

A Single Sacred Community: An Interview with Charles Brandt – Hermit, Bookbinder, Ecologist

Conducted by Donald Grayston and David Chang

Charles Brandt is a Roman Catholic priest and hermit, a bookbinder and paper conservator, and an award-winning ecologist. Since 1965, he has lived the hermit life, mostly at Merton House, his hermitage at Black Creek, British Columbia (a few miles north of Courtenay on Vancouver Island). When working elsewhere as a conservator, he would make his urban apartment his hermitage, always intending during those years to return to Black Creek. Now 93, he says this: “I’m looking towards eternity now. . . . I’m not going anywhere. I love this spot. I’m permanent. I feel steady, in a sense, with life, and with my calling.” He is a beautiful old man.

Before the interview, he sent us a “Time Line,” which provided us with many possibilities for questions. (This is why some questions in the interview appear without antecedent in the discussion; their antecedents are in the Time Line.) Born in Kansas City, Missouri, February 19, 1923, of Danish-English heritage, the child of Alvin Rudolph Brandt-Yde and Anna Chester Bridges, his family moved to a farm not far from the city when he was five years old. Between high school graduation in 1941 and 1951, he undertook post-secondary studies, interrupted by four years (1942-46) in the US Air Force. He encountered the Episcopal Church during his military service (the family was Methodist), and was confirmed in the Episcopal Church while at Cornell University. Over the next four years, he explored Anglican religious communities, and was ordained an Anglican priest in England in 1952. During this time of searching, however, he had been questioning the validity of Anglican ordinations; and in January 1956, at the age of 33, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

That Easter he visited the Abbey of Gethsemani and met Thomas Merton, who encouraged his contemplative vocation. In September 1956 he entered the Cistercian Abbey of New Melleray in Dubuque, Iowa. He remained there canonically for nine years, but without making final monastic profession, and continuing to explore other expressions of religious life. In 1965, he moved to Vancouver Island, the same year that Merton entered the hermitage at Gethsemani. Received there into the diocese of Victoria by Bishop Remi de Roo, he was ordained priest as a

hermit-monk on November 21, 1966, at the age of 43, with his parents and sister in attendance. (Readers of Merton will note in the interview a number of points at which he connected with Merton.)

From 1973 until 1984, he lived away from Black Creek, undertaking advanced studies in bookbinding and archival paper conservation in the United States, Switzerland, Italy and England, then working in this field in Canada. Having returned to his hermitage in July 1984, he earns his living by bookbinding, and has also been active in ecological restoration work on the Oyster River, where his hermitage is located. He has received wide recognition for this, and a number of environmental awards. When people express a wish to keep in touch with him, he adds their names to his listserv, and regularly sends them photographs of birds, animals or plants from his immediate environs. He welcomes local people to visit him at the hermitage, and to share his life of contemplation and love of the natural order. He has arranged that on his death, the property will go to a nature trust, and the hermitage will be available for another hermit.

This interview took place on Friday, February 12, 2016.

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Donald Grayston: First of all, thank you very much for giving us your time, and let's cut right to the chase: why be a hermit? How do you explain yourself to yourself?

Charles Brandt: Part of it, I think, is tradition. You know I was a Trappist monk for eight years at New Melleray,¹ and I couldn't quite bring myself to making final vows. During Vatican II [1962-65], monks were trying to discover their roots. So there was a kind of a movement among the Trappists to explore their roots, and they discovered the hermits. We went back, just trying to discover our roots as monks.

DG: That was then, as the teenagers say, and this is now: so why be a hermit in the twenty-first century?

CB: It still has its place, and I think that anybody who prays benefits the whole body of Christ. Prayer touches everybody. The person next to me is affected by whatever I do. If I pray, that helps them, and it also helps the natural world. I'm very keen on the natural world, and I think that the human community and the natural world must go into the future as a single sacred community or perish in the desert, as Thomas Berry² says.

1. New Melleray Abbey, located near Dubuque, Iowa, founded in 1849 from Mount Melleray Abbey in Ireland.

2. Thomas Berry (1914–2009), a Catholic priest of the Passionist Order, cultural

Praying, living a life of solitude and stillness, quiet, is good for my soul; it's good for everybody, I think.

David Chang: Did your interest in spirituality and your interest in the natural world – matters of ecology – did they always go hand in hand, or did one come first and feed into the other?

CB: I was a Boy Scout, and I spent some time in the summer at Osceola Scout Camp in Missouri, where I was called into the tribe of Mic-O-Say.³ The Osage Nation⁴ lived in that part of Missouri; they [the Scouts] had braves and runners, and they called them Mic-O-Say. You would come down as a camper, and if you did well, and showed exemplary character, you were called into the Mic-O-Say; and so I was. Roe Bartle, the mayor of Kansas City, was the chief, and said to me, “You’ve been called, you do not know why, nor will you ever know, but thus far you’ve been considered worthy”; and then he gave me something to drink, bitter with the sweet, turned me around several times, and told me to keep absolute silence for 24 hours. Then I was to report to Blue-Eyed Otter, the medicine man of the tribe. He told me to go out and sleep in the wild, and to make medicine, and to take vows to God, to [my] mother, and [my] country. In terms of country, I wasn’t thinking of Missouri or America; I thought of the earth, and that was a revelation to me. So it was through birding and Scouting that I got into contact with the natural world, and it always seemed to go hand-in-hand with what I was thinking about. And when I was about five years old, we moved out of Kansas City to a farming area, in the countryside, in the wilderness. Every tree had a bird’s nest in it. It was amazing to me, my real first contact with the natural world, moving from the city to a farming area.

DG: So it was important for you to grow up on a farm, and then have this

historian and eco-theologian (although cosmologist and geologist – or “Earth scholar” – were his preferred descriptors), is considered a leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin. Brandt’s approach, strongly akin to Berry’s, advances the concept of sacred or sacramental commons to frame the human relationship to the earth (see his article: <https://throughtheluminarylens.wordpress.com/2014/12/01/father-charles-brandt-the-land-as-sacred-commons/>).

3. The Tribe of Mic-O-Say is an honor society maintained by two local councils of the Boy Scouts of America, Heart of America Council and Pony Express Council; it is not a program of the National Council of the BSA. Mic-O-Say’s ceremonies, customs and traditions are based on the traditions of the Osage people. Founded in 1925, it still functions.

4. The Osage are a Midwestern Native American nation of the Great Plains which historically ruled much of Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas. Forced onto reservations in the nineteenth century, they are now based in Oklahoma.

exposure through Scouting.

CB: Very much so. And were you asking about the natural world and the spiritual?

DC: Yes.

CB: When I was quite young, I felt that we should have contact with God, that we should be able to communicate with God. Nobody told me anything about that, it was just kind of an intuition. I would ask pastors, do you know God? And it was kind of embarrassing, you know, it was sort of hem and haw, and I took it for granted that they should be able to communicate with God.

DG: Do you know *The Way of a Pilgrim*?⁵

CB: Yes.

DG: The pilgrim goes to his priest and then the bishop and neither knows what to say; finally he meets somebody who teaches him the Jesus prayer. You had a similar experience.

CB: Then somebody told me about *The Man Nobody Knows*, by Bruce Barton;⁶ and it was the first time I realized that Christianity was more than just an ethical thing, that Jesus was really Son of Man, Son of God, he *was* God, and that was a revelation to me that he was divine. He never says he's God [laughs], but that's the theology . . .

DG: Divinity and humanity together.

CB: That's right.

DG: You did tell us in your Time Line that you started reading Thoreau⁷ when you were 13. Now, what kind of a kid reads Thoreau at the age of 13?

CB: My mother's brother's wife, my Aunt Hildred, did book reviews for *The Kansas City Star*. She did one on *Walden*,⁸ and I read it, and I

5. A classic of the Russian spiritual tradition. The best current edition is *The Pilgrim's Tale*, edited and introduced by Aleksei Pentkovsky, translated by T. Allan Smith, with a Preface by Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

6. Bruce Fairchild Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925). Written by an advertising executive, it presents Jesus as the "Founder of Modern Business," in an effort to make the Christian story accessible to businessmen of the time. It was one of the best-selling non-fiction books of the twentieth century.

7. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was an American author, poet, philosopher, abolitionist, naturalist, tax resister, development critic, surveyor and historian.

8. *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854): Thoreau's

got interested then in Henry David Thoreau. He went to the woods to find out what life was all about, and that was really quite exciting, and a real challenge for me; and I wanted to do something like that. That was probably my first inroad into the hermit life. Then again in high school, we had to do a project on what was our vocation; and I wanted to be a fire-watcher, to live in a tower. So again, I guess that was sort of leaning toward a solitary life.

DG: Which was something that Merton discussed with Dom James about doing at one point.⁹

CB: That's right. Dom James thought that would give him kind of a footing.

DC: I want to ask a question about Thoreau. The first time I read Thoreau, I had a particular view of him. A couple of years later, I read him again, and I appreciated him differently. Did you find that? Or, have you revisited him?

CB: I think the big thing about Henry David Thoreau – I've been to Walden Pond, and I saw where the hermitage was – was that he went to the woods, and gave us a deeper appreciation of the natural world, what's out there. We take it for granted, when they [the colonists] first came to America, they came to use it, and to conquer the First Nations¹⁰ people, and to use the land. But Henry David Thoreau went out just to appreciate what was there. I think that's perhaps his great contribution, and I think that's a big thing we could do today: show people the natural world so they fall in love with it. That's the only way we're going to save the world: to appreciate it. It's sacred, and we only love what is sacred. I think Thoreau helped us, along with John Muir¹¹ and Emily Dickinson.¹²

DG: In your second year in high school, you became quite interested in bird study, and you had a very special experience with a stream of warblers.

CB: It was Sunday morning. My Dad was not very appreciative of my not going to church, but I really became interested in bird study, and

best-known book.

9. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 286-88.

10. The Canadian term for those whom Americans refer to as Native Americans.

11. John Muir (1838-1914), also known as "John of the Mountains," was a Scottish-American naturalist, author, environmental philosopher and early advocate of preservation of wilderness in the United States. He was instrumental in the designation of Yosemite as a national park.

12. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), notable American poet.

I was out along the Blue River. I saw birds of different colors, maybe five or seven different species. These were warblers of different species which migrate though in the spring, different species each with its own coloration, oftentimes moving through together. It was a quite amazing thing to me that that should exist, and that I should see that, and it was kind of a breakthrough for me. It was an experience that lifted me out of the ordinary run of life.

DG: After a year at William Jewell,¹³ you went to the University of Missouri,¹⁴ and met the son of Aldo Leopold.¹⁵

CB: That's right. I finished the first year at William Jewell, and then realized that my real interest was in natural history and biology; and at the University of Missouri, they had a course in wildlife conservation, taught by Dr. Rudolf Bennett. I wasn't a graduate student, I was just in second-year university, and one of my compatriots in my rooming house was Starker Leopold. He was studying wild turkey down in the Ozarks in Missouri, and I would see him from time to time at breakfast. I didn't get to really know him, but later on, looking back, Starker was quite an outstanding person.

DC: He never mentioned anything about his father during that time?

CB: No. His father died in 1948, and his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, was published a year later.

DG: Aldo Leopold spent a lot of time observing birds. Do you still do bird-sound recording at all?

CB: I don't, but I have a friend in the valley who does. You need some really special equipment for that. At Cornell, we had a sound truck with a parabolic reflector. When I was at Cornell, I won a scholarship in bird-sound recording. When I was in the Air Force, I learned to build radios, so I did a lot of work with preamplifiers, built a couple of those. That was my primary work for the bird-sound recording at Cornell. At the time, they had finished pretty much all the birds, and they were getting into recording amphibians, voices of the night, frogs and toads and crickets

13. William Jewell College is a private, four-year liberal arts college in Liberty, Missouri. Founded in 1849, it was associated with the Missouri Baptist Convention until 2003, when it became an independent institution.

14. The University of Missouri was founded in 1839 in Columbia, where its flagship campus remains. Charles Brandt attended its Kansas City campus.

15. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was an American author, ecologist, forester, conservationist and environmentalist. A professor at the University of Wisconsin, he is best known for his book *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

and things like that.

DG: That's what Merton calls "the huge chorus of living beings." It's a wonderful passage, in which he describes the sounds of the night.¹⁶

DC: What is it about birds that provide an entry point to a larger ecological consciousness?

CB: There's something really magical about birds. The fact is, they can fly, they can move. That's really an enchanting thing, but I think once you get interested in any part of natural history, then it opens you up to everything, to rivers and trees and plants.

DG: Because it's all connected.

CB: It's all connected . . . our community here by extension includes plants and soil and all sentient life, so it's everything that's connected.

DG: Do the Buddhists have something to teach us about that?

CB: Oh, absolutely. What do they call it? . . . dharmakaya?¹⁷ . . . everything is connected, everything is compassion, and everything is emptiness,¹⁸ but I think the big thing that Thomas Berry – I've read a lot of Thomas Berry – would say is that the big thing with the Buddhists is their respect for life; that all life is precious, and that's really influenced me. I'm a fisherman, and I used to do fishing, catch and release, and I've given that up now, because I realized that once that hook gets into that mouth, they feel some pain, and the Buddhists want all pain to cease, all suffering. Thomas Berry was quite keen on Buddhists because of that.

DG: When I was in India, I met Chatral Rinpoche; and every year, he had a ceremony where he would release fish, not having caught them, just farmed them.

DC: They were otherwise destined for somebody's plate.

DG: Freeing the fish. He was noted for that.

CB: Did Thomas Merton meet Chatral Rinpoche?¹⁹

16. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 360.

17. In the glossary of *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), dharmakaya is defined as "the cosmical body of the Buddha, the essence of all beings" (372); subsequent references will be cited as "*AJ*" parenthetically in the text.

18. "The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (*AJ* 235).

19. See *AJ* 142-44 for Merton's encounter with Chatral.

DG: Yes. He talked with him for two hours.

CB: Yes, I remember now. He thought he was really an outstanding person.

DG: Yes. Much more so than the Dalai Lama. Everybody thinks of the Dalai Lama as he is today, but then he was very young. I asked Chatral Rinpoche's assistant, who was a Canadian, that when Chatral Rinpoche told Merton that he, Chatral, was on the edge of the great realization, was he speaking the literal truth, or was he just saying that to be polite to Merton? And he said, he was just being polite.²⁰

CB: Really.

DG: Yes. He didn't want to discourage Merton by placing himself ahead of Merton on the spiritual path. But back to you. You entered active service in the US Army Corps, and later the Air Force, and you had a number of military experiences, including bombardier training.

CB: I was a navigator officially, but I did have bombardier training. You had to have bombardiering to be a navigator, so you could understand what the bombardier was [doing] . . .

DG: How do you feel about that now, looking back on that military period?

CB: You know, I never thought much about it. The war was going on when I was in high school. My father was an officer in the Air Force and I'd hear a little bit about the war. I never took it seriously; I never thought about it. Went to William Jewell College, went to the University of Missouri, joined the reserve corps, then I was drafted. I finally wound up training as a navigator, and then about halfway through the course, I began to think, well what is this about war? Is this really right? Should we be dropping these bombs? So I went in to see the chaplain – and this wasn't really down on my record, I know that. I said I may be a conscientious objector, I don't really know, I haven't really thought it out. So the chaplain said well, you go and think about it for a while. Then, I was shipped out to gunnery training and then finally navigation training. Things were really moving right along, and I really didn't have time [to think about it]. Today, I don't say I'm a conscientious objector, but I'm nonviolent. That's what Merton was. Merton was nonviolent. That's where I think I would stand. Merton might say there might be a necessity to take a stand, but he was really nonviolent. So that's where I stand, and I would be there from the very beginning, I think, had I realized what was taking place.

20. See *AJ* 143; the conversation about this was with Konchok Tashi (Steve Brown), December 12, 2000.

DG: Then you encountered the Episcopal Church.

CB: Yes, in Clovis, New Mexico. I picked up a copy of *The Clovis News Journal*, and there was a column in there called “The Parson.” It was written by Ross Calvin, who was the rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Clovis.²¹ He was describing a trip he had made to a place called Tucumcari, a town in New Mexico, and some of the plants and birds he had seen there; and I thought, well here was a pastor who knows something about science. I was trying to bring the two together and relate the two, so I went in to see him, and met his wife, and had a lot of good conversations. I sat through a confirmation class with him, but I wasn’t confirmed. Ross Calvin had been a Harvard professor in English. He had to go to New Mexico because of his health. Then I went from there after I was discharged, to Cornell, in Ithaca, and started going to St. John’s Episcopal Church; and then I was confirmed. I went to Cornell because of ornithology; they had a department. Then the first year, I decided I wasn’t going to go ahead with ornithology, and I didn’t know what I was going to do. I talked to the pastor and said, I think I might have a vocation. So the second summer I was at Cornell I spent at St. Barnabas Brotherhood.²² That was founded by Gouverneur P. Hance, the uncle of Dr. Ross Calvin’s wife, and they had told me about him. There was a deacon there from Philadelphia, Francis P. Voelcker, making a retreat. We started talking, and he thought I was a likely candidate for the Anglican priesthood. He thought I could think abstractly.

DG: [laughs] You have to do that to be an Anglican.

CB: [laughs] That’s what he said. So, after the summer, he invited me to stop by in Philadelphia, which I did, at St. Mark’s Church, where Dr. William Dunphy was.²³ I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of him . . .

DG: No, but wasn’t that a famous Anglo-Catholic parish?

21. Ross Calvin (1889–1970), rector of St. James (1942–57), was a noted naturalist. A recent book about him is Ron Hamm, *Ross Calvin: Interpreter of the American Southwest* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2016).

22. An Episcopal religious order for lay men only, devoted to the care of “incurable” men and boys, founded in 1902 and based in Gibsonia, PA. It is no longer in existence as an order; however, the work it began has developed into the St. Barnabas Health System, also in Gibsonia. Its work includes retirement communities, assisted living communities, nursing homes, an outpatient center and a rehabilitation facility. As of 2016, it provides more than six million dollars of free care annually.

23. Ninth rector of St. Mark’s; no further information available.

CB: It was. The Wanamakers²⁴ went to church there. I met Mrs. Madelene Hart Jenkins, the wife of Judge Jenkins,²⁵ and she helped me a lot. I was thinking very seriously then, and I talked to the pastor at St. John's in Ithaca and decided that I was going to go for holy orders. Voelcker had gone to Seabury-Western,²⁶ and he thought it was a good place. I visited Seabury-Western, but Nashotah House²⁷ is out in the country, lake country, beautiful country, and that really appealed to me. I think that was the main reason I went to Nashotah House, just because of the ecology. At Nashotah they put a lot of emphasis on apostolic succession. The first time I ever heard of apostolic succession was through Dr. Calvin. I remember once talking to him about succession and bishops and he said, "I'm a priest," and I never realized the possibility of having a priesthood outside of the Roman Catholic Church. I remember walking out of the rectory – there was a hedge along that walk, and I was grabbing some of the leaves – and I said, that means I maybe have to become a Roman Catholic. I was very fearful of that, because I'd been brought up with certain prejudices against the Catholic Church, but that was the first time I ever considered the idea of becoming a Catholic, not a priest, but just a Catholic.

DG: I don't see the connection there. Calvin was an Episcopalian, and you could be a priest as an Episcopalian . . .

CB: Yes. But I had never realized there were priests outside of the Catholic Church; so when we think of priests, well, that's Catholic . . .

DG: That took your mind to the Roman Catholic Church.

CB: I made that jump, I don't know why.

DG: So, 1948: you were 25, and you decided to seek ordination. What were your feelings around that?

CB: I think that, at the time, first of all I'd got some sort of inkling of it from Ross Calvin and his family, the idea that I might have a possible vocation, and then Voelcker and Judge Jenkins encouraged me. I was ordained to the diaconate, my second year at Nashotah House, in Denver. My father came out, and my mother didn't. I think my mother had kind

24. Wealthy owners of a chain of department stores in Philadelphia and New York.

25. Theodore Finley Jenkins (1849-1940), lawyer and judicial reformer; he was a judge himself only for one year (1905-06), but retained the title.

26. Seabury-Western, founded in 1933 by the union of two older Episcopal seminaries, has been united with Bexley Hall, in Bexley, Ohio, since 2013.

27. Founded in 1842, at Nashotah, Wisconsin, Nashotah House is the most conservative of Episcopal seminaries.

of a prejudice against [my being ordained]; probably she thought it was Catholic or something.

DG: But you weren't estranged from your mother.

CB: Not at all, no. I love her very much; she's a great person.

DC: Did she eventually make peace with the idea of your being Episcopalian?

CB: Oh, she did. When I was ordained [in the Roman Catholic Church], here in Courtenay, in 1966, she came out and spent a week here, spent time at the hermitage. She was quite proud of me.

DG: In the beginning of your second year at Nashotah, somebody told you about *The Seven Storey Mountain*,²⁸ and loaned you his copy.

CB: That's right. He was a seminarian from Florida. We were walking from the refectory down to the dormitory; it was a long walk. He said, "Have you heard about this new book, amazing book? It's called *The Seven Storey Mountain*." So when I read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, that was what I was looking for; that really answered my question. I wanted to know if it was possible to really experience God in this lifetime, to talk to him, as a person? That was really a revelation, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and it changed my whole thinking. From then on, I was thinking in terms of the monastic life. At Nashotah House, I was having some questions about Anglicanism and priesthood. Anglican orders were condemned by some Roman Catholic writers. There were conversations about this, the Malines conversations.²⁹ One person who took part in these was Dom Lambert Beauduin, from Chevetogne.³⁰ Voelcker and I went to Chevetogne, and actually talked to Beauduin. He spoke only French, but Voelcker also did [speak French], and he [Beauduin] said yes, they

28. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.

29. The Malines Conversations were a series of informal discussions exploring possibilities of corporate reunion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. They were held at Malines, Belgium (now normally called Mechelen) between 1921 and 1927, largely on the initiative of Cardinal Mercier, primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium, but with tacit support from the Vatican and from the archbishops of Canterbury and York. *Apostolicae curae*, the 1896 bull of Leo XIII, had declared Anglican ordinations "absolutely null and utterly void," and this remains the official position of the Roman Catholic Church – hence Brandt's scrupulosities.

30. Lambert Beauduin (1873-1960) was the founder, in 1925, of the monastery of Chevetogne, in Belgium. A monastery dedicated to Christian unity, it includes both western-style and eastern-style churches, and offers worship daily in both traditions.

[Anglicans] have valid orders. Then, I visited the Cowley Fathers³¹ and and then I went to Mirfield . . .³²

DG: . . . which is where I went to seminary . . .

CB: . . . and I told them that I wanted to spend time in meditation, contemplative prayer, and they said yes, you can come here and do that. You can follow your own *attrait*, do what you do, which wasn't really true in the long run.

DG: They told you what you wanted to hear.

CB: That's right. Then the idea of ordination came up, and the US group, Holy Cross³³ and Jenkins, were putting pressure on me to get ordained. I was really hesitant about ordination and priesthood, Anglican priesthood, and even though I was already a deacon, I still had this real doubt in my mind about it. But [in any case] I was ordained by the Bishop of Wakefield – I have a Bible upstairs signed by him – and I said my first mass at Mirfield.

DG: At one of those little chapels around the church. When I was a student there, we would serve those private masses, but after Vatican II, that all vanished.

CB: You'd seldom get to celebrate at some of the better altars; those were reserved for priests who had been in the community for years . . .

DG: A certain amount of preferential treatment?

CB: There was, yes. After leaving Mirfield in 1953, I spent ten days at Assisi, then spent a couple of weeks in Rome, and stayed at San Girolamo.³⁴ Then I went back to America, to the US, not knowing what I was going to do. I had met, through Mrs. Jenkins, Father Paul Weed, who had been rector at St. James the Less Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and I went to confession to him as an Anglican. And it was amazing. He talked about prayer and meditation and I thought I could just remain there for

31. Officially, the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Anglican religious community founded in the Oxford suburb of Cowley in 1866 by Richard Meux Benson. Now extinct in the UK, it continues in the US with a monastery at Cambridge, MA.

32. The Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, West Yorkshire, founded in 1892 by Charles Gore and Walter Frere, both later bishops in the Church of England.

33. The Order of the Holy Cross is an Episcopal religious community based at West Park, New York. It was founded in 1884 by James Otis Sargent Huntington. Father Shirley Carter Hughson (1867-1949), mentioned below, a prolific author and spiritual director, was for two terms superior of the order.

34. A church in Rome, near the Palazzo Farnese and the Campo de' Fiori.

ever and ever. He was a real contemplative, I think. He had some land in Connecticut at Gaylordsville, about a hundred acres. There was a Miss Emily Babcock, who was being directed by Father [Shirley Carter] Hughson from Holy Cross; and Father Weed had encouraged her to set up a hermitage on his property. He had a chapel there, and he encouraged me to go there.

DG: Then after a while . . .

CB: . . . I realized that wasn't where I was supposed to be; and the only other place that I could think of was Three Rivers, Michigan.³⁵ I was received as a novice there: Benedict Reid was the novice master. I liked him a lot. He had a big blackboard, with all of his notes on it (chuckling). He was a methodical person, with a sense of humor.

DG: So how did you find Three Rivers?

CB: I didn't really know Latin, so I spent a lot of time studying Latin while I was there. Again, everything we read had to have an imprimatur, Roman Catholic approval;³⁶ so while I was there, I read Bede Griffiths' book – what was it called?

DG: *The Golden String*?³⁷

CB: “I give you the end of a golden string; only wind it into a ball; it will lead you in at Heaven's gate, built in Jerusalem's wall.”³⁸ *The Golden String*, I read that, and about his conversion. Then I also read *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Cardinal Newman.³⁹ I really was convinced I should go into the Catholic Church. The only person I knew who was a Catholic priest was Dom Bede O'Leary; he was down in Louisiana at a parish. So I took the bus down to Louisiana, and talked to him about my thoughts that I might become a Catholic. Father Bede was going to go on his holiday to Mexico [City], to [the Shrine of] Our Lady of Guadalupe, and he invited me to go with him. So I did. It was really a great experience. They have this huge image of Our Lady of Guadalupe above the high altar.

35. Location of an Episcopal Benedictine community, founded in 1939; since 1946 it has been at Three Rivers.

36. A mark of the “papalist” tendency in Anglicanism; not a characteristic of mainstream Anglicanism.

37. Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), Camaldolese monk, swami in the Indian tradition, author of *The Golden String* (London: Collins, 1954).

38. From “Jerusalem” by William Blake (1757-1827), English poet, painter and mystic.

39. A defense of his religious opinions (London: Longman, Green, 1864) by John Henry Newman (1801-90), English Roman Catholic cardinal, canonized in 2016.

DG: It's the original one, isn't it, the cloak of St. Juan Diego?⁴⁰

CB: I think there's some question about it. You know, the first [Roman Catholic] Mass I ever served was in the shrine. Father Bede wanted to say Mass at the cathedral, and the only time he could say it was really early in the morning, five o'clock. I knew all of the [Latin] responses from Three Rivers, so I served that Mass, and that was a great moment.

[Excursus. On the table in his living room is a small brass bell which was the sanctus bell used by Charles de Foucauld⁴¹ at his hermitage in Tamanrasset (or Tamanghasset), in Algeria. It came into the possession of a French family, and they gave it to Charles Brandt.]

DG: *May I ring this? [bell sound].*

CB: *There isn't much sound to it. That's the bell that they found in his hermitage, in a trunk; and the French family used it as a dinner bell.]*

DG: Serving the Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe was a critical moment, I take it, for you in deciding to be a Roman Catholic.

CB: I think it was. Most of my ordination cards as a Roman Catholic have her image on the front of them.

DG: You told us that you learned bookbinding at Shawnee, Oklahoma.⁴² This was just after you'd been to Guadalupe.

CB: On my way home, I stopped in Santa Fe, and somebody there thought I should go down to Jemez Springs, in southern New Mexico, and visit a Father Gerald Fitzgerald.⁴³ He had opened a monastery there, primarily for alcoholic priests. This friend drove me down, and I met him, and told

40. St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (1474-1548), recipient of visions of the Virgin Mary, whose image, according to the tradition, is imprinted on his *tilma*, or cloak. It is the focus of devotion in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. St. Juan Diego was canonized in 2002.

41. Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), French Roman Catholic priest and hermit, linguist of the Tuareg language; beatified in 2005. His writings inspired the formation, after his death, of the Little Brothers of Jesus and a number of related groups.

42. A reference to St. Gregory's Abbey, founded under that name at Shawnee in 1929, a member of the American Cassinese Benedictine Congregation.

43. Gerald Michael Cushing Fitzgerald (1894-1969), American priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross, founder of a network of treatment centers for priests struggling with substance abuse or pedophilia. He was a pioneer in calling for a change in the practice of moving pedophile priests from one parish to another. Some bishops listened to him; most didn't. It is arguable that had the official church listened to him, the endemic problem of sexual abuse by priests could have been dealt with many years earlier than it has been.

him that I was thinking of becoming a Catholic. He took me out in the hall where there was a statue of Our Lady, and said, kneel down, and I knelt down, and he said, “At one time all of England knelt at the feet of Our Lady.”⁴⁴ And he said, “I know where you should probably go. Some of my men are studying theology with the Benedictines in Oklahoma, at Shawnee.” And I said, “Well I know somebody there, Dennis Statham; I met him in Rome.” That clicked it; he got on the phone and called. I went to Oklahoma, and I was there for a full year, as a choir monk. I said the office with the monks, and during that year, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church. That’s where I really learned bookbinding. Then at Easter, I had a mind to enter Gethsemani Abbey. The abbot was really upset about that, because he had just taken it for granted that since I’d been a whole year there, that I was going to remain. So at Easter I went to Gethsemani. I knew Merton was the novice master. I didn’t realize I was going to meet him. I was in the guest house for about a week. So [knocking] I hear this knock on the door, and in enters Thomas Merton. You know, he sat down there, just the most ordinary person in the world. Immediately, I liked him, really liked him as a person, and we talked. My intent was to enter the novitiate there, but he said, “Don’t come here. We could make a good monk of you, but not a good contemplative.” He knew my history and my whole background.

DG: You don’t think he said that to everybody, then.

CB: I don’t think so. I had a different background.

DG: Yes, with your pre-existing interest in contemplative life. You were 33, whereas most of the novices that came to Merton were 18, 19, 20. Did your discussions with him align with your own impressions of Gethsemani?

CB: I didn’t have much of an impression. I could hear the monks, see them, chanting the office. I’d read a lot about it, but I didn’t really have any kind of impression about what it would be like to be a monk at Gethsemani, or to enter there.

DC: And when Thomas Merton said, we can’t make a contemplative of you here, did you feel disappointed, or were you okay with that advice?

44. Cf. “Lady, when on that night I left the Island that was once your England, your love went with me” (*SSM* 129). Both the moment with Father Fitzgerald and Merton’s comment reflect the then still active ill feeling about the separation of the Church of England from papal authority four centuries earlier. (Our thanks to Jonathan Montaldo for locating this reference for us.)

CB: I think I just accepted it because he's the great teacher, and he said it in just such a nice sort of way, just like ordinary people talking to one another.

DG: So then you ended up going to New Melleray. Did Merton recommend New Melleray?

CB: No he didn't. Bede O'Leary knew some Poor Clares, and I heard about New Melleray through them. So I made a visit to New Melleray, and spent some time in the guest house. They accepted me as a novice, and encouraged me to come at a time when another novice was going to enter.

DG: And you were in charge of the book bindery there.

CB: After a time. I was a novice for two years. Then later, I was put in charge of the bindery.

DG: You were still uncertain about making your final profession in 1964, by which time you were 41. You were attracted to the hermit life while there at New Melleray, and Merton had told you about the Camaldolese. Now, a question here. When Merton became the novice master in 1955, he promised Dom James that he wouldn't talk to the novices about the Camaldolese [CB laughs] or the hermit life.⁴⁵ Yet he did speak to you about the Camaldolese. Strictly speaking, he kept his promise, because you weren't a novice, but he was skating near the edge. What's your thought about that?

CB: I think it was quite courageous of him. He actually told me he thought that the biggest thing that was coming to the American Church were the Camaldolese . . .

DG: And he had wanted to be part of that [in Italy].

CB: That's right. The abbot would pigeonhole me from time to time and say, "So what are your plans?" I talked to him about the Camaldolese, and he drove me down there.⁴⁶ I have a really bad back problem, and I discovered that the Camaldolese stand for the whole office. As a Trappist, you chant a psalm and you sit, and you stand and you sit, and I could do that. So I found out after about 15 minutes that I couldn't live that life. There was an English Camaldolese there who told me about Father [Pierre]

45. See Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015) 26-27; subsequent references will be cited as "Grayston" parenthetically in the text.

46. This was Holy Family Hermitage, Bloomingdale, Ohio, founded in 1959.

Minard,⁴⁷ down in North Carolina, a French primitive Benedictine, who was interested in the eremitic life. So I telephoned the abbot and asked him if I could go down to visit Father Minard. He gave me permission, and I went down, and was quite impressed. I said I'm really interested in the hermit life, and he said that's a real possibility. I went back to New Melleray, and I still didn't know what to do. The abbot said, "Well, write to Thomas Merton." Merton wrote back⁴⁸ and encouraged me to join that group. He did say, "You may find it a little uncomfortable, after your life [at New Melleray]." The abbot gave me his letter, and so I got the approval. I was still a monk of New Melleray when I went down and entered into that life. And I was there for maybe a year. Then I saw that really what Father Minard was looking for was somebody to run the farm. I had heard that there were hermits out on Vancouver Island [the Hermits of St. John the Baptist, at Merville]. Minard knew Father Winandy,⁴⁹ and so he gave me permission – a permission within a permission – to go out and visit the hermits; I was still a monk of New Melleray. I went out and arrived in Courtenay and entered the hermitage in March 1965. Never looked back.

DG: So here you are in Courtenay, or in Black Creek. And you've been here for a little more than 50 years. You were at Merville first, weren't you?

CB: I was on the Tsolum River, near Merville. It's about four miles west of Merville, and this building here, the one we're in, I built down there, and moved it here by low-bed truck. This is a new addition out here [points to the large deck], but this part, this 20-foot area, I built – my original hermitage. I tore down a house to get most of my lumber.

DG: Father Winandy: what sort of a person was he?

CB: He spoke in a very gruff voice. He knew very little English . . . you

47. There is a letter from Merton to Father Minard in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 262-63 [1/9/1965]; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text.

48. See SC 241-42 [9/27/1964], for Merton's letter, addressed to "Brother C.": his exact words are: "Fr. Minard's group . . . might offer the best solution, if you are ready to take it" (242).

49. Jacques Winandy (1907-2002), friend and correspondent of Merton, Belgian-born, sometime Abbot of Clervaux in Luxembourg; for Merton's letters to him see SC 289-90 [8/30/1965], 293-94 [9/21/1965], 295-96 [11/13/1965], 343 [8/19/1967], 397 [9/8/1968], 403-404 [10/11/1968]. With eight or nine others, he established a hermit colony near Merville, BC, in 1964; Charles Brandt joined this colony in 1965. Winandy returned to Clervaux in 1972, and the members of the colony scattered, with Charles Brandt moving to his present hermitage, on the Oyster River at Black Creek.

met him.

DG: Yes [in 1967]: it was not a long conversation.

CB: I think that he was under the impression that the hermits wanted the kind of obedience they had had in monasteries, but some that came after me were more the free or roaming type. They didn't want a lot of official . . .

DG: Supervision?

CB: That's right. He was a little bit disappointed in that, I think. And then eventually, before I left Merville to come up here, he left to go to Mayne Island to live in a hermitage there. He wanted to be more solitary. But then he found that he couldn't take it. He had to have more contact.

DG: Which contradicts the public image of a hermit. Of course a hermit is still part of the larger human community.

CB: He is. But I could communicate with him, probably better than most of the hermits, because I would speak slowly and enunciate [clearly]. He tried to learn a little English from me, but his English was really very limited.

DC: I was just wondering, whether bookbinding, as a form of practice, has any contemplative value for you.

CB: I think it does. Probably the best contemplative part of bookbinding is sewing the book. It's a very relaxing, I think a very meditative, contemplative aspect of binding. Literature is disappearing at a great rate from our libraries all over the world, and it's our written record of humanity. So if you're preserving that, as I am, you're preserving humanity, the culture, and I think that's really quite worthwhile. It's like preserving the earth. It's not just a job, it's something that's conducive to the prolongation of civilization.

DC: It's an act of beneficence.

CB: Yes, and it's a slow, methodical work. You're not in any hurry, not working with heavy machinery. Merton, that was one of his big gripes at Gethsemani.⁵⁰

DG: Here's one more question. You spent a number of years away from here, doing archival and preservation work. How does that fit with being

50. See on this Grayston 207, and Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 335 [7/11/1949].

a hermit?

CB: After I'd been doing some bookbinding for a couple of years, I realized I didn't have a lot of experience working with paper conservation, and I wanted to get more experience. I had a friend who had a friend in Massachusetts at the New England Document Center,⁵¹ Dr. Cunha. I wrote to him and asked if I could come, that I knew a little bit of bookbinding, and that I would offer that skill if he would teach me paper conservation. So I was there for about a year, and I kept getting jobs. I became head of the bindery. But it wasn't what I came for, and I wanted to learn how to do fine binding, you know what I mean? You do binding, then you put designs on it with tools, and it's called finishing. I wanted to learn that. They had said, we can teach you that, but they didn't have anybody there to do that. So I went to Ascona,⁵² in southern Switzerland. While I was in Ascona, I got a telephone call from Ottawa, from the Canadian Conservation Institute, asking me if I would like to be interviewed for a job as conservator. That was a big chance, you know? So they flew me to Ottawa, and I got the job, and then they flew me back to Europe and I finished what I planned to do, and started working for the Canadian Conservation Institute.⁵³ I did that for five years, and got a pension from that. Then I went from there to Winnipeg, and set up a conservation centre for the [provincial] government there.

DG: During this time, what about the hermit life?

CB: Well, in Ottawa, I had a flat. I didn't do much parish work, and when I got to Winnipeg, I said a daily Mass at the cathedral there for a couple of years. When I was in Ottawa, I spent most of my weekends in Combermere: that's where the Baroness⁵⁴ was. So I was really in contact with the life. I wasn't just secular, and I was, like St. Paul, a tent maker. I was a bookbinder, and trying to live a contemplative life in a busy world.

51. Now called the Northeast Document Conservation Center, it was established in 1973, with Dr. George Martin Cunha as its first director.

52. To the Centro del bel Libro; Ascona is in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino.

53. Based in Ottawa, it is a specialized agency of the federal Department of Canadian Heritage.

54. Combermere is the headquarters of the Madonna House Apostolate, founded in 1947 by Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985) – “the Baroness” – and her husband, Eddie Doherty (1890-1975), a famous reporter when he met Catherine; later, at Combermere, a priest of the Melkite rite. She was a major influence on the young Thomas Merton (see *SSM* 340-60 and *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, ed. Robert A. Wild [Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009]).

DG: Did you feel stretched by that experience? Did you have a sense of pull back to this place?

CB: Oh yes. I was always moving back. I was always coming back.

DC: At this point in your life, how you would say you've grown or changed in your appreciation of spirituality in relation to ecology, and in relation to your place here in Black Creek?

CB: In a way, I'm looking towards eternity now. I'll be 93 on February 19, [2016], so I'm not going anywhere. I love this spot. I'm permanent. I feel steady, in a sense, with life, and with my calling. And this is my place. I walk out and I know the trees, and I know the birds and the animals. They're my friends. As I said, the human community and the rest of the natural world has to go into the future as a single sacred community. I feel that I'm part of this community where the natural world and people come and go; and if we don't, as Thomas Berry says, we'll perish.

DC: So, you know the birds: do the birds know you? Do they have a sense you are a person who lives in their neighborhood?

CB: I think the deer know me more than the birds, because the birds are more skittish. But in a way, I'm sure they accept me into their community.

DG: It's wonderful to hear your story. Many thanks.