

# Shade

## *A Letter From Gettysburg*

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*Dead soldier and shot-battered trees, Culp's Hill, Gettysburg, 1863.*

*I tell myself that in times like these there has to be something for which one is willing to get shot and for which, in all probability, one is actually going to get shot.*

— Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

*“So I will disappear,”* said Thomas Merton, concluding his address to the International Monastic Conference in Bangkok on December 10, 1968. Merton, a Trappist monk and writer, planned to take an afternoon nap before a panel discussion that evening. He walked back to his guest cottage in the sweltering midday heat, took a shower, and, while standing in his bare feet on a tile floor, reached to turn on an improperly wired electric fan. The end came for him with a sustained jolt of direct current, at about 2 P.M. local time. He was fifty-three years old.

I thought of Merton the day before my sixty-fifth birthday, in 2005, while standing barefoot on a wobbly chair to change a light bulb over the kitchen sink in my rented house in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. A rusted, poorly installed socket was making the task difficult. As I coaxed the old bulb loose, my mind drifted from Merton’s tragic fate to a discussion I’d had during a family get-together sixteen years earlier.

That winter of 1989, Bill McKibben’s book *The End of Nature* had been making waves by predicting the depletion of the ozone layer, the warming of the planet, and widespread species extinctions — shocking revelations at the time. My seventy-eight-year-old mother, after hearing my agitated reiteration of McKibben’s statistics, shoved aside the vegetables she was preparing and tearfully asked, “Why is it that, of all the billions of people who’ve lived on the earth, we are the ones who must witness the time of the end?” I put my arm around her and made light of the subject, joking that we had at *least* six months before the end. But my eighty-year-old father, who had also read McKibben’s book, did not conspire with me to be lighthearted for my mother’s sake. “What makes me sad,” he said, “is that we can’t take with us into old age and death the assumption that nature, as we’ve always known it, will survive. *That*, it seems to me, is a first.”

I changed the kitchen light bulb without incident and turned sixty-five the next day. Life goes on, both within me and around me, but I am left holding this intuition of The End.

*I didn’t learn about* the tree-cutting program at Gettysburg National Military Park until I saw early evidence of its implementation. Just north of the hill known as Little Round Top, more than a hundred large trees — maples, oaks, tulip trees, mulberries, magnolias, cedars, hickories, and ash — were felled and hauled away in a matter of weeks. The sudden and seemingly pointless cutting was deeply disturbing to me. When I walked the former wood lot just after the logging machinery had left, I had to choke back rage at the sight of the low-cut stumps, many of them two and three feet in diameter, and some as much as five feet across. Left standing for the pleasure of visitors to the national park were exactly fourteen eight-inch-diameter ash trees, their leaves shot through with disease, their bark scraped by logging machinery — scrawny,

wobbly-looking, giraffe-like stalks that seemed puzzled by their own survival.

Tourists can now rest assured that no trees will stop them from envisioning what the soldiers of Battery C, First New York Light Artillery, Fifth Corps, saw on July 2, 1863. Which is precisely what the park service intended: “to rehabilitate the Gettysburg battlefield so that the features that were significant to the outcome of the battle . . . more nearly reflect their historic conditions.”

When this logging project is complete, a forested area equivalent to 526 football fields will have been “restored” to match photographs taken in July 1863. At the time of this writing, 147 acres of woods have been cleared, and the remaining 429 acres are legally doomed. Any trees that have grown on the battlefield in the years since the Civil War will be removed; trees that were present in those days but have been cut or have died in the interim will be “replaced.” The work has been swift, efficient, and neat. In a year no one will be able to tell those woods existed.

The lovely hilltop road leading to the Eternal Light Peace Memorial, dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the battle, has been stripped bare of the dozens of old oaks that once lined it. Restored to its original state, the once-wooded hilltop itself now resembles not an arboreal amphitheater positioned for a spectacular view to the west and south, but a badly scalped bump of land hosting a stark granite platform. As a bonus, visitors can enjoy an unobstructed view, to the east and southeast, of the Giant supermarket, the Days Inn, the Hilton Garden Inn, the U-Haul franchise, the North Gettysburg Shopping Center, and the Gettysburg College sports facilities. The now-unfiltered din of traffic from surrounding highways makes it nearly impossible to conjure up the nineteenth century.

After five years of planning and protest, the forces in favor of historical restoration have prevailed over those who regard the stately woods as reassuring evidence that America has healed from its contentious history — not to mention those who simply cannot fathom the wholesale slaughter of hundred-year-old trees for *any* reason. The argument is over, and what I write here is not an attempt to persuade but an elegy for the kind of healing spirit that gave rise to this place.

Everyone understands that in the larger scheme of devastation caused by development and suburban sprawl, this particular alteration of the environment is relatively benign. The woods are not being replaced by shopping malls, after all. And at least the battlefield cannot be sold to developers. Opposing camps in this conflict have withdrawn and retrenched for now, but the deep and irreconcilable divisions between them remain.

*I teach composition* and creative writing at Gettysburg College. Sometimes I illustrate the process of beginning an essay or story by drawing a thundercloud on the chalkboard and sketching the start of a zigzag lightning strike: a series of unlinked dashes descending from the cloud at forty-five-degree angles to each other. Scientists call this a “stepped leader.” You

can't see a stepped leader, I tell my students. Those unlinked dashes represent intuition, the first tentative ideas for an essay, usually nebulous and vague, and as invisible to a reader as a stepped leader is to the naked eye. To produce visible lightning, the stepped leader must join with an upward-reaching "ground leader." (I draw a little line from the ground to the lowest dash.) When the two leaders connect . . . *zap!* Lightning rushes *up* from the ground, not down from the cloud. Let grounded detail illuminate your intuition, I tell them.

Many cultures equate lightning with intuition. For the Lakota, for example, if you dream of lightning, you are likely what they call a *heyoka* — an intuitive who experiences brilliant flashes of inspiration, but rarely understands their source. *Heyokas* are the irreverent contrarians, the sacred clowns who do everything backward during formal ceremonies. At a sun dance a *heyoka* might pretend to piss on the medicine man's altar, or sashay around like a woman, or splash his face with steaming hot water to cool off. *Heyokas* wear black-and-white costumes, and everything they do provokes laughter tinged with fear.

The Lakota believe that *heyokas* can cross the boundaries that exist between human beings and read people's minds. "Be careful not to look me in the eye," a *heyoka* once told me during my stay at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. I asked him what he meant and then made the mistake of glancing at him while waiting for an answer. Only when I tried to tear my eyes away did I understand that he had somehow held me paralyzed with his gaze, as effectively as if I'd touched a bare electrical wire.

Shortly after that incident, two young Lakota, Mike and Tony, visited me at my apartment in New York City. I took them to the Statue of Liberty, and we got stuck in a long line waiting for the ferry. The captive crowd had attracted the usual array of street performers, one of whom — a man with dreadlocks — followed hapless pedestrians and mimicked the way they walked. He had an uncanny ability to duplicate the posture and pace of another individual and exaggerate the single element that seemed to define that person: the slouch, the urgency, the shyness, the arrogance. His imitations were hilarious, but they were also disturbing. I glanced at Mike and Tony to see their reactions; they both casually nodded their approval and said in unison, "Heyoka."

When I was a young man and insecure in my own skin, I used to compensate for my fear of lightning by getting all pumped up and challenging it to strike me as I pranced around soaking wet under a flashing sky. You wouldn't want to do that where Mike and Tony live. Out there, the many-fingered lightning sizzles across the Great Plains, striking indiscriminately at anything higher than the prairie grass. It's enough to make you run to your car and whimper like a dog.

In Gettysburg lightning will strike a monument once in a while, but mostly it's the trees that take the hits. Once, while walking on a service road, I found a ten-foot-long splinter of bark and pulp that had been blasted from a nearby oak just minutes earlier. A surprising number of trees in the park bear the scars of lightning strikes. Some survive, while the others

attract all sorts of insects and serve as feeding grounds for the population of redheaded woodpeckers in the battlefield woods.

*If Thomas Merton* screamed for help as he died, no one seems to have heard him. His Thai hosts found him lying on the tile floor, pinned beneath the fan, its blades still whirling in their cage. That was the same year Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, and some speculated that Merton, too, had been murdered for his progressive beliefs.

I knew almost nothing about Merton at the time. His early autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, sat unopened on my bookshelf throughout the sixties. I don't know why I never got around to reading it; maybe because I wasn't Catholic, or because too much was happening in the public domain for me to be interested in the life story of a contemplative monk. John F. Kennedy's assassination had produced in me a strange addiction to news of chaos and turmoil. It seemed as if every time you turned around, some well-known person was getting shot. Along with Martin Luther King Jr. and the two Kennedy brothers, there were such disparate figures as black militant leader Malcolm X, President Diem of South Vietnam, pop artist Andy Warhol, and revolutionary Che Guevara.

I was driving a taxicab in New York City on the fourth of April, 1968, when a passenger told me that King had been gunned down on a balcony in Memphis. I remember feeling a wave of nausea. If there were people out there willing and able to kill our most visionary political and religious leaders, what did that say about the future of democracy? I drove up to Harlem and began giving people rides for free, my meter off. For a brief time that evening, everything seemed almost thrillingly clear: For all of us there was now a common enemy. Murderous racism had shown its face, and I could help beat the enemy by demonstrating my solidarity, as a white man, with my black neighbors. Then an off-duty police detective jumped into the front seat of my cab and ordered me to drive him to the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. By the time we arrived, a small riot was in bloom. After I let the detective out, a group of young people splintered off from the crowd and stormed my cab, pelting it with bottles. I ducked low behind the steering wheel and ran red lights as I sped away.

That same evening, exactly two months before he was gunned down himself, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, on a presidential-campaign stop in Indianapolis, addressed a crowd of mostly black inner-city residents. He told them that he, too, had lost a brother to a white man's bullet. He quoted the Greek playwright Aeschylus in an attempt to universalize the suffering and pain, and he suggested that everyone go home and pray. Riots shook more than a hundred American cities that night, but not Indianapolis.

I had worked as an advance man for Bobby Kennedy during his 1964 U.S. Senate race. President Kennedy had been assassinated in his motorcade in Dallas nine months earlier, but that did not deter Bobby from riding slowly in open convertibles along avenues and side streets all over New York State. I was

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sometimes obliged to ride with him, hanging on to his belt from behind while he leaned into the crowd to shake hands. At other times I would walk along beside the car to protect people from being run over.

In Buffalo, when our campaign coincided for a day with that of President Lyndon B. Johnson, the head of the president's Secret Service detail asked me what kind of security we were traveling with for Bobby. He blanched when I told him that all we had was an on-leave New York City police detective armed with a .38 caliber pistol.

"I think I should tell you," he said, "that all the people we've rounded up seem to be after your candidate — not the president."

"All the people?" I said.

"Yeah," he answered, "they're coming out of the woodwork. We just caught some guy with a rifle lying in the high grass along the thruway."

It must have taken an iron will (the word *courage* doesn't entirely explain it; nor does the phrase *death wish*) for Bobby Kennedy to ride in an open motorcade and wade into crowds of admirers. He knew the risk. But he took seriously (and had copied into his notebook) Albert Camus's admonition that "to know your own death is nothing." In the early hours of June 5, 1968, about thirty seconds after a .22 caliber bullet lodged in Bobby's brain — and only a few seconds before he lost consciousness for good — he lay on the kitchen floor at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, looking up at his wife, Ethel, who cradled his bleeding head in her hands.

"Is everyone else all right?" he asked.

As I write these words, news drifts in through my window from a neighbor's radio that President George W. Bush plans to visit a training center for border-security guards in Texas today — another of his prepackaged appearances in front of government employees, calculated to strengthen his political base. When was the last time a political figure thought about anyone but himself and his party? And what is the consequence of this self-serving political charade? Perhaps it can be discerned in American democracy's great shadow, which we have now projected onto Iraq: civil war.

*(end of excerpt)*