

Treasure box: A beloved monk's collection

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

When I was a child I knew all the dips in the asphalt in my neighborhood, all the places where, if I pedaled really fast, I could for one blissful moment—down, up!—feel as if I were flying.

I remember riding my bike one bright fall day to meet my dad as he pedaled home from work on his black Schwinn. I took the route that led me through all my favorite spots: the dips, the bumps, the curves. When my dad came into view I saw a cardboard box balanced on his handlebars, and he was trying to tell me something. “A treasure!” I heard him shout when I got a little closer. “I’ve got a treasure!”

The treasure came from his dear friend Matthew Kelty, a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. In those days, the early 1970s, Matthew ran a small, experimental monastery for Gethsemani in Oxford, North Carolina. Before he became a monk he had been a missionary in Papua, New Guinea, and he had dreamed of returning there one day as a hermit. When a new abbot gave him permission, Matthew had a ring engraved with *O Beata Solitudo* on the outside and *Matthew Kelty—Gethsemani* on the inside. He booked passage on a container ship from New York to Sydney via the Panama Canal and boxed up his sermons, retreat talks, letters and notes and gave them to my dad. My dad was ecstatic.

So was I. Matthew’s friendship was a treasure at the heart of our family. In his leather jacket and boots, Matthew would ride his motorcycle from Oxford to my hometown to speak with Dad’s students about life with God. I would wander out of my bedroom in the morning and find him having breakfast in our kitchen or come home from school to find him talking in the backyard with a group of students. He would welcome me into whatever was going on, and he always made me laugh. He still does. At 94 he is one of the wittiest people I know.

I spent hours reading through Matthew’s box. Inside I found a newspaper clipping of the now-famous photograph of a young Vietnamese girl, her clothes burned off in a

napalm attack. Above the photo a young Catholic activist, a frequent visitor to the Oxford monastery, had written: FATHER MATTHEW PLEASE WALK TO WASHINGTON.

Matthew wrote in his newsletter that when the monastery peacocks screamed in the night, he heard the cries of Vietnamese children. In 1972, at the age of 56, Matthew walked 235 miles from North Carolina to Washington, D.C., to protest the war. His box was full of letters from peace activists. Some had ripped their draft cards into confetti. Some had received visits from the FBI. Some were on hunger strikes. From their letters, I learned what passionate commitment sounded like.

Matthew believed that the one true purpose of monastic life was to discover reality. Monks, he wrote, “want to know and experience what it is to be human, all the way in, all the way down.” I found in the box a definition of work: “to make something useful with one’s hands, sell it for a fair price and keep the whole thing cool and quiet.” I learned that the monastery subscribed to magazines “so that a monk can keep very much alive to what is going on and respond to the situation by the kind of life he lives.” I discovered that even monks get mad at each other and that Matthew wanted the Oxford monks to confront their disagreements rather than paper them over with an unreal peace.

Every shred of paper in that box was marked by the intimacy with which Matthew lived with Jesus: “With Christ I love my brother and bear the heat and suffer pain and know heartache, endure loneliness, and keep silent, suffer rebuke and quench anger. With Christ I walk the earth and count the stars at night,” and not just with Christ, but with everyone. If we do these things with Christ, I learned from Matthew, we do them with all human beings.

What did I understand of any of this as a child sitting cross-legged on the floor? I don’t know; I only remember how drawn I was to Matthew’s box. Reading through those papers and letters and clippings, I could feel my heart lifting. It was better than anything I could do on my bike.

In these difficult days, when so much has disappeared into the abyss of our economy, it’s consoling to remember how much real treasure was packed into that one cardboard box. Nearly everything I still care about today was in it, and I wonder: am I filling the box of my life with treasures that would lift a child’s heart if she rummaged through it? Do I have any treasure to offer that would help her feel the world opening and opening on every side?