

## Transfiguration Happens

Lori and I have long been Thomas Merton fans, so we were delighted to visit the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Louisville several years ago. For those of you who aren't familiar with Merton, he was a Trappist monk from 1941 until his death in 1968. He wrote 50 books and many articles on [spirituality](#), [social justice](#) and [pacifism](#). Among his most enduring works is his bestselling autobiography [The Seven Storey Mountain](#) (1948). Merton was also a pioneer in interfaith dialogues, especially with Buddhism.

At the abbey, we spent time in some of the places where Merton walked, meditated and wrote. It was a strong experience to get some sense for the place where much of his spiritual experience and writing occurred.

But a nondescript street corner in downtown Louisville gave us an even more important window into Merton's life as a man of faith. For it was here, at 4th and Walnut Streets, that he had a vision in which he saw people on the street one day as remarkable spiritual beings.

Here's how Merton described his experience:

"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a

dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

To this day, people from many places come on pilgrimage to that spot, which is marked by a small plaque that describes his vision. Something happened there on March 15, 1958, that still touches people deeply today.

It's difficult to know how to characterize Merton's vision. Was he transfigured? Were the people he saw transfigured? At the very least, it was an extraordinary experience, a moment when Merton saw the world in a profoundly different way.

I'm going to use this and a few other examples from my experiences to try to figure out what to make of the story of the Transfiguration from the Gospels. The Transfiguration is nearly as important as the resurrection as a

major event in our Christian faith, and it's worth spending time trying to unpack what it's about.

In our Gospel passage for this morning, Jesus and Moses and Elijah appear dramatically changed to their followers. You and I are like Peter, James and John in the story, of course, aware that something is different. Peter's reaction especially is one that we can likely understand. The misfit between his effort to be hospitable, and the remarkable transformation that is happening, speaks volumes about his inability to understand what is before him. And also about the advanced spiritual beings who are being revealed.

The Gospel reading makes me think of another personal experience. This one is from the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Center in Bloomington, Indiana. When Lori and I visited there a number of years ago, we were honored by an audience with the Rinpoche, as the spiritual leader of the monastery is known. Despite a busy schedule, he honored us with a lengthy visit of more than an hour, during which he answered our questions and told us of his life and that of the monastery.

Part way through our conversation I noticed a bird outside the window and exclaimed, "oh look, a tufted titmouse." Lori gave me a look, one of

those marital looks that could take paint off a wall, expressing her displeasure at my disrupting the conversation. But the Rinpoche responded with joy. “How wonderful!” he said, sharing my delight in the bird.

Looking back, I realize that I had been in the presence of someone who embodies the Buddhist ideal of living fully in each moment, and that this unusual characteristic was clear from the moment we met him. Or, to put it another way, in the moment with the bird he was transfigured, and I finally saw his true nature.

Shifting back to Christianity, another figure who shows signs of having been transfigured is St. Francis of Assisi. He was renowned for the rigor of his spiritual practices and his subsequent change (transfiguration?) was evident to his followers.

St. Francis changed from a spoiled, rich youth into a deeply spiritual person. He inspired what is probably the Catholic tradition that is closest to Jesus’ emphasis on serving the poor: the Franciscans. When Lori and I visited Italy, I was struck by the contrast in his home of Assisi between the magnificent Basilica and the simple quarters of the monastery and its grounds where Francis found spiritual sustenance.

What brought those two worlds together for me, though, were the remarkable frescos in the Basilica. They depict scenes from the life of St.

Francis, including many which depict his luminescent qualities. In scene after scene, St. Francis glows with spiritual energy. By the time you're finished walking around the basilica, you're in awe of the spiritual presence of a man long dead.

I invite you to check out some images online from the Basilica in Assisi. Even in a scaled-down form, you get a sense for how St. Francis' contemporaries might have seen someone whose spiritual being shone through his body.

In this example, there are correspondences to Buddhism, which says that anyone can become enlightened. Thus there have been many "Buddhas" (and similar spiritual beings known as Bodhisattvas) and there continue to be today. The Buddhists would say that to achieve such an advanced spiritual state (to borrow a phrase from the musical world about getting into Carnegie Hall), all you have to do is practice, practice, practice. As in meditation!

Richard Rohr, who after the Pope is probably the most famous Franciscan alive today, reminds us to be sure to do our spiritual homework before the final exam (our dying and death). That spiritual homework is our practice, in Buddhist terms.

I'm sure some of you have been at the bedside of a dying person who had taken Rohr's advice. As they die, such people can exhibit a remarkable sense of light and luminosity. I've experienced this several times and I can think of no better way to describe their remarkable condition than to say they were transfigured.

Let me give you a less exalted example of transfiguration. My friend Dick tells of a nurse from University Hospital who has been leading the cause of bringing nursing care to the homeless people who frequent Agape Cafe. He says that while no one else has seen her halo, he has.

So let's return to Peter again. His practical but clueless response seems so...so lowan. Ok, we're up on a mountain where bad weather can occur quickly, so let's build a shelter for each of you. Good idea, right?

And think back to the Louisville street corner. Who was transfigured in that scene? Merton? Perhaps. But he saw the luminosity of each passer-by. None probably realized their own spiritual glow, but had they perceived Merton's, they might have gotten a glimpse of their own.

So perhaps one of the lessons of the Transfiguration is a reminder for us to do our spiritual homework, so that when these moments happen we can be open to them. We can keep our eyes open for those who have been transfigured, whether living or dead. Their shining examples can change

us. Why else would countless people make pilgrimages to that street corner in Louisville if not to seek what Merton had seen?

So be alert. Keep your eyes and heart open. Resurrection and transfiguration are happening all around us—and also within us—if we just pay attention.