden’s house across the street is open and I have a long and interesting conversation with a guide named Vern, a retired prison guard with lots of stories to tell. I tell him I was hoping to know if I would experience the same spine-tingling I felt in the long-abandoned Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia a few years ago and he knows exactly what I’m talking about. He’s felt the ghosts too. He says developers are eager to purchase the lakefront property but others want to preserve the site. Don’t let them turn it into condos, I tell him.

It’s raining hard again when I leave the museum, so I decide to head straight to Toronto to catch a three o’clock film at the Hot Docs Cinema on Bloor Street. Traffic is not too bad driving into the big T.O. but free parking is non-existent in the trendy Annex neighborhood and it doesn’t take long, sitting in a café, for me to once again start feeling out of place in this city. But, as always, I tell myself *they* are the ones – the Torontonians - who are out-of-place. Like so many other things in this city, the Hot Docs Cinema is perfect, a beautifully renovated classic theater. But, like so many other things in this city, it all seems to be trying a bit too hard to impress. The film, *Leaning into the Wind*, about the artist Andy Goldsworthy, is fantastic. It’s wonderful to see a genuine artist in the act of creation. Approaching sixty, the artist says twice in the film that he’s not so sure anymore about the way he approaches nature, which is what he has always used to create his art. He feels now that *he* is a part of nature as much as anything else. In fact, he says, everything we create – cars, houses, computers - is nature too. We don’t create materials or substances out of nothing, so even a sidewalk is nature.



Kingston Penitentiary



Hot Docs Cinema, Toronto

After finding *Saints Behaving Badly* at Balfour Books on College Street, despite thinking I should give the city another chance, I decide to keep moving. The traffic is horrible on the way out, like the city knows it's being spurned, but the river of cars eventually begins to move and it feels good to be going to Hamilton, a city I have a feeling I'm going to like. In the evening, in my room at the Mohawk College Residence and Conference Center, I finally get a response from the Abbey: no rooms available. I ask that they keep me in mind if there are any cancellations.

The Pascal book is too scattershot and, after skipping to the *Wager*, I decide I will put it aside and focus on Merton and the *Seven Storey Mountain*. Pascal says: "If there is a God, he is infinitely incomprehensible to us. So we cannot choose what to believe by reason." We need to make a guess. Pascal's point is that there is nothing to be gained in choosing to believe there is no God, but everything to lose (if eternal damnation is the result). "According to the principle of probabilities, you must take the trouble to seek the truth; for if you die without worshipping the True Cause, you are doomed."

Day 3 will be a sunny day in Hamilton. First stop is the lookout in Sam Lawrence Park, a small city mountain much like Mount Royal in Montreal. But it's too hazy for photos so maybe I'll come back later. I linger in the parking lot and fall asleep in the warm enclosure of my car overlooking downtown Hamilton, and then read a bit of Merton when I wake up fifteen minutes later, determined to finish the book today.

Merton says the monk needs to detach from himself, and from his sin. "That is the meaning of the contemplative life, and the sense of all the apparently meaningless little rules and observances and fasts and penances and humiliations and labors that go to make up the routine of existence in a contemplative monastery: they all serve to remind us of what we are and who God is..."

Hamilton, less than an hour away from the wonder-of-the-world Niagara Falls, nevertheless calls itself *The waterfall capital of the world* because there are so many in a city that sits next to the same Niagara escarpment. The waterfalls are nice but not spectacular and not easily found. But I find a book quickly at the River Trading Co. on Barton Street in an interesting neighbourhood just beginning to gentrify. The short biography of Leonardo Da Vinci is by Dr. Sherwin Nuland, the guy who wrote the definitive book on *How We Die*.



Hamilton, Ontario



Barton Street, Hamilton

Bayfront Park, a short drive away, looks a bit too new and manicured, with trees not yet totally at ease with where they've been placed. But I like it very much and get some nice shots. On a bench, I skim through the last sixty pages of the Merton biography, which I think would have been a much better book with two-thirds cut out. And yet Merton leaves out the main event – the thing that made him doubt his vocation to become a priest. (He felt he was ineligible because he had fathered an illegitimate child in his youth, a secret he kept to his grave.)

I return to Sam Lawrence Park in the afternoon and walk the length of it along the escarpment. Blue haze still hangs over the city, but the light is good here in the gardens. Then it's back to Bayfront Park to re-take some the afternoon shots in softer light. I try to think like Andy Goldsworthy and get inside the nature I see around me. All of a sudden, at 8:40, I notice I'm beat, legs leaden and body feeling stiff after a long day foraging for photos. A beautiful day.

Day 4 will be another bright and beautiful day. The plan is to drive slowly to Windsor, stopping at Cambridge, Stratford, and London along the way. I begin *Saints Behaving Badly* which is lighter and more gossipy than I thought it would be. The saints are all medieval, from a world far removed.

Cambridge is pretty but there's not much to see and I'm already feeling tired with four hours of driving left to Windsor, which I don't actually *have* to reach of course, this being a no-reservations trip. Stratford, a tourist mecca, is even prettier. I don't linger and don't take a single photo. I take a nap in the car before hitting the road again.

London is disappointingly ordinary with more traffic than expected, but I manage to find a book, *The Common Sense of Science* by Jacob Bronowski, at Brown & Dickson Booksellers on Richmond Street. The sky has been cloudless all day but the light is marred by a dirty blue haze.

I finally make it to Windsor, which feels weird, sitting in the shadow of its big, rough neighbor across the Detroit River. The light is not good at Riverfront Park, so I don't linger long, but I get a decent shot. In the evening I plan the next two or three days in Detroit. My room at the Kenora Hotel is on the busy road leading up to the international Ambassador Bridge and I can hear the trucks rolling by all night.



Cambridge, Ontario



Detroit from Windsor

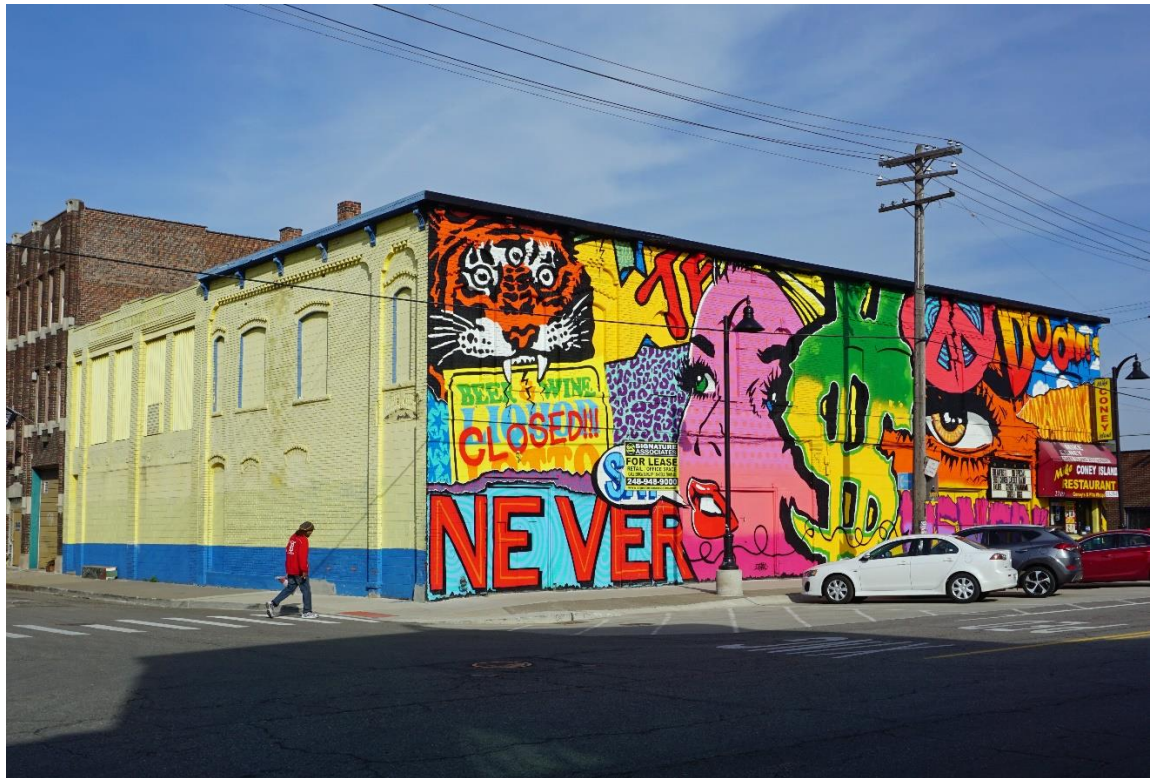
Day 5 is cooler than yesterday, with the border just a few minutes down the road. I enter the U.S. easily, not sure where to go first, and end up finding easy parking at Detroit's Riverfront Park where I leave the car and walk over to the Renaissance Center, headquarters of General Motors. Impressive from the outside, inside it's an automotive cathedral with a rotating assembly-line-like belt of vintage trucks on display and solemn hymnal music echoing in the cavernous atrium. I have a coffee in the sun-drenched food court facing Windsor. It's sunny now but may cloud over later and it's extremely windy. Everyone so far seems super-friendly here.

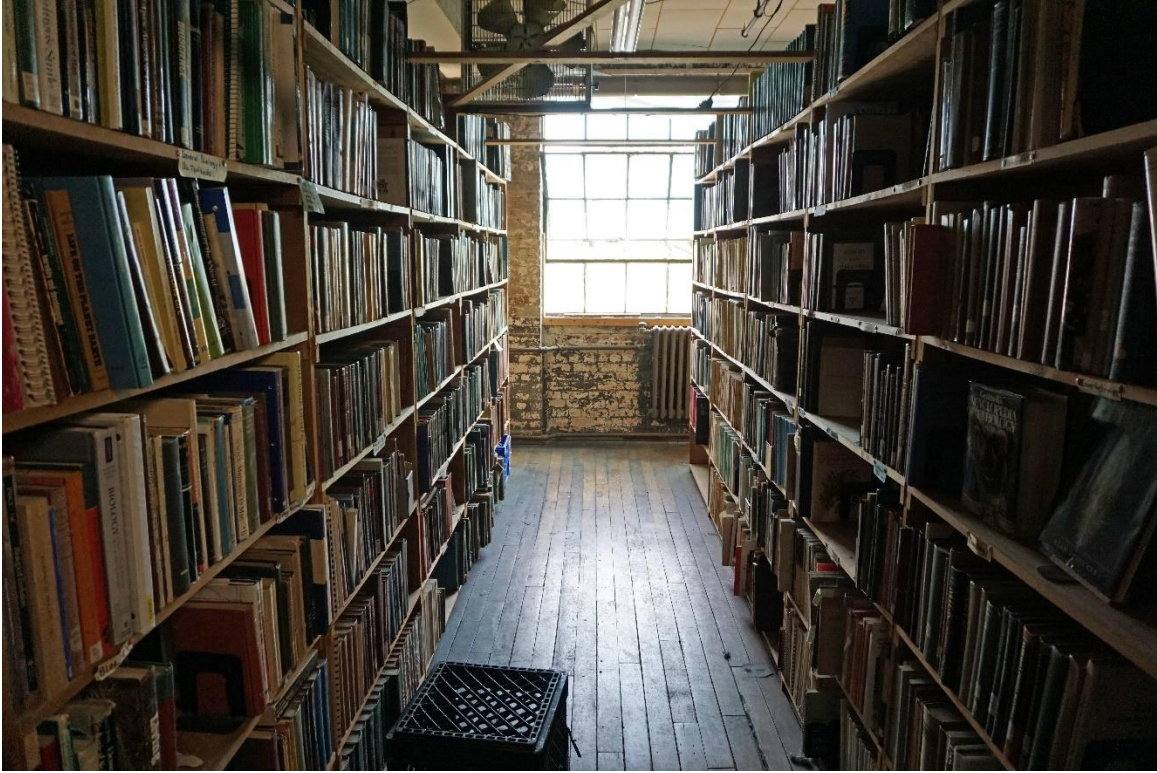
Next stop is John K. King Books, the biggest used bookstore I've ever visited: four floors of endless books, many a bit too old and smelly, in an unrenovated downtown warehouse. I find two books: *Mysticism: The Experience of the Divine*, and *Merton by Those Who Knew Him*. I take some photos of the store before driving up to the local arthouse, Cinema Detroit, which is closed, but lunch at Gus's World Famous Hot and Spicy Chicken down the street is cheap, fast and delicious.

It's unusually quiet and empty downtown, feeling like a Sunday, and everything I want to see seems so close, with easy parking. I'm liking the city very much so far. Next stop is the Detroit Art Institute to see the magnificent *Detroit Industry Murals* by Diego Rivera, which the artist considered to be his best work. The twenty-seven panels have their own enclosed sunlit courtyard, an homage to a once mighty center of industry.

Then it's back downtown where I will learn from a walking-tour guide that the city is two-thirds empty, the result of what they call the "white flight" a few years ago. It's been decades since I've seen so few cars on city roads, and in Motor City of all places. The city now is 80% black, 10% Latino and only 10% white. The architecture is beautiful, even though much of it is crumbling.

Our tour guide, Bob, is great and very knowledgeable about his city, which was founded by a French explorer from Montreal. He's also a lawyer with an office high up in the art-deco Ford building that he brings us to visit. He's paying an astonishing low rent of \$500 a month, but not for long. Like so many of the old office buildings here, some abandoned for years, this one has a new owner and is slated for renovations. It will probably be turned into condo-lofts for the rich.





John King Books, Detroit



Detroit Industry Murals, Diego Rivera



In the evening I finally finish *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton says we were never destined to lead purely natural lives - that "God gave man a nature that was ordered to a supernatural life." We are created imperfect and need assistance (grace) to raise ourselves up. In the summer leading up to his decision to join the Trappist monks and live at Gethsemani, Merton became "conscious of the fact that the only way to live was in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God."

Day 6 starts out raining, so I linger in my room at the Allen Park Motor Lodge to finish a translation job and review the Merton autobiography till eleven, when the weather is predicting a bit of sun mixed with thunderstorms.

As soon as he arrived at the monastery, hoping to be accepted as a monk, Merton started to speculate about the nature and meaning of contemplation, which would eventually develop into his greatest contribution. "The contemplative life directly and immediately occupies itself with the love of God... The peak of the mystical life is a marriage of the soul with God which gives the saints a miraculous power... and changes the course of religious and even secular history." This idea that contemplation has a direct effect on the world will pop up several times on the trip. Before making his big decision, Merton asks God for a vocation and eventually comes to understand that we all have the same vocation:

"Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example."

I get a couple of nice shots driving slowly into the city in the rain: one in a cemetery next to some sort of gravel plant and another of Michigan Central Station, the most famous of the abandoned buildings in Detroit. The sun finally comes out when I park the car downtown and I get some shots from the 75-cent *Detroit People Mover*, an automated, elevated, single-track-three-car train that circles the downtown area. But it's peopleless today, except for a few tourists like myself.



Michigan Central Station



The Detroit People Mover



A bit further uptown, lunch is a Coney Dog (a local delicacy dressed only with mustard and chili) and a surprisingly good coffee at Detroit One on Woodward, the city's quiet main drag. The city feels even more deserted on a Saturday. I explore the side streets a little, taking photos, worried that locals might resent another tourist taking pictures of their distressed neighborhoods. At one point, an older, slightly disheveled man rushes up to me and I quietly step back into my car. Other than "Taking pictures, taking pictures..." I can't make out what he's saying, so I simply smile, give him the thumbs up, and drive away.

I drive deeper into the same neighborhood and park the car to wait for the rain, which has just begun, to stop, hoping the sun will move into a small patch of pale blue sky behind me. The rain eventually lets up and I get some shots before heading further uptown to the abandoned auto plants. Then it's back downtown to buy a fridge magnet at The Guardian Building, also known as The Cathedral of Finance, and ride the People Mover one more time.

Then the sun pops out and I rush back up Woodward Avenue to retake some shots, but it's gone again by the time I get there, so I head back to my hotel in the suburbs. On the way, I drive through a violent storm, which almost forces me off the road, but then get a nicely-sunlit shot of an abandoned strip club, *The Bada Bing*, with a rainbow and dark sky behind it. Chinese dinner at Yum Yum Express is barely edible but the cookie is nice to me (*You will have a very comfortable old age*) and I struggle to stay awake past eight on my last evening in Detroit, a ravaged city where you can see and feel the excitement of a resurgence beginning to take place.

Day 7 begins cool and cloudy and, according to the forecast, it will be even cooler by the time I reach Chicago. I'm not looking forward to the five-hour drive after a solid eight-hour sleep full of dreams, including one in which an acquaintance was telling me about a service that hooks single people up with someone to spend a last pre-nuclear-war night on earth with. I leave at nine, a late start, but I'll get an hour back when I cross into the next time zone heading west.

For the first time I notice how much easier on the eyes a gloomy day on the road is. I pull over into Kalamazoo for a break after two hours of driving, and to see if there's a Catholic mass happening, but also just because I want to say I've been to Kalamazoo. The timing is perfect, with a mass at nearby St. Joseph beginning in just a few minutes.



The Bada Bing

As is usually the case in this country, the church is packed, and the first reading is delivered by two beautiful 8-year-old girls all dressed up for their first communion. But I can't make out a word of what they are saying in their childish, uncomprehending voices, which is ironic because the Gospel delivered by the priest is the one about spreading the word: "As my father sent me, so I send you." The priest also says we should pay attention to the sacraments and their meaning. The meaning of the sacrament of communion, he says, is that we unite with Jesus, forgetting ourselves (which is always a good thing).

The final forty minutes entering Chicago on a Sunday is spent in a traffic jam, which is discouraging, making me doubt the wisdom of coming to such a big city, especially having to drive in every day from my hotel in the suburb of Lombard.

All of a sudden, the skyscrapers appear at the end of the road my car is slowly creeping down: a beast of a city, the tops of the scrapers shrouded in clouds. I drive into downtown but there's nowhere to park, not even a chance to pull over, so I head towards the lake and take the highway-like Lakeshore Road north until I can pull over next to a beach and get my bearings. I ask my phone to look for a used bookstore in Rogers Park, a neighborhood I've already identified as interesting, and it takes me to Armadillo's Pillow Inc., an excellent store where I find *The Secular Journals of Thomas Merton*, a 1959 first edition hardcover in great condition with a *Holy Ghost Convent Library* stamp on the cover page.

Walking around Rogers Park, looking for a warm café, I suddenly realize I'm cold and hungry - shaky hungry - so I step into a small supermarket where I find a container of stuffed grape leaves which hit the spot immediately. I eventually make my way back to my hotel in Lombard where in the evening I plan the next three days which includes seeing the many Frank Lloyd Wright-designed homes in Oak Park, a much older suburb not far from where I'm staying, along with the master architect's own house and studio, now a museum. Afterwards, on the way to Kentucky, I'll stop in Indianapolis to do laundry and see a movie.

I decide to put aside the book about misbehaving saints. I get it – saints all have a past and are for the most part just like us. I'll focus on Merton instead. *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* consists of the recollections of twenty friends of the famous monk. His publisher, Robert Giroux, remembers him as someone remarkable for his gaiety, charismatic, empathetic and worried about the egotism of writing worldly books. Merton disliked nosy bishops and the cheese and trinkets for sale in the Abbey's gift shop, but Gethsemani was his only home.

It's raining and dark, almost as night, when I finally get up on Day 8 from a night of restless sleep. In the breakfast room of the hotel it gets even darker outside and the image on the TV freezes then loses reception moments before the deluge begins, quickly followed by thunder and lightning. I hope this doesn't last all day.

The decision to visit the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio first thing works out well in spite of the torrential rain. It's all so beautiful, with everything built to human-scale, and the neighborhood is fantastic, full of FLW houses and the Unity Temple, one of the most beautiful buildings I've ever seen, just around the corner. The light, the colors, the design... everything in the temple looks perfect. Built over a hundred years ago, it's still an active Unitarian Church with three levels of inclined pews that leave no congregant more than forty feet away from the pulpit.

But I'm disappointed when I ask if the structure had ever been restored and the answer is a definite *yes!* A few years ago it was basically falling apart. "Wright was no engineer," the guide says, "the saying goes that if you live in a Frank Lloyd Wright house, you'll want to put your houseplants under the leaks in the roof." Could it be that all this beauty is more a stage prop than functional? No, FLW was a giant of a man, a heroic genius.

I take some photos in the Temple and on Forest Avenue in heavy rain before moving on. It turns out Oak Park is a good place to leave the car and take the Green Line train into the city. I'm the only white person in the train car, with many passengers speaking very loud, a woman yelling at her kids, an old guy dragging a mysterious four-by-four container and banging a large steel pipe on the floor, uttering slightly threatening gibberish to no one in particular... quite the experience. By the time I get downtown a strong wind is making the rain even nastier. The forecast had predicted the rain would stop by two but now it's saying four. After taking a quick look at the photogenic River Walk, I linger over lunch and coffee in a warm, dry restaurant.

I continue wander around aimlessly downtown, getting a nice shot of *Joan Miró's Chicago*, a tall sculpture surrounded on three sides by skyscrapers, then I take the subway out to Myopic Books, a used bookstore listed as a place to see, but its snotty hipster intellectualism turns me off almost immediately. The rain has let up a bit so I head back to the center of town to take shots that I'll probably re-take tomorrow, if the sun ever comes out.



FLW Houses, Oak Park



Unity Temple, Oak Park



Joan Miró Chicago

So many homeless people and panhandlers here, aggressively pleading for money. There's a kind of lethargic carelessness in the way many of the public employees speak, too. It feels like a culture of poverty. I take a coffee break perched on a stool in a café window under an L Station on the crazy-busy corner of W. Adams and S. Wells. It's stopped raining but still grey. Getting back to my car and hotel in rush-hour madness is another reminder of how big this city is.

In the evening I read more stories told by Merton's friends, one of whom says he "worked out a pattern and a meaning in his life that have given a great deal to other people. Surely he will remain in history as one of the most remarkable men of our time."

The news and weather for Chicago in the morning of Day 9 are grim. Murders, gun-fights, heavy fog and robberies on the Blue Line train. My plan to park the car in Oak Park and take the train downtown, as I did yesterday, seems problematic but I'm not going to fester in suburbia, so I'll just set the GPS to avoid highways (aside from the fog, the roads are said to be slick) and take my chances on the train.

But before I leave I linger in the room for an hour to read some more Merton friends. One talks about the *Seven Storey Mountain* as a surprise bestseller in 1948, and how Merton's death at the age of fifty-four on his first extended trip away from the Abbey was such a shock. The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti saw him in San Francisco on his way to Asia and his imminent death by electrocution inflicted by a fan. They met in a coffee shop where the monk was apparently "quite interested in any beautiful woman who walked by." Joan Baez talks about his yearnings for beer, scotch and hamburgers and later in the book another friend will say it was understood that if you were coming to visit you should meet the monk at the back gate of the Abbey with a six-pack and two hamburgers. The Nicaraguan priest and politician Ernest Cardenal says Merton's monastic order had more rules than any other, which Merton tolerated but often disagreed with. Cardenal is the only friend in the book who will say that Merton was considering coming back into the world.

The fog has lifted by the time I leave at 8:15 and the drive to Oak Park is easy. I find a parking spot about a mile away from the L station but I don't mind walking through this quiet, beautiful neighborhood. I couldn't find the protective wooden cross on a string from Santa Fe I travel with this morning and I'm a bit apprehensive without it. Did the knot come undone yesterday and fall to the ground somewhere? I'll look for a replacement in the city.



On the train, word comes from the Abbey of an opening this week. It may be for just one night but still feels like a blessing. First stop is Holy Name Cathedral where about a hundred junior high school students are noisily rehearsing some kind of ceremony. It's a beautiful church, about 150 years old but looks brand new. A rich congregation, no doubt. There's no gift shop so the search for a cross continues.

Second stop is St. Peters where they have a version of what I'm looking for but I don't like the chintzy look of it. Maybe I'll take a chance and wait till I get to the Abbey with its renowned gift shop. Now that I'm headed there for an "official" visit, maybe I can imagine I'm protected because I'm not really a tourist anymore. I keep walking.

Millennium Park is boring and sterile, surrounded by antiseptic glass towers with the lake nowhere in sight. I eventually make my way back to the River Walk but the light is still a heavy grey so I don't even bother to take the camera out of my bag. By noon, I'm beat, looking forward to a day off in Indianapolis tomorrow, so I walk back to the Chicago Temple to eat lunch nearby and wait for a two o'clock guided tour of the Sky Chapel. Maybe the sun will have come out by then. It turns out the Temple is just around the corner from St. Peters where I started my long walk over two hours ago. Rather than linger in the noisy basement food court of the building across the street from St. Peters, I'll linger in the first-floor sanctuary of the Chicago Temple.

The ancient Methodist guide eventually shows up and takes us up to the 23rd floor Sky Chapel, the highest temple in the world. The chapel is small and a bit threadbare, surrounded by beautiful stained-glass windows that would have been much more impressive on a sunny day of course. The view from the reverend's private terrace one floor down is wonderful.

I don't know what to do next and think maybe I'm coming down with a cold. The sun finally peeks out for a few minutes at 5:15 and I can see my shadow for the first time in Chicago. From one of the many bridges spanning the Chicago River, I get a decent photo of the groves of tall buildings striding the River Walk, then take the Red Line out to Oak Beach to walk beside the lake, hoping the sun will come out again. It does, eventually, but the beach is not very interesting. I get one nice shot of a mural in the underground tunnel leading to the beach that makes this last photo hunt in Chicago worthwhile.



Holy Name Cathedral



The Sky Chapel



The Sky Chapel



The reverend's terrace



Back at the hotel in Lombard, I read some more Merton friends. Robert Lax talks about the monk as a writer and communicator: "People would say he was talking as though he was talking from inside of me. He was so much inside himself that he was inside of everyone." And James Forest echoes others who are glad he stuck it out at the Abbey: "At times he was really miserable with the limitations and seemed to complain bitterly about them with God, his friends, and himself. But there are certain outstanding results that have come from his being there. I can't help but thank God he kept at it."

The sun is rising in my hotel window in the morning of Day 10, just as I'm about to leave Chicago with a sore throat/cold. But I'm feeling good on my "day off" with nothing to do today but laundry at a highly-Yelp-reviewed laundromat in Indianapolis, and a movie at four o'clock. And Merton, of course – I'll read more what his friends had to say today. After breakfast, the sore throat seems to have receded and only sniffles remain. And the Santa Fe cross is back, reappearing under some clutter on the dresser just as I'm about to leave.

The Interstate to Indianapolis is dreary, crowded with trucks on all sides, and I'm exhausted after four hours of driving. Laundry is done by 3:00 and soon I'm sitting with six dumplings in the food court of the ultra-squeaky-clean-shiny-white mall where the Art Cinema is located. This has to be the ugliest site of an arthouse cinema I've ever seen. What a strange place to see Wim Wenders' documentary about Pope Francis.

Wenders tries hard de-cheesify the man in the funny clothes, racing around in his Pope-Mobile, but it's impossible in the end. I fall asleep in the empty theater about four or five times for just a minute or two, rousing myself each time to continue watching this interview with a good and very sincere man whose life itself, they say, is a sermon and who holds a position of considerable influence in the world. Power is at the center of the Gospels, says the Pope, and we should imitate God with our own hands by working and creating.

After the film I drive to the center of town to take a look at the canal area near Military Park but it's all a bit too new and clean (and practically deserted). I'm not tempted to linger in this city.

I continue to read about Merton in the evening. One friend says that by the time Merton was invited to go to Asia, "he was much more attached to the idea of monastic life, the contemplative life, a hermit's life, than he was to the specifics of any particular sect or religion."



Indianapolis

Merton described prayer and contemplation as more of a feeling than having to do with words. Some of his last words to Sister Mary Luke Tobin were: “We don’t need so much to talk about God but to allow people to feel how God lives within us, that’s our work.” And he never wrote about his personal experience of prayer; in spite of all the words he put to the page, “he was very reticent to talk about the deepest things.” According to Jean Leclercq, Merton believed that “the object of prayer was eventually to enjoy God. Not as a personal enjoyment, pleasure, satisfaction, but to be with him. Whether you speak or are silent, to be with him.”

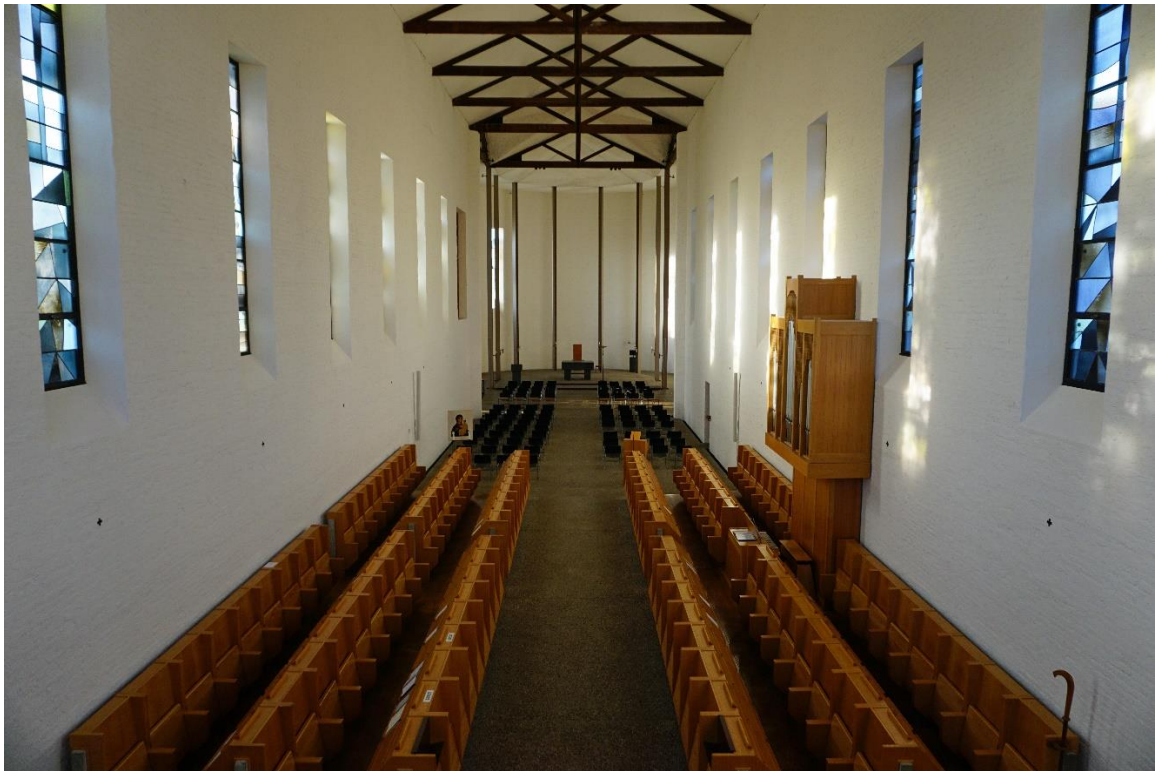
I wake up on Day 11 with a nose running like a tap and another three hours of driving ahead of me. I try to get a bit more sleep after breakfast and it doesn’t work out, but at least my eyes feel a bit less hollow. I set the GPS for the Abbey and hit the road to my final destination.

The calm is palpable as soon as I step out of the car and enter the gift shop of the Abbey, an hour past Louisville. A lady in the gift shop directs me to the guesthouse where an ancient monk explains what to expect and walks me to my cell in the older building. All the buildings are connected but it’s complicated to get from one to another. He gives me a small piece of paper with a list of seven instructions, including having to cross the balcony of the church to get anywhere from my wing. Room 3040, a cell in the male-only, unairconditioned, shared-bathroom wing – the monks’ wing – is perfect. Merton himself could have lived in this cell.

It’s all very attractive and the silence inside and outside is thick, except for the birds and the wind in the trees and an occasional car going by on the adjacent road. I walk around the grounds and visit Merton’s grave, but it’s pretty hot so, after starting out on the path to Merton’s private hermitage then turning back, I decide to wait until after supper to walk more. On the way back, I meet a young woman on the path who tells me about the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville.

Dinner at 7:30 is simple but good with about thirty other people in the hushed dining room. In the evening, silence permeates everything. I briefly watch the monks perform their rituals from the balcony of the church and it doesn’t really appeal. According to Merton, the object of prayer was to enjoy being present with God. I understand, I think, but I seem to be not tempted to do it in a place like this.







TO SOUTH WING

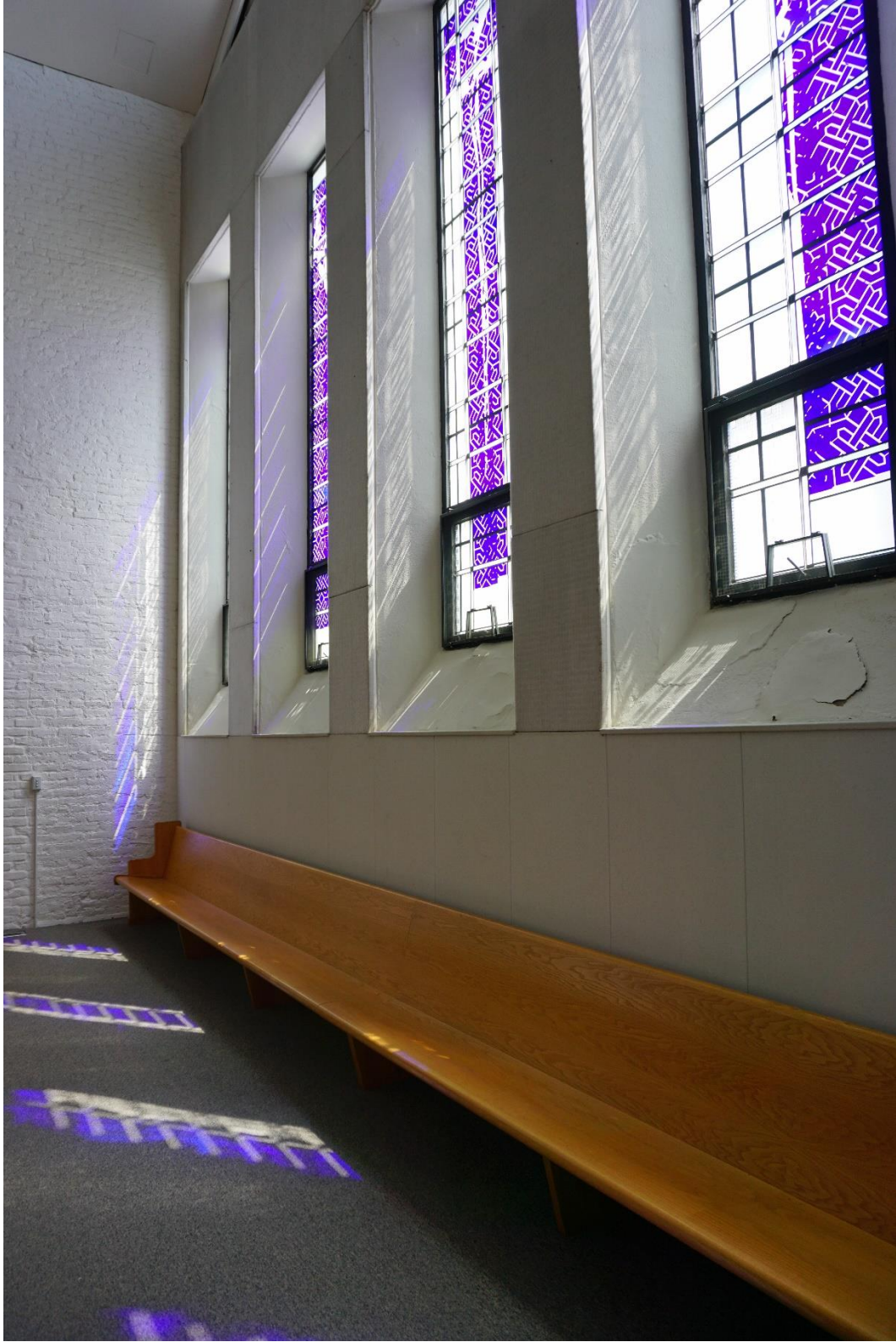
1. Take elevator to 3rd floor
2. On 3rd floor turn RIGHT and go till end of hall
3. Enter door to the RIGHT
4. Go down 7 steps enter BALCONY door
5. Enter door to the RIGHT, CROSS the church balcony
6. Enter door "for retreatants only" and you are on the 2nd floor - Rooms (2010-2090)
7. One flight up for 3rd floor – Rooms (3010-3090)

After dinner I get some nice shots in crystal clear light, one of them of what looks to be the infamous back gate where Merton received his gifts of beer and hamburgers. I still haven't finished the friends books and read a chapter where someone says that Merton gave the impression when talking about the author William Faulkner that you could live a monastic, contemplative life as an artist in the secular world.

I'm in bed by ten. Mass will be at 6:15 tomorrow morning, breakfast at seven, check-out at eight. A real hit-and-run retreat. I hardly got any reading done today, focusing mainly on taking photos, something Merton liked to do here as well.

I end up sleeping well in my cell, on top of the covers with the window open to fresh country air and both fans turned off. I get up at 3:30 to go to the bathroom down the hall in my bare feet and boxers (the advantage of staying in an all-male residence) and I can hear the muffled sounds of the monks doing their vigils in the church below. Every now and then during the night I had surfaced to consciousness thinking I was getting really sick, my chest congesting and a fever rising, but when I finally get up to take a shower, I don't feel so ill after all.

Day 12 will be hotter than yesterday and I don't think I'm up to taking any long walks, so I may not linger at the Abbey too long. I feel empty inside and I'm starving but it's only six and I have to go to mass before I eat. Mass is short and to the point, with no extras like hymns or long liturgies. I ask myself if I would stay another day or two if a room became available and I don't think so. If I leave today, I will have spent less than twenty-four hours here. Does that make the visit a failure? At least I paid my respects at Merton's grave and I can always do a genuine retreat closer to home where there are several monasteries not too far away. Or not: maybe I lack the requisite piety and already have enough silence in my life.



The church balcony at Gethsemani

Breakfast is another simple meal in the silent dining room, the only sounds the discrete clinking and clacking of cutlery. People make a big deal about the prohibition against talking, but my first impression of the lifestyle is that it's not so different from the way I already live most days, a monk without a monastery. The plan today, after a last tour of the grounds, is to return to Louisville to visit three places, including the Thomas Merton Center. My last walk around the site begins with the St. Joseph statue across the road. I take several photos walking up the small hill with a path mowed into the tall grass, my shoes getting drenched in heavy morning dew.

I want to do some reading on one of the outside chairs before I leave but the short, round monk who conducted mass this morning is now doing wheelies on a small tractor-mower on the lawns beside me. He's so round his girth extends beyond the width of the tractor and he's wearing big aviator sunglasses, a funny hat, and a mask to cover his mouth, so I can't tell if he's smiling, but he sure looks like he's having a good time obliterating the silence. I finish the Merton friends book anyway and get in the car to begin the long journey home – eight days to drive 1500 miles.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Than has the final word on Merton. There is much value in the contemplation or meditations of a monk, he says, turning a common phrase upside down. Instead of *Don't just sit there, do something*, sometimes it's wise to *Don't just do something, sit there*. The image is of a world held together by the calmness and meditations of seated monks.

In Louisville, I visit the downtown corner where Merton had his epiphany in 1958: Fourth and Walnut, which is now Fourth and Muhammad Ali Boulevard. Two plaques commemorate the event in which the monk realized there was no escape possible or necessary from the world around him and felt he was "awakening from a dream of separateness". He felt connected to every person in the crowd and "was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people."

Next stop is the Thomas Merton Center in the library of the University of Bellarmine, a spacious and beautifully maintained archive and mini-museum well worth the visit. There are a lot of personal effects, notebooks and artwork I had never seen before. The last stop in Louisville is a disappointing bookstore where there's nothing to be found, so I hit the road.



I was going to take the scenic route to Cincinnati along the Ohio River but the river is an ugly brown so how scenic could it be. It's hot when I get to the city and park the car near Duttenhofer's Books where I pick up a book that I will read when I get home but will have no relevance to this trip. The neighborhood is edgy and weird and the local MacDonald's which I visit for a milkshake and Wifi is even weirder, the worst I've ever experienced. People, both customers and staff, are loud, rude and unfriendly. Very depressing. Aside from the Merton Center, it's not been a good day in this part of America. Maybe it's the heat and a still-lingering fever that make me anxious to move on tomorrow morning.

After a good night of sleep at a nearby motel, I'm still feeling discouraged in the morning of Day 13, like the trip could already be over. And weather forecasts are grim. But the decision has been made to go to Pittsburgh next, so today will be another day of too much driving, but that just means less driving later in the week. I plan to take three breaks along the way and, after looking at the books I've picked up so far, decide to begin Jacob Bronowski's *The Common Sense of Science* today - something completely different.

The first stop is a donut shop somewhere outside of Columbus. In Chapter One, Bronowski writes about science as a distinct culture but objects to the idea of conflicting cultures: "The human race is not divided into thinkers and feelers, and would not long survive the division." He says the claim by some that they cannot understand mechanical things is simply not true.

Second stop is beside a dam and ancient bridge in Zanesville, a small town full of churches. Bronowski claims that science, more than art, leads to social change. He makes an interesting point about how industrialization created sensibility that didn't exist before. "It was the engine, it was the horsepower which created consideration for the horse; and the Industrial Revolution which created our sensibility (to issues like child labor)." He seems to be saying that we only stop exploiting when scientific technology makes it unnecessary.

It's the start of the Memorial Day weekend so there are speed traps everywhere along the Interstate, waiting to catch drivers trying as hard as they can to stay within the speed limit. But it isn't easy and eventually a police car pulls out of its lair and begins to tailgate me. I must have been going just a few miles over the limit, ten at the most, for just a brief time, but there it is, right behind me, a sickening feeling. I wait for the cops to turn on their flashing lights, a signal for me to pull over, but for five torturous minutes nothing happens.

For five minutes, I hold my breath with one eye on the speedometer, waiting for the unpleasant interaction to begin. Then, all of a sudden, the police car slows down and takes the exit off the freeway behind me. The feeling of relief is wonderful. They probably ran my plates and got a description of me along with a photograph of me crossing the border last week. Maybe they just decided to give this old pilgrim a break.

At the third stop, Bronowski says there are three ideas central to science: order, causes and chance: "We could say that the Middle Ages saw nature as striving towards its own inner order; and that the Scientific Revolution overthrew this order and put in its place the mechanism of causes... The Scientific Revolution was a change from a world of things ordered according to their ideal nature, to a world of events running in a steady mechanism of before and after."

I finally reach Pittsburgh and first impressions are good. It's a nice-sized city with just the right level of grime. Despite the poor, overcast light, I get a nice shot of the Andy Warhol Bridge downtown. I walk for hours in the city and in the evening plan the rest of the trip. I'll spend the last three days in New York, a city I've visited twice before but never alone and never as part of a pilgrimage.

Sunday, day 14, begins very grey, rendering the views from Mt. Washington overlooking the city unphotographable. I want to go to mass at a nearby suburban church but the GPS screws up, so I'll try to find something in the city.

It's muggy, but not too hot without the sun. The 36-story Cathedral of Learning on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh (and the Heinz Chapel next to it) are impressive. There's nobody around when I take the elevator up to the top floor but the views are still a dullish grey. The chapel opens to the public only at twelve; I decide to linger in the area in the meantime and wander over to the Ryan Catholic Newman Center for 10:30 mass but there are no seats available, so I walk to posh, air-conditioned St. Paul's Cathedral, where mass has just ended but the organist is continuing with a beautiful recital. Maybe I'll skip mass and just hang around churches today. I've already heard the day's gospel on the radio and it wasn't very interesting.



Pittsburgh Bridges



The Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh

Next up is a movie at the Row House Cinema, which I love, but Alfred Hitchcock's *The Rope* is dated and corny. The sun is out when I emerge and it's hot. I drive up to St. Anthony's Chapel in Troy Hill, which is corny and dated too, and full of the little pieces of martyrs and saints they call relics, the stupid side of Catholicism. City Books is tiny and too hot to linger in. So far, the day has been a bit frustrating.

I decide to drive back to the Cathedral of Learning where I get some nice shots of everything looking better in sunlight. Then it's back up to Mt. Washington for some great views of the city before coming back downtown to do some more walking on a late Sunday afternoon. I'm still liking the city.

In the evening, I give up on yet another book that I decide I will finish when I get home. Bronowski is wrong: he says anyone is capable of understanding his explanation of science but trying to read his book simply reinforces the fact that I am definitely not. It's not a matter of will or effort. I remember giving up on chemistry in high school - not being able to make sense of the periodic table. I simply couldn't understand the concept of chemical elements and, applying yet another level of abstraction, the concept of a symbol to represent each element. The appropriate wiring seems to be missing in my brain.

I cough so bad during the night I almost leave my room to look for a drugstore and even consider cutting short the trip. The mysterious on-and-off cold seems like it might be a continuation or culmination of a flu I had four months ago, from which I never recovered more than 10% of my ability to taste or smell. Despite these new symptoms, the senses are back up to about 25%, so maybe this is a good thing.

For the second day in a row, I return to my bed on Day 15 after breakfast, exhausted with at least three-and-a-half hours of driving ahead of me. I'll try to take lots of breaks today. It's Memorial Day so at least there won't be rush-hour traffic to deal with, driving through Pittsburgh heading east. But the Interstate will be booby-trapped again so I'll need to go slow.



Pittsburgh from Mt. Washington

The Midtown Scholar in Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, is a first-rate bookstore/café in the heart of the city. I find a nicely illustrated edition of *The Man Who Planted Trees*, the classic tale by Jean Giono. I was considering staying here overnight, but the town itself is uninviting and I decide to get some more driving done. I book a room in Allentown, another ninety minutes down the road, which effectively means I'll have almost no freeway driving to do for the next three days, until I leave New Jersey for home (I've also booked a room for three days in Secaucus, just across the Hudson River from Midtown Manhattan).

My hotel room in Allentown is next to a small airport. Dinner is two hot dogs and two pierogis at nearby Yocco's, the so-called *King of the Hot Dogs*. I have to admit they're pretty good. The coughing is getting out of hand so I visit a nearby drugstore where a friendly clerk helps me find some cough medicine that works well and I get an excellent night of sleep.

It's cool and grey in the morning of Day 16 but the sun might be out by the time I get to where I'm going. It's a mixed forecast for the next three days. I decide to begin the tiny book on mysticism I picked up in Detroit before I leave.

It can't really be considered a book – it's too short and doesn't even have an author, part of series on Medieval Wisdom. The book says: "The mystic experience is most commonly defined as the experience of union with the divine or transcendent." It seems to be a *feeling* more than anything else, a feeling that Saint Teresa of Avila described as God "present in all things" and her life as a "life which God has lived in me." This is what Merton was seeking. In his autobiography he writes about how our natural goodness and capacity for love "becomes transfigured and transformed when the love of God shines in it."

Another passage puts Merton's preoccupation with contemplation in perspective: "To the Christian mystic, it is in a state of contemplation that the seeker finds the transcendent union with the divine known as meditation in the East." Merton was literally and figuratively moving East when he died.

I'm closer than I thought to my destination and it doesn't take long on the highway before I see the faint silhouette of the forest of towers across the Hudson. The sun is out but the haze is thick and blue so I set the GPS for a bookstore in Hoboken and fight horrendous traffic to finally find a nearby parking spot. The bookstore on Washington Street is half-closed for a children's storybook reading so I abandon the store and have a coffee and scone instead at Jefferson's Café a few doors down before driving to my hotel.

In the café, I finish the book on mysticism which ends with Meister Eckhart, the famous German mystic I have somehow managed to avoid so far in my life. Meister Eckhart says that: “God is such that we apprehend Him better by negation than by affirmation.” To dwell permanently in a state of union with the divine requires “the unceasing and absolute renunciation of ourselves and of all things.” What’s called the *via negativa* (the way of denial) seems to be the consensus of most mystics; but not for me if it means renouncing all pleasure. I tell myself it’s because I think we’re meant to enjoy this life.

Room 301 at the River Inn in Secaucus will be my home for the next three days and I like it very much: good desk, good chair and the bus that will take me through the Lincoln Tunnel to the Port Authority in the heart of Manhattan in twenty minutes for less than three dollars just down the street. I can totally forget about the car.

Once in the city, I buy a transit pass that’s good for a week and the first ride I take is all the way up to 190th Street on the A-Line to The Cloisters, the furthest uptown I’ve ever been by far. I activate the data reception on my phone too: I’ll not lose any time wondering where I am and how to get to the next place in this gigantic city.

The exhibition at The Cloisters, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, is wonderful and just a bit blasphemous. The Cloisters is a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art dedicated to medieval art and the entrance ticket is good for all three branches of the museum, so I know what I will be doing if it rains all day tomorrow as forecast.

Next stop is the Roosevelt Island Tramway where I have a nice exchange with a family in the crowded gondola. I offer my seat to the eight-year-old freckled boy with a crew cut, standing directly in front of me, who eagerly accepts it, and I’m given a warm smile and a thank you by his attractive grandmother in return. I tell her standing is actually better for taking photos and exchange a few words with the boy about all the cars on the Queensboro Bridge below us during the short ride over the East River, which is fun, but there’s not much to see on the island. It’s sunny but blue haze still hovers over the Manhattan skyline so I hardly take any photos.



Heavenly Bodies at the Cloisters



The Queensboro Bridge from the Roosevelt Island Tramway



Roosevelt Island

Back in midtown, I search for a quiet place to eat but there are thousands of people doing the same in Bryant Park and thousands more it seems in the gigantic Whole Foods across the street. Spaghetti and meatballs in a small, sit-down restaurant hits the spot – I’ve forgotten to eat since breakfast.

In the evening I read some of the short biography of Leonardo Da Vinci I picked up in Hamilton. The author assumes that Leonardo was a homosexual, but celibate, which might explain his obsessive focus and devotion to his work. He describes the Renaissance genius as a secular monk in “a constant state of inner attentiveness, removed from the everyday concerns of living and doing.” The book is written by Dr. Sherwin Nuland, the man who gave me hope that there might be something good about the creeping decrepitude of old age with his speculation that the brain cells dealing with trivial things are the first to die, freeing the mind of clutter and making way for the cells that deal with the more important things. The potential wisdom of old age.

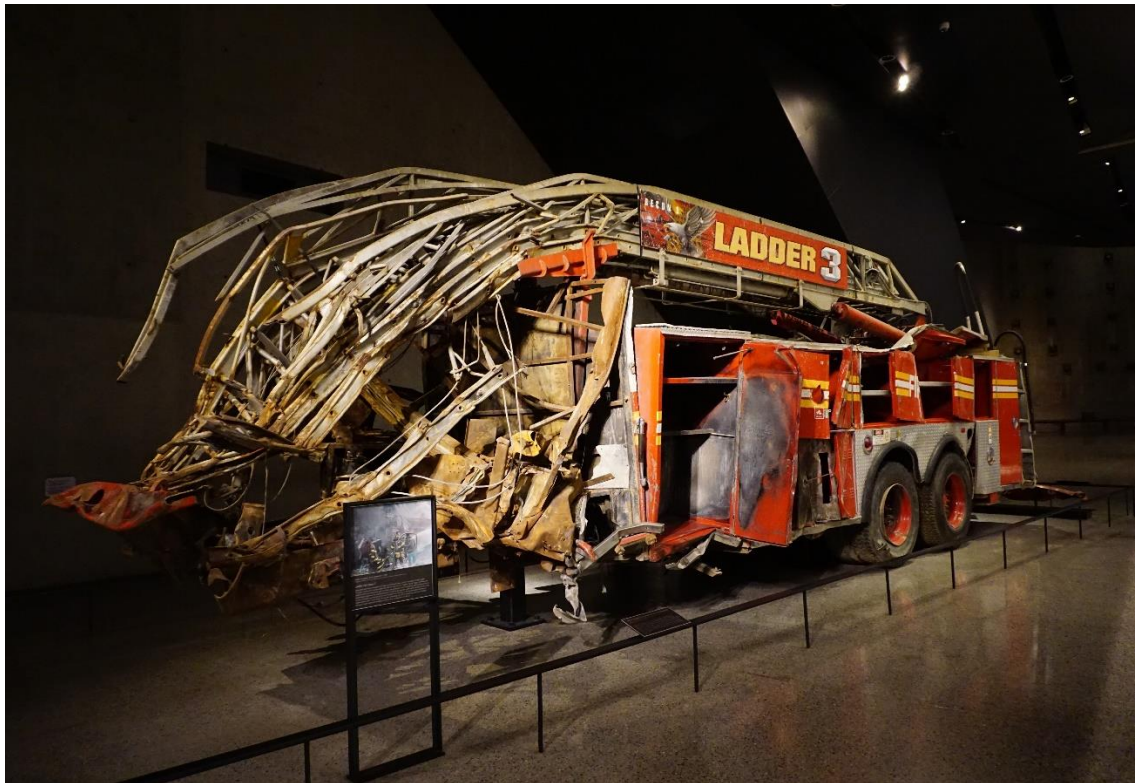
Day 17 will be a hot day in the city with fourteen hours of sunshine now predicted. First stop is the 911 Memorial Museum on the site of the fallen World Trade Center, which is impressive but sombre. People stand, hushed and still seemingly in shock, in front of twisted girders and half-demolished emergency vehicles. The patriotism is a bit nauseating but I guess it helps deal with the grief and horror of the catastrophe.

Then, it’s all the way up to 135th Street in Harlem which, now gentrified, looks like any other busy New York Street. Jackhammers, sirens, horns... so much noise in this city. I want to see Columbia University which is not far but it’s uphill and very hot and my legs feel like lead when I finally sit down for a long coffee break on the campus to plan my next move. I decide I’ll see nearby Saint John the Divine, then take the F Train all the way to Brighton Beach in Brooklyn.

Saint John the Divine is huge (later I will learn it’s the world’s largest church) but I don’t feel like paying the ten-dollar entrance fee. I see on my phone that the northern tip of Central Park is just down the street and consider trying to walk the length of it, from 110th to 59th Street, fifty-one blocks of winding paths, but I give up after ten minutes. It’s too hot, I’m too tired and the late spring scenery is too relentlessly green to photograph anyway. I’ll sit on an air-conditioned train to the beach for forty-five minutes instead. Maybe take a nap.



The Oculus, World Trade Center



911 Memorial Museum

The weather forecasters are wrong again and by the time I get to Brighton Beach in Brooklyn it's back to being overcast and chilly and I'm glad I have a hoodie with me. I've never been here before, where the scene under the elevated train tracks is interesting and chaotic. All sorts of shops, mostly Russian it seems, with sidewalks full of people of all nationalities. I buy a Russian doughy, meat-filled thing at a sidewalk stall and it's not that bad but very greasy.

It's not a great day to be on the beach but, as always, it's nice to walk on the damp, hardened sand beside the sea, hearing the sound of waves instead of cars, sirens and people. I walk the mile to Coney Island which is shrouded in greyness before taking the train all the way back to Union Square. The Strand Bookstore will be my last stop. Frustratingly, the sun comes out again when I'm on the train.

I find nothing at the Strand – there are simply too many people in the store, and too many books as well. A sign boasts that there are eighteen miles of books here. Walking through crowded Union Square, I spot the same grandmother I encountered on the Roosevelt Island Tram yesterday. We see and recognize each other at the same time and I sense we share a pleasant jolt of synchronicity. The only thing I can think to say is *Where's the boy?* She has two children with her but they both appear to be girls. She points to the child with long, thick and curly red hair and says, *There he is*, like it's obvious he's wearing wig. What are the odds of bumping into someone more than once in this gigantic city?

The madness getting home in rush hour is almost overwhelming, especially walking from the 42nd Street Subway Station to the Port Authority which is supposedly "connected" but actually involves at least ten minutes of underground navigation through throngs of quickly moving people in claustrophobic heat with musicians blaring music and others shouting about Jesus. I'm happy to finally find a seat and relax on the 320 bus to New Jersey. It's been a long day.

In the evening I read more about Leonardo. The only other thing I will take from the book, which deals mainly with Leonardo's incredibly futuristic anatomical drawings, is the idea that the man was both a brilliant artist and scientist: "He began to see art from what might be called the scientific point of view. And the converse was also true: he was seeing science from the viewpoint of an artist." He had practically nothing to say about religion, however, and claimed that humans can *only* be understood by turning toward nature. Everyone has blind spots.



Coney Island



The forecast for Day 18 isn't as complicated as yesterday: rain all day long. But I've got a list of places to visit that should keep me occupied and relatively dry on what could be the last full day of the trip.

First stop of the day will be the Mahayana Buddhist Temple on the Lower East Side in Chinatown, right next to the entrance to the Manhattan Bridge. It's only three subway stops from the Port Authority to Canal Street but first I need to navigate the same insane underground web as yesterday. This time I let myself literally go with the flow, dropping myself into the streams of people moving fast in every direction, bobbing and veering to avoid bumping into each other. The surroundings are just as noisy and ugly as yesterday but this morning it doesn't seem to bother. Putting aside resistance, I can see in the humanity coursing through one of the world's great cities a logic and purpose that overrides aesthetics, personal feelings, and impressions. I can see how it can even be exhilarating.

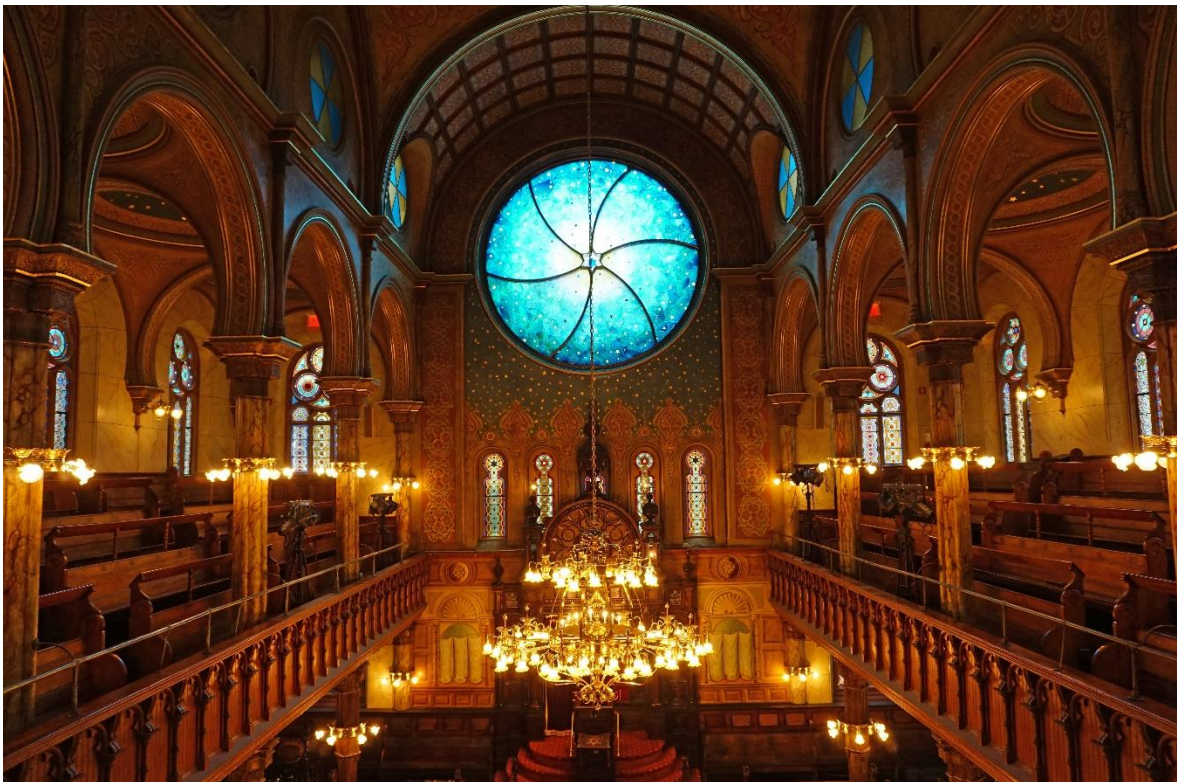
I recall the artist Goldsworthy saying there's no such thing as un-nature, and the way he laid down on the dry sidewalk just as it was about to begin to rain, letting the falling drops of water draw the outline of his body, blending into the asphalt, and how, in another scene, he struggled mightily to fight his way lengthwise for several minutes through a tall leafless hedge, removing the boundaries between the body he inhabits and everything outside of it. Experiencing everything as one interconnected creation, like Merton's Fourth Avenue epiphany.

And the trains – noisy and ugly too – are wonderfully efficient, moving 5.7 million riders a day up and down the grid of this island. You always know where you're going: it's so simple, you're either going uptown or downtown, always confident, at least, that you're moving in the right direction.

The garish Buddhist temple is easy to find in the heavy misty rain. I'm one of only two visitors and I pay the dollar for my fortune, a tiny folded yellow piece of paper held together with the tiniest elastic band I've ever seen. The fortune couldn't be more disappointing: *Good tidings: you can safely invest your money in a sure-fire interest.* Buddha, the financial advisor. I try to meditate sitting in one of the chairs that line the walls, but fall asleep instantly, a nice, restorative nap with a soothing recorded chant playing in the background.



Mahayana Buddhist Temple



Eldridge Street Synagogue

Second stop is the Eldridge Street Synagogue and Museum, a beautiful late 19th-century structure steeped in local history. It's just a few blocks away from the Buddhist Temple in what used to be the Jewish neighborhood, home to one of the greatest migrations in human history. In the late 19th-, early 20th-century, over two million Eastern European Jews came here. The guide explains how they immediately felt at home, surrounded by Yiddish-speaking people.

When we walk up the narrow stairway from the basement museum, the guide lingers in the foyer before continuing. For effect, she says, as she describes the way these people lived in squalor, crammed into tiny apartments with communal bathrooms down the hall or in the backyard. Imagine how they would have felt, walking into this, she says, with open arms as she leads us into the magnificent main hall.

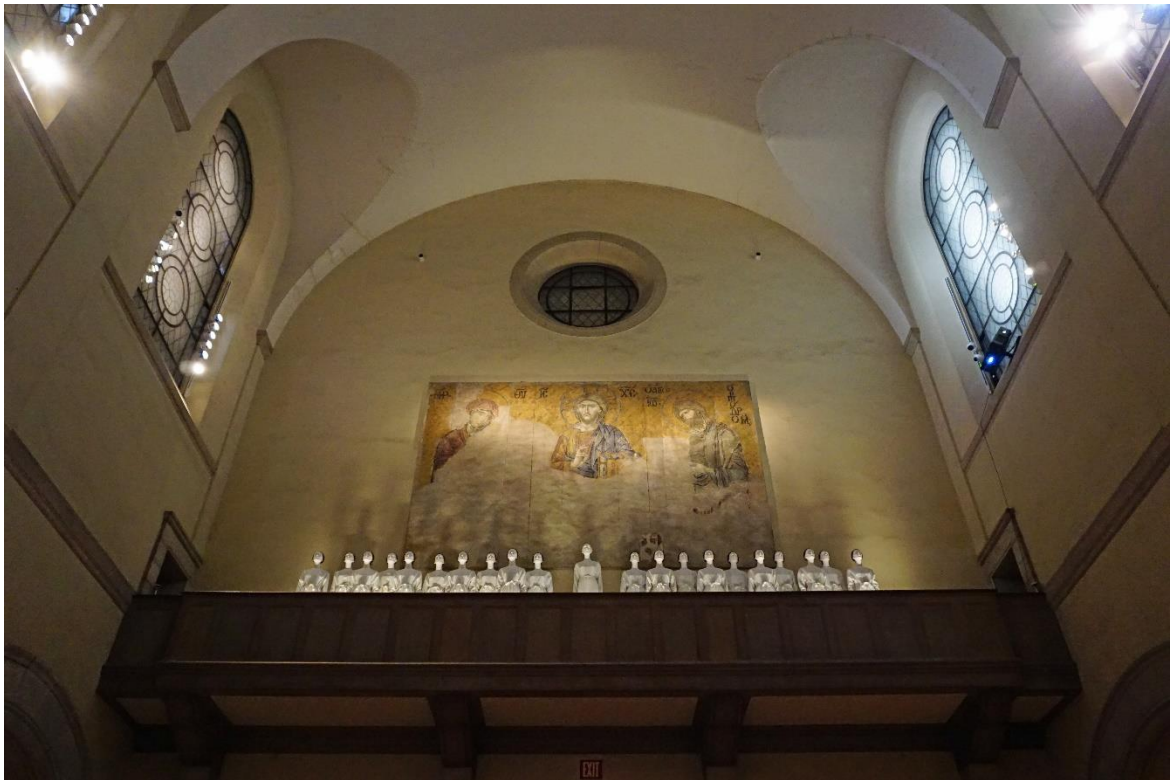
It's raining hard when I leave for stop number three, the New York Public Library, which is a temple as well, to books and knowledge. The large lobby of the stately building is as noisy as a subway station, swarming with tourists like myself. I don't stay long before heading to the next stop: the main site of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue where there will be even more tourists seeking dry places.

There are far too many people at the museum, but this main part of the *Heavenly Bodies* exhibit in the Medieval Room is fantastic, with dreamy, goose-bumpy music to enhance the effect. It's surprisingly moving, even though it's basically just fashion. I think it's the concept of the Catholic Imagination, a term I've never heard before, that moves me. It evokes how much of a religious sensibility can be enhanced by style and imagination.

The third site of the museum, The Met Breuer, is just a few blocks away, and much more relaxed. The exhibition, *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body*, consists of interesting depictions of bodies of all sorts that leave me feeling conscious of my own as an incredible object I mostly take for granted. The museum and neighborhood are infested with rich people, easy to spot, especially the old ladies who evidently spend fortunes on their appearance, and the younger women who all seem to be talking about real estate - where they, or people they know, live (or aspire to live) in this expensive city.



New York Public Library



Heavenly Bodies: The Catholic Imagination at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

This last day, winding down now, has gone well, despite the rain. Everything has worked out so far. I could conceivably stay an extra day if the rain-all-day-tomorrow forecast changes, but my feet tell me it's time to go home. In the evening I take a break from reading and treat myself to a nice dinner in New Jersey.

It's June 1, Day 19, and I'm going home. There are at least six hours of driving ahead of me with lots of breaks. I'm in no hurry and I have *The Man Who Planted Trees* to read along the way.

The Interstate that will take me most of the way home is dull and featureless until torrential rain and hail force me off the road for a few minutes, as if to remind me how important a role the rain gods have played on this trip. The Giono book is a quick and easy read - a short story about a man who devoted his life to planting trees that would eventually bring people and prosperity back to his barren valley. "He's discovered a wonderful way to be happy!" says someone in the story. A happiness based no doubt on the meaning and purpose expressed in the creative act of planting trees. Saving the world in his own small way with his solitary devotion, like the monk just sitting there, doing nothing or, like Merton, putting words on a page.

Then it's one last stop at the Corner Stone Bookshop in Plattsburgh where I find a last book that will have no relevance to this trip. The owner of the old store looks half-dead: stooped over, shaking, bleary-eyed, with skin that appears in spots like it's already starting to decay. I've got no more U.S. cash and it takes at least five minutes to process credit card payment on a new-fangled Apple gadget the owner doesn't quite understand. Finally, I do it for him.

An hour later, I'm on the Champlain Bridge, starting to feel nervous and edgy re-entering my city through downtown traffic. I'm really tired of driving and can't wait to return the car tomorrow. But there are other things bothering me: I feel like I've travelled too much recently – four pilgrimages in the last eight months. I need to sit still and catch up. And I'm not sure about this trip and what it means; it seems so disjointed right now.

Lastly, and most bothersome, I feel less "holy" now than before my visit to Gethsemani, and for the first time ever on a trip I got tired of thinking and reading about the things that usually preoccupy me on a pilgrimage. I had been feeling like I needed to give the pilgrim thing a break too, then I saw the exhibition on the Catholic Imagination and it just reinforced the idea that this notion of God and

sacred purpose is mostly in our heads – in our dreams and daydreams. Someone once asked Merton about the rituals of the Catholic mass, and he said, basically, that if you participate as if they are real, they become real. This sounds true, so let it be in my imagination.

But it's clear that it should be in my heart too, which is what the mystic seems to experience. Merton constantly emphasizes the importance of God as a feeling, the opposite of Pascal's Wager that attempts to convince with logic. The *Wager* is simple: Why decide to believe everything is meaningless when you can never know for sure? But then why does Pascal go on and on trying to convince the unfaithful? One of the first remarks he makes about atheists says more than enough: "Atheists should declare only what is perfectly clear." If you can't prove the non-existence of a Higher Power or an underlying purpose to the cosmos, then atheism can only be understood as *faith*, ironically based on a *feeling* that no such thing exists, a dark and depressing (and possibly perilous) position to take.

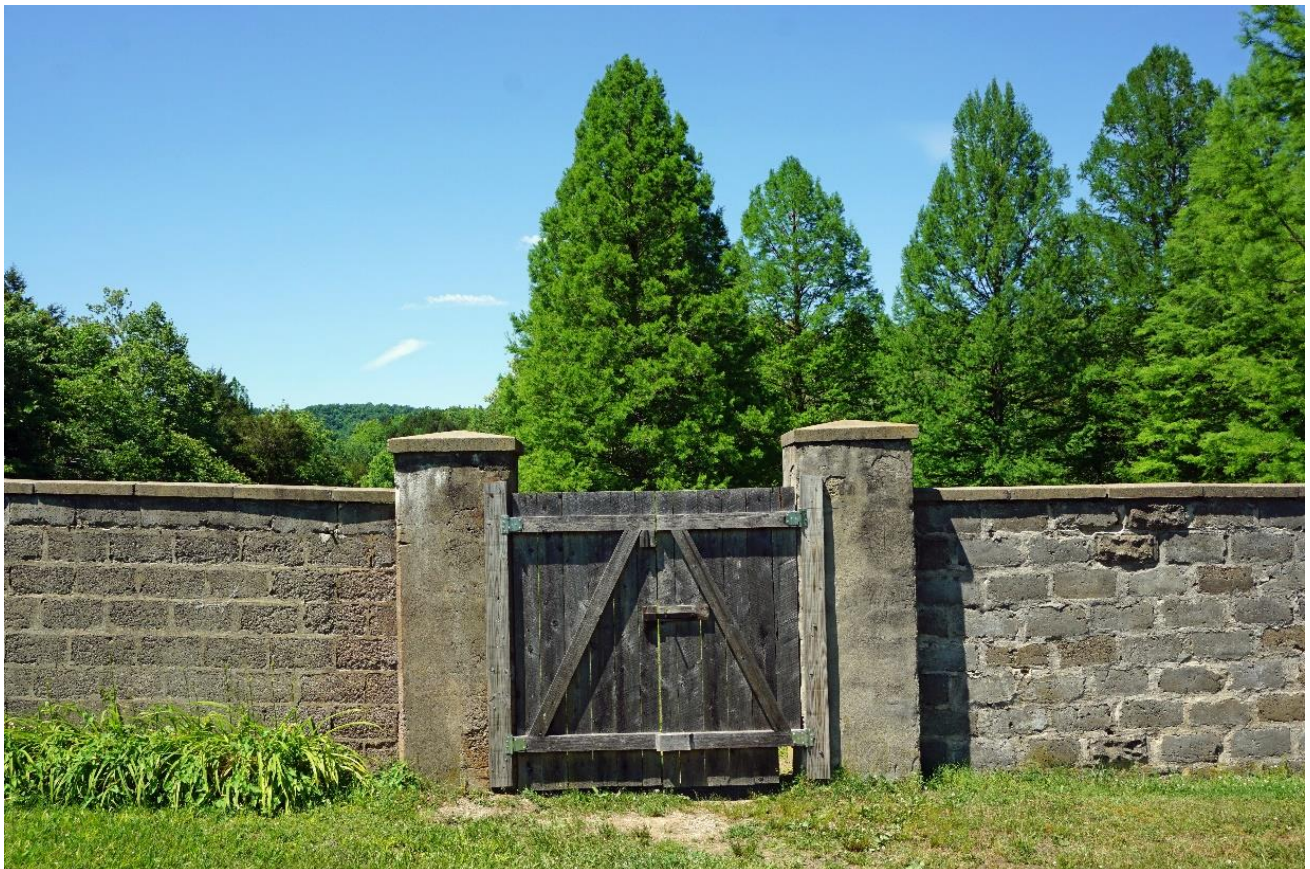
I would have preferred Pascal put more emphasis on feeling, such as when he asks those who claim there is no God: What is it that feels pleasure within us? He could just as easily have asked: What is it that feels anything? Or that acts with intention? Or the ultimate question: What is consciousness? Maybe consciousness is God. He's right about one thing: we have to make a choice.

In his secular journal, Merton describes faith as not just a feeling but a "virtue, an active habit which cannot even pretend to rationalize anything: it seeks what is beyond reason." Faith is what we do, not what we say or feel, and practically everything the monk does is a reflection of faith. But what do these acts of faith accomplish? In the same journal, written before he decided to move to Gethsemani, Merton echoes Thich Nhat Hanh on the monk's importance when he describes his first impression of the Abbey as the center of America: "I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery... It is an axle around which the whole country blindly turns, and knows nothing about it."

It doesn't take long, once home, to recover my equilibrium and focus and realize I did learn some important things on this trip. I think I have a better understanding of the monastic life and the way I'm living my own life as a soon-to-be senior citizen. John Eudes Bamberger, an associate of Merton's who eventually became an abbot, said the monastic life "appeals to people who have

had some awakening that makes them feel that living in a way that doesn't go to the heart of life is a waste of time. Its biggest appeal is that it encourages and facilitates a man's living at his own frontier."

Merton described eloquently the monk's life and purpose, but did he ever completely commit to it? He was no saint, and some even suggest he would have eventually come back into the world, but we'll never know. Hours after the first known recording of him speaking on film in Thailand, he was killed by another mechanical appliance – an electric fan. And so he will remain a monk forever, cheating every now and then with hamburgers and beer at the back gate of heaven.



The back gate at the Abbey