

BOOKS BY FENTON JOHNSON

Crossing the River: A Novel

Scissors, Paper, Rock

Geography of the Heart: A Memoir

Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey

Keeping FAITH

A SKEPTIC'S JOURNEY

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IN SEARCH OF THE UNFOUND

ON THIS PLEASANT EVENING of July 1996, the long, narrow chapter room at the rural Kentucky abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani was filled with monks. Along the right wall, under an image of the risen Christ, stood our Trappist hosts, the “white monks,” dressed in white robes covered with black hooded scapulars and cinched at their waists with broad leather belts. Next to them, wearing black robes, stood the Benedictines, the “black monks,” the more publicly engaged, apostolic of the Roman Catholic contemplative orders. Among these monks were scattered a few women, most dressed in the white blouse and below-the-knee gray skirt favored by many post-Vatican II sisters. Along the left wall, under a batik banner of the seated Buddha, stood the Buddhist monks, some wearing maroon trimmed with saffron, others wearing saffron trimmed with maroon. A single Japanese monk wore dove-gray robes trimmed in black and white; a single Taiwanese nun wore saffron, peach fuzz sprouting from her newly shaven head. Among these Asians mingled the American Buddhists — some wearing black Zen robes, some wearing street clothes. Some of the Asians were Americans, naturalized priests and monks whose Buddhist congregations include American Jews and Roman Catholics and Protestants. The Christians and the American Buddhists were almost all Caucasian; the Asians ranged from Japanese ivory to Sri Lankan browned butter. Timothy Kelly, abbot of Gethsemani, and the exiled Dalai Lama of Tibet stood at front center, focal point for this international convocation of Buddhist and Christian monks and lay contemplatives.

The assembly presented a picture postcard of institutionalized religion, East and West: a few men on the stage ran the show, while the women — a clear majority of those present — looked on. But one does not expect

an embrace of gender equality from religious institutions, and I settled into the territory with a familiar interior sigh. I had been invited as a writer, which is to say as a kind of anthropologist whose job is to reserve judgment and simply observe. A significant aspect of that observation is to learn and follow local customs, and so when the time came to perform the first Buddhist bows, I followed the example of my neighbor and bent — although not too deeply; I saw myself as a skeptic and an American, inheritor and expression of centuries of Enlightenment rationalism. *All people are created equal; liberty, equality, fraternity* — this was my creed and my mantra, and I was not much given to bowing to anyone, whether to the pope or the Dalai Lama. But the writer does what he must do for the sake of the story, and so when the Dalai Lama passed I imitated my neighbor, ducking my head and joining my palms.

Then Abbot Kelly took the microphone and called upon us to pray, opening with the sign of the cross. Here I had no need to look to a neighbor; I have known this script since before memory — the fingers to the forehead, the heart, the left then the right shoulder, a simple gesture I once inhabited as easily as lifting my hand to wave goodbye . . . and I could not do it. All around me Roman Catholics made the sign of the cross, but my right hand remained at my side. The abbot's prayer was brief; before long he closed it by repeating the gesture. Again my hands hung stubbornly at my sides, dead weight. Even for the sake of the story, the body refused to go where the mind willed.

Here among the believers, seated at the foot of the bloody Christ for longer than any time since the Lenten vigils of my childhood, I was stunned by the anger that simmered up from some repressed place. I was possessed by anger — the pit in the gut, the quickening pulse; I recognized the signs. I was angry at the institution of the church, any church; angry at myself for letting it get to me (*all that therapy for nothing*); angry at being so alone in my anger.

Or so I thought. Then across the following six days of this convocation of Christians and Buddhists from North America, Asia, and Europe, most of whom had dedicated their lives to contemplation, I discovered one word that arose so often that finally conferees agreed to a moratorium on the subject, and still it returned: anger.

Evidently I was not as alone as I had thought.

What was the source of this anger? The ready and obvious answer

would be sexual repression or its aftereffects, but I am suspicious of ready and obvious answers. Desire in all its manifestations lies at the heart of what it means to be human — I know this from experience, and I would shortly learn that Buddhism posits as much in its first, foundational principle. But desire assumes many guises. Again and again the convocation participants returned to the subject of anger, but they were discussing a symptom, not a cause; the cause might be more accurately described as *longing*, with anger the result of its frustration.

But what were we longing for, and why was it yet unfound? I could not then address that question, but thanks to those hands, rigid at my sides, I understood this much: anger had taken up residence in my house, where it had dwelt long enough to take control. And — child of Western psychology — I understood that I must engage that anger if I was to find peace.

This particular leg of my journey began a few months earlier in my Kentucky hometown at the Sherwood Inn, the hotel-tavern acquired by my great-grandfather Thomas Hardin Johnson in the mid-1870s and run by my family in the century-plus since. On a bright spring afternoon in March 1996 I was visiting for the celebration of my mother's eightieth birthday and standing on the Sherwood porch when my aunt poked her head out the door to tell me there was a knock at the back door.

At the Sherwood "a knock at the back door" usually means one thing, so I cut through the bar, grabbed a couple of beers, and went out back to greet one of the monks from the nearby Trappist monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, a crow's mile across the Kentucky hills. Brother Paul Quenon, tall, ascetically thin, and slightly grizzled as befits a poet-monk, had hiked over the steep hills that the locals call "the Knobs" to let me know that in the approaching summer Gethsemani would host an international convocation of Buddhist and Christian monks and lay contemplatives, with the Dalai Lama of Tibet in attendance. Almost thirty years in its ripening, the Gethsemani Encounter was the fruit of a 1968 meeting between the Dalai Lama and Thomas Merton, author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the best-selling autobiography of Merton's journey toward joining the Gethsemani community as a Trappist monk.

I did not know Brother Paul well. We first met because someone recommended his poetry to me and I was curious — what would it be like to be a poet inside the enclosure? He'd joined Gethsemani in the early 1960s,

had Merton for his novicemaster, and taken solemn vows in 1968. But Paul was among the more private monks, not one who came to town to buy hammers or nails and who occasionally visited community families. On that particular spring day he wasn't delivering pressing news — a thunderstorm or a wrong turn on the path and I'd never have received it. I'd have been back in San Francisco, struggling with my next book, which I was certain would be a novel.

I accepted Brother Paul's invitation to attend the Gethsemani Encounter partly as a means of dodging the looming terror of beginning that novel. I'd been considering creating a Buddhist doctor and a Trappist monk as its principal characters, but I knew little about Buddhism and not much more about monastic practice. What better way to learn about these, I told myself, than to spend a few months researching an article about the contemplative life?

Years later I see with the crystalline vision of hindsight that my decision to attend the Encounter was not a casual detour but another step in an unfolding path. After all, my fate is so common the French assign it a name — *le donné*, the youngest child who is given to the church. Until recent times the progression among sons was clear and unyielding: the oldest male inherited the property; the second went to the military; the third went to the government; the fourth went to the church. Ninth of nine children, fourth of four boys, bookish, homosexual, I had "religious orders" all but engraved on my forehead; I was destined for the church.

But I also came of age in the 1960s, those tumultuous years in which all traditions were open for questioning and in many cases dismissal. For reasons this journey will bring me to reconsider, I determined early on never to set foot in a church except to please my mother — and sometimes not then.

A visit with American Christian and Buddhist monks would provide a quick look at the road not taken — that was how I justified my decision to attend the Encounter. I would go as a tourist, someone who rents a car, checks into a hotel, spends a day or two driving around, and returns home filled with tales about the quaint and charming ways "they" do things. I'll learn Buddhism in a few months, I thought, pick up a few stories from the monks, and combine these for a quick article. Then I'll get back to the novel and my comfortable life in my beloved San Francisco, city of self-satisfaction.

But one embarks on an interior journey at peril of one's whole way of being. What I'd planned as a quick week's visit turned into a cross-country journey through the briars and thistles of faith and (its traveling companion) desire, with no compass save for an inquiring but ignorant heart. What follows is a chronicle of a skeptic's journey into the wilderness, a casual excursion that transformed itself into a search for what it means to have and to keep faith.