

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton was, by his own admission, rarely the man he believed he was. In his youth, he identified as a writer yet barely sold a book. When he shunned worldly pursuits for the monastery, his superiors directed him to write. Taking a vow of silence, he wrote bestsellers, corresponded copiously, and ultimately traveled to Asia. And that is one of Merton's messages—that just when we arrive at our epiphanies, we discover that God has other plans.

Here you will find a few small drops from the deep well of Merton's extraordinary and paradoxical complexity and simplicity. Whether you have read many books by the Trappist monk, mystic, poet, and activist, or you are unfamiliar with his words, carry them with you for a month. Ponder them in light of the accompanying Scripture passages, prayers, and ideas for action. May this spiritual master inspire you to discover something new in the familiar and set you on the path to your true self—the self that God knows and dearly loves.

Key to the Works

CGB » *Conjectures Of A Guilty Bystander*

(NEW YORK: DOUBLEDAY, 1966)

CP » *Contemplative Prayer*

(NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS AND CUDAHY, 1960)

LH » *Life and Holiness*

(NEW YORK: IMAGE, 1964)

NM » *No Man Is An Island*

(NEW YORK: HARCOURT, BRACE, JOVANOVICH, 1955)

NS » *New Seeds Of Contemplation*

(NEW YORK: NEW DIRECTIONS, 1962)

SJ » *The Sign Of Jonas*

(NEW YORK: HARCOURT, BRACE, JOVANOVICH, 1953)

SSM » *The Seven Storey Mountain*

(NEW YORK: HARCOURT, BRACE, JOVANOVICH, 1948)

TS » *Thoughts in Solitude*

(NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 1958)

The quotes from Thomas Merton were chosen by Connie Clark, who also chose the Scripture and wrote the "Prayer" and "Action" pieces.

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THE INTERIOR LIFE

There is only one 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. SSM

Scripture

“Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” **MARK 6:31**

Prayer

Lord God, lead me to a quiet place where I can rest, pray, and think. Help me understand that it is not selfishness or egoism when I contemplate that which is within me, because my inmost self is created by you. As I search for my true self, I contemplate your work of creation. When I seek your Spirit within me, I find strength for my journey and peace for my soul.

Action

Today, I will find time for quiet reflection. I will think about my day, observing the magnificent ways God works within me at this time in my life.

LOVE

If we love one another truly, our love will be graced with a clear-sighted prudence which sees and respects the design of God upon each separate soul. NM

Scripture

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” **MATTHEW 25:40**

Prayer

Lord God, in the perfect world I envision, everyone is happy—me, my loved ones, my coworkers, even people I don’t know. I can’t understand why they wouldn’t want this perfect existence too. But it’s my idea of perfect. Help me abandon all I want for others. Free me from my narrow, earthbound expectations. Let me be amazed by your grand design working in the lives of your children.

Action

I will look—really look—at one person I care about. I will ask myself which of my expectations for this person are realistic, and which are not.

BEAUTY

Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own. NM

Scripture

God does not see as a mortal, who sees the appearance. The Lord looks into the heart. **1 SAMUEL 16:7**

Prayer

God of wonder, I perceive a reality through lenses clouded by my past, my hurts, my prejudices, and my opinions. Therefore my reality is not the complete picture. Help me shed the scales from my eyes and align my vision more closely with yours. Help me see beyond the actions and decisions of others, and into their hearts, which is the true reality—immensely beautiful.

Practice

I look at the scene around me right now. I close my eyes for a minute and try to remember all that's there. I open my eyes and look again. Is there anything I did not notice before? Where can I see beauty here?

ILLUSION

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. NS

Scripture

You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I praise you, because I am wonderfully made; wonderful are your works! My very self you know. **PSALM 139:13–14**

Prayer

Lord God, I spend time and energy chasing an image of who I want to be. But is this my true, inmost self? Introduce me to this wonderfully made person—my deepest being.

Action

Today I will consider one thing that has meaning for me—my family, a hobby, a pet—anything. I will think about how this person or thing inspires me and makes me real. I will prayerfully address any concerns I have about it.

SOLITUDE

Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer. Where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all. TS

Scripture

Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light.

MATTHEW 17:1-2

Prayer

Lord God, I can feel lonely in a crowd, yet when I am alone under the sky and feel your presence, I know you are all I need. It is in these moments that you lead me to the mountain; you reveal yourself to me.

Action

The next time I encounter someone who is truly lonely, I will find a way to spend time with them.

RELATIONSHIP

I will have more joy in heaven and in the contemplation of God, if you are also there to share it with me; and the more of us there will be to share it the greater will be the joy of all. NS

Scripture

“This I command you: love one another.” JOHN 15:12

Prayer

God of all peoples, I am part of something far greater and more mystical than I can comprehend—the body of Christ, your Son. We all move in the same direction, toward your kingdom. Give me joy in knowing that I am not alone on the journey, that I am called to help others make it. I must also accept their help when I get turned around or find myself on the wrong path.

Action

Today I think about a time recently when someone offered help to me. What was my reaction? Was I gracious? Or too proud to accept? I will remember that I help others follow Jesus when I accept their help with joy and gratitude.

FOUND BY GOD

To “be perfect” then is not so much a matter of seeking God with ardor and generosity, as of being found, loved, and possessed by God, in such a way that his action in us makes us completely generous and helps us to transcend our limitations and react against our weakness. LH

Scripture

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. ACTS 2:4

Prayer

Lord, two simple requests today, but so very difficult. First, help me learn to accept myself, weaknesses and all. Then, help me to sit quietly and wait for your Spirit to work within my soul.

Action

I will look at my “to do” list today and see how I can responsibly remove one thing that isn’t a priority. I will replace it with time spent alone in God’s awesome presence, waiting for God to speak to me.

MERCY

It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need of forgiveness. NM

Scripture

“Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” LUKE 23:43

Prayer

God of mercy, I have made mistakes. I have turned from you. I have carried crosses and blamed others for them. Sometimes I have even blamed you for them. Yet I know many are of my own making. Today I kneel before your great love for me. Do not let me sink into the black hole of despair that creeps ever closer, but lift me up to your cross. Lift me up to the heights of your shining love for me—today, tomorrow, and every day after that.

Practice

In reparation for something I have done to hurt others, I will do something kind for someone. I will do it in a silent, hidden way so that I do not receive credit for it.

SUFFERING

Indeed, the truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. SSM

Scripture

“You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” **MATTHEW 16:23**

Prayer

Loving Jesus, so many times I have asked you to free me from suffering, or keep some pain or heartache away. You have listened to my prayers, perhaps because you knew I was not ready. I do not seek to suffer, but if troubles are before me, help me remember you on the cross. Help me to bear whatever hardship comes, confident that it brings me closer to your kingdom and your Father’s loving will for me.

Practice

I think of someone I know who is suffering. Although I may find it disturbing or difficult, today I will seek a way to be with them in their pain.

TRUE FRIENDS

May God preserve me from the love of a friend who will never dare to rebuke me. NM

Scripture

“I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” JOHN 15:15

Prayer

Jesus, friend to all, I thank you for placing good, honest people in my life. I ask you, have I built up such a fence around my feelings that they are afraid to speak the truth to me when I need to hear it? Do I even hear your answer right now?

Action

I will spend time in the company of a friend, even if it's only an online connection. Before we get together, I will plan everything I will *not* say. I promise myself that I will thoroughly devote my attention to them. I will be a kind, active, and honest listener.

CONTROL

We ought to have the humility to admit we do not know all about ourselves, that we are not experts at running our own lives. NM

Scripture

But when Peter saw how [strong] the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him. **MATTHEW 14:30-31**

Prayer

My God, I want to ask you to save me from the storms that lash at me, from the waves that wash over me, from the currents that pull me down. Instead, I will say this: Lord, I do not know where the sea will take me. But you, O Lord, carry me with you through the deep waters. With you, O Lord, I will know no fear.

Action

Throughout the day today, I will say this short prayer: Jesus, I depend on you entirely.

NATURE

How absolutely central is the truth that we are first of all part of nature. CB

Scripture

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

PSALM 8:3-4

Prayer

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we do not simply live on your earth. It is our past, present, and future. It is yours. Help us all as we live in, for, and with the work of your hands, your creation.

Action

I will find a way to experience God's creation through every one of my senses. I might chop fresh vegetables, take a quick breath of outside air, listen to a rainstorm, or just look out the window. If I find myself so inspired, I might even write down my impressions.

UNDERSTANDING

So much depends on our idea of God! Yet no idea of Him, however pure and perfect, is adequate to express Him as He really is. Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about Him. NS

Scripture

While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them. They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. They said to them, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised." LUKE 24:4-6

Prayer

God of life and love, my thoughts run in such finite, human patterns that when I experience a moment of your divine love, sometimes my mind cannot process it. Open my heart, that I may respond to your surprising, overflowing grace working in my life.

Action

I imagine myself with the women at the empty tomb. What would I do if I were there? Where would I go next?

SELF-DENIAL

We can deny ourselves rigorously for the wrong reason and end up pleasing ourselves mightily with our self-denial. NM

Scripture

“Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days’ wages and given to the poor?” JOHN 12:5

Prayer

Lord God, how many times have I been secretly or openly proud of my self-denial or considered it an achievement? How many times have I been angry with myself for not living up to my standards? Can you help me see the disorder of this kind of selfish thinking? Show me what I can do today to please you, no matter how small. Be with me any time I step out of my comfort zone so that I may always understand why I do it—for you alone.

Action

Those who knew Merton personally often commented that his joy was contagious. Today, I will try to emulate him, by smiling at least fifteen times.

SPEECH

If our life is poured out in useless words, we will never hear anything, never become anything, and in the end, because we have said everything before we had anything to say, we shall be left speechless at the moment of our greatest decision. TS

Scripture

“Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.” MATTHEW 5:37

Prayer

Lord God, I have said far more than I wanted to today. I want to practice silence, but I cannot do it without your help. Give me your word that I may keep it on my tongue, rather than the endless words of my own making.

Action

I will spend time in silence reading the word of God. I will stop and reread anything that has special meaning for me right now, listening to what God says to me.

ANXIETY

In our age everything has to be a “problem.” Ours is a time of anxiety because we have willed it to be so. Our anxiety is not imposed on us by force from outside. We impose it on our world and upon one another from within ourselves. TS

Scripture

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.” LUKE 10:41–42

Prayer

Lord God, difficult things happen that I cannot always help. But worrying about them is a choice I make. Give me your strength to choose the better part and rest at the feet of your Son, listening to his words in my life.

Action

I will make a written list of my worries and offer them all to Jesus.

PEACE

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are traveling in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. SSM

Scripture

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

PSALM 23:4

Prayer

Jesus, I walk in your presence. Guide my thoughts, words, and actions. I ask you this in the name of God the Father, who is all-powerful and all-good.

Practice

When I have difficulty quieting my mind, I will try this technique: I picture a chalkboard in my imagination. It is filled with my thoughts and worries. I imagine Jesus gives me a large eraser. He guides my hand as I slowly wipe the thoughts and worries from the board. Once it is clean, I turn to Jesus. He looks at me with love. Now, what does he say?

NOTHINGNESS

Mary's chief glory is in her nothingness, in the fact of being the "handmaid of the Lord," as who in becoming the Mother of God acted simply and in loving submission to His command. NS

Scripture

And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. **LUKE 2:19**

Prayer

Mary, most blessed among women, you pondered so many things—bewildering, painful, frightening things. Yet you always accepted the mystery of God in your life, with all of its implications. Help me recognize God working in my life. Help me accept his will without fear, complaint, or hesitation, but with joy, strength, and love.

Action

Whom do I worry about? I ask God what my role is in helping them work out their own salvation within his plan (not mine) for their life.

LIVING

The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived.

TS

Scripture

“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” LUKE 10:27

Prayer

Lord, sometimes I admit my prayer is just words, repeated over and over. Sometimes my thoughts are far from my prayer. Sometimes my actions have neither prayer nor thought. Help me gather it all in. Make my spiritual life one with my active life. Make my prayer real, my thoughts real, and my actions real. I ask all of this in your holy name.

Action

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. I will ask God how I might turn this prayer into action in my life.

SAINTHOOD

Sanctity is not a matter of being less human, but more human....This implies a greater capacity for concern, for suffering, for understanding, for sympathy, and also for humor, for joy, for appreciation of the good and beautiful things of life. LH

Scripture

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

GALATIANS 5:22–23

Prayer

God of all goodness, immerse me in love for humanity and your creation. This is the prayer of your saints, who did not skim the waters of humanity, but dove in, body and soul. Show me the way of your saints who lived—really lived—in this world, and who live with you forever.

Action

Today I will learn about someone I've always admired. In what ways might I imitate this person's humanity?

INDIFFERENCE

Violence is not completely fatal until it ceases to disturb us. TS

Scripture

A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. **LUKE 10:31**

Prayer

Lord, our world is so full of violence and hate, it seems like the only way to cope is to numb myself to it. To move on without really seeing it. But you never move away from us. You feel every act of violence in every human person. Today I ask you to change hearts. Give your people strength to stand together in peace and solidarity. Hear our prayers for our world. Help us to overcome violence and hate through peace and charity.

Action

Today I will let peace begin with me. When I am tempted to raise my voice or speak too quickly, I will ask Jesus' help to see what damage my words can do.

CHARITY

A shortsighted and perverse notion of charity leads Christians to perform token acts of mercy, merely symbolic acts expressing goodwill. This kind of charity has no real effect in helping the poor. LH

Scripture

[The Samaritan] approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. **LUKE 10:34**

Prayer

Father of all, help me remember that each person I pass on the street, see at work, or come in contact with is a child of yours. Each person has a past and a future, joys and worries. Each is loved by you. Guide my thoughts and actions so that I do not pass by those in need. Let my service to my fellow human beings be just as real as they are.

Action

I will say a quiet prayer for the first random stranger I encounter today.

GROWTH IN THE SPIRIT

Not only must we revise and renew our idea of holiness and of Christian maturity (not fearing to cast aside the illusions of our Christian childhood), but we may have to confront in our lives inadequate ideas of God and the Church. LH

Scripture

When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. **1 CORINTHIANS 13:11**

Prayer

Lord God, I've learned much in my faith journey, but I still have many miles to go. Help me to keep my moral compass, but help me also to acknowledge the different paths people take. Together, may we enter your kingdom in peace.

Action

I will explore the other side of an issue I feel strongly about, even if the view is morally unacceptable. I do not aim to change my mind; I simply want to see my brother or sister's viewpoint.

CONTEMPLATION

The contemplative way is, in fact, not a way. Christ alone is the way, and he is invisible. The “desert” of contemplation is simply a metaphor to explain the state of emptiness which we experience when we have left all ways, forgotten ourselves and taken the invisible Christ as our way. CP

Scripture

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” MATTHEW 5:3

Prayer

Jesus, I’m not sure I understand. You want me to discover my true self, yet you want me to forget myself. How can this be possible? I come to the conclusion that it is not for me to understand why. All I can do is take a first step—and contemplate you. I leave the rest to you.

Action

Blessed are the poor in spirit. I will repeat these words throughout the day today and contemplate what they mean to me.

PURPOSE

For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be. NM

Scripture

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

LUKE 1:38

Prayer

Ah, Mary, I think of your words to the angel. You had no idea what lay ahead. Yet you accepted God's will for you. Mary, I do not know if I am following God's will. I do not know what is ahead for me. Show me how to listen as you did. Let your words of acceptance and praise be always on my lips. Let me care for Jesus in my life, as you did, with all love and goodness.

Action

Today I will pray about a situation that I believe is God's will for me. I will ask God to guide me on this path if it is the right one for me.

TENSION

The completely irreligious mind is the unreal mind, the tense, void, abstracted mind that does not even see the things that grow out of the earth or feel glad about them. CGB

Scripture

“Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them.” MATTHEW 6:28–29

Prayer

God of all creation, help me to understand that all life has its origin in you—mysterious, unseen, wondrous. Help me appreciate the life you have given me, so that I might see my place in the continuation of life in all its forms.

Action

I will roll up my sleeves and find a way to experience new life, whether by planting seeds, helping a new parent, supporting a shelter for unwed mothers, or just getting some good earth beneath my fingernails.

TRUTH

We make ourselves real by telling the truth. NM

Scripture

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” JOHN 14:6

Prayer

Lord God, I think of confused people like Pilate who asked your Son what the truth was, and yet still condemned Jesus. I think of the rich young man who walked away sad because he could not face the truth of his own life. Father, help me to see the truth in my life: that it is only your Son who brings life. Help me live this truth always.

Action

Today I will pray for strength for all those who speak Jesus' truth in a hostile world.

TRUST IN GOD

I only say I trust You. My actions prove that the one I trust is myself—and that I am still afraid of You. SJ

Scripture

He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” MATTHEW 18:2–3

Prayer

Jesus, why am I so afraid? I must take time to examine my fears and to find out what it is that keeps me from abandoning myself to your love and mercy. I must look honestly at my life and understand that learning to trust you completely may take time for me—perhaps a lifetime. Help me, Jesus.

Action

I will spend time today picturing myself sitting with Jesus. I have nothing to offer him but myself. How does this make me feel? How does Jesus respond?

PRAYER

It is a kind of pride to insist that none of our prayers should ever be petitions for our own needs: for this is only another subtle way of trying to put ourselves on the same plane as God—acting as if we had no needs, as if we were not creatures, not dependent on Him and dependent, by His will, on material things, too. SSM

Scripture

“Until now you have not asked anything in my name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.” JOHN 16:24

Prayer

Lord God, I thank you for every great gift you have given me. Let me never forget all you have done in my life. Help me honestly assess my wants and needs so that I do not become obsessed with them, but let me use your gifts to praise you and give you glory.

Action

What do I truly need in my life? I will spend time today asking for God’s help, and thanking him for listening to my prayer.

LIGHT

That is what God wants to create in us—that marvelous spontaneity in which His life becomes perfectly ours and our life His, and it seems inborn in us to act as His children, and to have His light shining out of our eyes. SJ

Scripture

“You are the light of the world...Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”

MATTHEW 5:14,16

Prayer

Jesus, light my way so that I may see, not the path ahead of me but those all around me. Make me one with you. Fill my soul with the light of your love, so that I may shine it for all.

Action

I imagine myself walking on a path—it is someplace special to me: the ocean, a mountain meadow, a garden. Jesus walks with me. We smile and laugh together. His light fills me and radiates outward. Where do we go from here?