



PROFILE

AT 95, FATHER  
CHARLES BRANDT HAS  
DEDICATED DECADES OF  
HIS LIFE TO PROTECTING  
THE NATURAL WORLD.  
HE'S NOT DONE YET.  
THE HERMIT PRIEST  
OF VANCOUVER  
ISLAND

BY BRIAN PAYTON FROM HAKAI

**SLOW DOWN.** Take a breath. Insight takes time.

Charles Brandt has been meditating and praying on the east coast of British Columbia's Vancouver Island since 1965. Over that time, he has come to some elegant conclusions about our place in the natural world. He gathered them slowly, through solitude, study and quiet contemplation. He has acted upon them.

Brandt, 95, is a Catholic hermit, priest, ornithologist, flight navigator, book conservator and naturalist. His solitary path can be seen as both a radical departure from and a return to first principles—the basic, fundamental reasons for believing or doing anything.

His hermitage, Merton House, lies at the end of an old logging road near the Oyster River. Surrounded by coastal temperate rainforest, it is a simple, two-storey home made of shiplap cedar planks. It has plenty of windows, indoor plumbing, electricity and Internet access. Brandt built it himself and named it in honour of theologian Thomas Merton.

Brandt is a calming presence, with bright eyes reflective of having reached both advanced age and wisdom. He seems perfectly present as he holds you in his gaze. He is tall and poised. He wears a loose-fitting sweater and old running shoes. He appears not unlike other healthy people his age. And yet he is one in many millions—an ordained Roman Catholic hermit-priest.

"I was called to this life," Brandt explains from his snug study, looking out on the trunks of towering trees. "You don't see anybody or hear anybody. My hermitage is just ideal for this kind of life."

For over half a century, Brandt has walked the quiet road leading to his hermitage, his "road to nowhere." As revelations of abuse and cover-ups eroded the moral authority of the Catholic Church around the world, he continued to meditate, pray and observe the natural world around him.

**OVER TIME,** he has evolved—not into a theologian but an ecologist. Now, as he approaches the end of his journey, he's taking steps to ensure that this land and hermitage are preserved in perpetuity. He also hopes the insights of his generation of ecological thinkers—humility, empathy and compassion for the natural world—will live on beyond him.

Brandt was 13 when he fell under the spell of Henry David Thoreau, renowned 19th-century American essayist, naturalist, abolitionist and philosopher. Growing up on a farm near Kansas City, Missouri, Brandt was himself already a budding naturalist and avid birder in 1936, when he first got his hands on a copy of Thoreau's masterwork, *Walden*. He was particularly taken with Thoreau's attempt to develop awareness and empathy for the natural world.

(PREVIOUS SPREAD) DAVE CALLEGARI

"He was my childhood hero," Brandt says. "He went to the woods to find out what life was all about so that he would not have lived in vain."

After high school and college, Brandt studied general science and biology at the University of Missouri and soon realized that his true interest lay in natural history. The Second World War interrupted his post-secondary studies. Brandt was drafted into the United States Air Force and trained as a navigator flying bombers. He did not declare himself a conscientious objector, but became deeply conflicted about his upcoming role in the war and sought the counsel of an Air Force chaplain. Then the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan and the war came to an end. Brandt never saw active duty overseas.



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Following his discharge, he continued to seek spiritual guidance. He also followed his interest in the natural world to Cornell University, where he studied ornithology, was awarded

a fellowship to work on a birdsong recording project and earned a bachelor of science degree.

Over the following years, Brandt's spiritual quest led him to several religious communities. He was ordained an Anglican priest in England in 1952. Increasingly, he found himself drawn to Catholicism, the works of Thomas Merton and the possibility of a contemplative life, so much so that he went to Kentucky to visit an abbey where Merton would later live as that monastic community's first hermit. But Merton—who found the monastery too crowded, regimented and noisy—urged Brandt to look elsewhere if he was serious about pursuing a solitary, contemplative life.

Brandt took his advice. Ten years later, at the age of 42, after having spent eight years as a Trappist monk, Brandt arrived on Vancouver Island, where the local Catholic bishop had a reputation for being receptive to those who wished to pursue the hermit's life.

"I was the first hermit ordained to the priesthood in something like 200 years," Brandt says.

**IN GREEK,** the word for hermit is *eremite*, which means "of the desert." Catholic hermits by definition lead solitary lives, but tend to live near one another in colonies to have some level of support. When Brandt took up residence on Vancouver Island, there were eight men attempting to exist as hermits on the banks of the Tsolum River.

They lived within walking distance of one another and 23 kilometres from the town of Courtenay.

But Brandt yearned for even more solitude. With the bishop's permission, he purchased 5.6 hectares of second-growth forest on the Oyster River for \$9,000. In 1970, he moved his hermitage 12 kilometres north to this new location. Over the years, the other hermits on the Tsolum River drifted away—some got married, some left for other religious communities. Only Brandt remained on Vancouver Island, alone in the woods, praying, reading.

In that hermit's life, Brandt found his thinking about the natural world and the spiritual life converging. He was drawn to the philosophy of deep ecology, which attempts to broaden the focus of religion from individual salvation to care for the earth. He sums it up this way: the universe is a community of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be exploited. The earth is a one-time endowment; we don't get a second chance. The earth is primary; humans and all other beings are derivative.

For those from a Judeo-Christian tradition, which decrees human dominion over "all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26), this calls for nothing short of another Copernican revolution—the idea that creation exists independent of human wants and needs.

**"DEAR MR. PELTON:** The Tsolum River is dead!" So began an open letter by Brandt to British Columbia's minister of the environment in 1985. According to Chris Hilliar, who was working for Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans at the time, that letter reignited what appeared to be a lost environmental cause.

The Tsolum River, where Brandt began his life as a hermit, was poisoned by a nearby copper mine that operated between 1964 and 1966 and continued to leach toxic metals into the water, destroying a thriving salmon habitat. The knowledge that a "community of beings" living in the river was under attack led Brandt from contemplation and prayer to action. In 2016, on the 50th-anniversary celebration of Brandt's ordination, Hilliar paid tribute to his long-time friend for his tireless work to resurrect the Tsolum River.

"As a strategic environmentalist, Father Charles knew that to restore the Tsolum River we would have to force government to act," Hilliar said. "And his 'Tsolum River is dead' letter did just that. It gave newspapers all the facts they needed. Suddenly the Tsolum River was in the spotlight and government had their feet to the fire."

Brandt was instrumental in establishing the Tsolum River Restoration Society and the campaign that resulted in the reclamation of the old copper mine (at a cost of more than \$6 million), which led to the rapid return of

salmon. Only nine pink salmon were counted in 1983; in 2016, their numbers had reached 130,000.

"Thirty years later," Hilliar said in his address to honour Brandt, "the Tsolum River is on the road to recovery. Salmon runs are on the rise and people living in the watershed are active in stewardship programs and in restoration work. And it all started with a simple letter from a hermit-priest."



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In addition to Brandt's efforts to restore the Tsolum, he went on to advocate for the protection of parks, forests and the surrounding sea—work that has been honoured with numerous awards.

"Immersed in the beauty of earth," Brandt says, "I had taken rather bold stands against several logging and mining companies that seemed bound to destroy all that I had come to the rainforest for."

It was his life of contemplation and communion with the natural world that led to a deep love of it. It is that love, he says, that led him to act in its defence.

**IF A BIOGRAPHY** is ever written on the life of Charles Brandt, hermit-priest, it should be bound by hand. While the insight, wisdom and spiritual sustenance found in texts have undoubtedly enriched his life, it is the work of preserving and restoring books that has provided him a means to make his living.

Although his hermitage would remain his primary residence and place of work, he spent time away to study bookbinding and archival paper conservation in the United States and Europe. He worked for the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, as well as in Manitoba. In all, he was away from his hermitage for 10 years, studying and working at his craft.

Brandt still occasionally works as a book and paper conservator, but his focus has now turned to the question: what happens after I'm gone?

The old logging road near the Oyster River was made to haul away timber when the land was cleared around 1930. Today it's surrounded by rainforest towering up to 28 metres high. The hermit-priest still at work here is older than all of these trees. Recently, Brandt enlisted the help of the Comox Valley Land Trust to help him save this forest as a place where people can come to commune with the natural world. He has also established the Hermitage Advisory Committee to ensure that Merton House remains a refuge for others in need of solitude for their work.

While it's easy to see how declaring the land a sanctuary could benefit the natural world and those who might visit it, what is perhaps less clear is the value to the wider world of having someone think, study or meditate there. Over 700 years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas said, "It is necessary for the perfection of human society that there should be men who devote their lives to contemplation."

Bruce Wood, current member of the Hermitage Advisory Committee, agrees. He says it's still important for the rest of us to see contemplatives leading by example and, like Brandt, turning thought into action. "There are alternative ways besides just pursuing the material world," Wood says. Contemplatives "give us something to ponder."

In his 2000 book, *Self and Environment*, Brandt writes, "This rainforest is not my property but God's creation.... To realize our unity with all beings, and so to leave the world of duality is perhaps the most important step we take towards halting the

environmental destruction that is taking place on the earth."

"We really have to fall in love with the natural world"—this is Brandt's refrain. To save something, you need to love it; to love something, you need to consider it sacred, he says. "Your wife or your children or the natural world. Only the sense of the sacred will save us."

By "sacred," Brandt means holy, "from the hands of God." But for those who have difficulty with those religious concepts, sacred also means something that's held in the highest respect, something so precious it must never be taken for granted or squandered.

"I think everybody has some sort of love for the natural world," Brandt explains. "They may not call it sacred, but somehow they relate to it. It motivates them and it moves them."

Brandt continues to step out of Merton House to open himself to the wonder of the natural world. Although he doesn't travel as far down the old logging road as he once did, he still makes his way toward the same destination: communion. **R**

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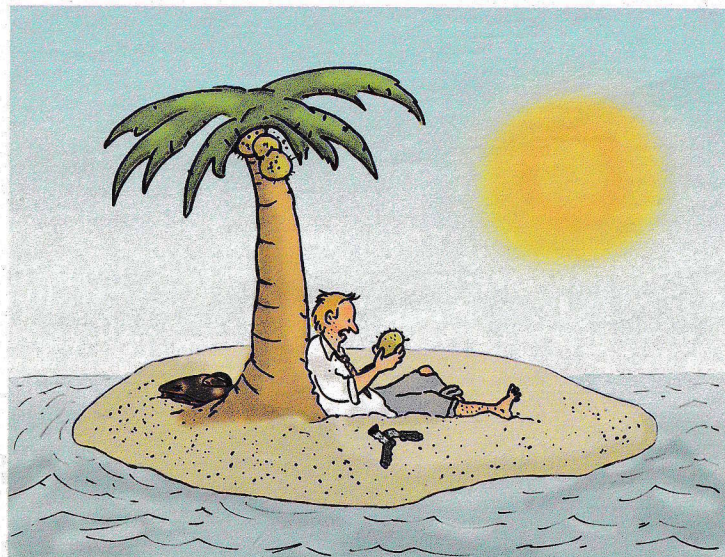


LIKE A BOSS

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JILL KRAJEWSKI, writer and social media producer

@ Work



"I wonder if I can expense the coconuts."

**WHEN TREATING PATIENTS** at the physiotherapy clinic where I work, staff always ask patients if they require any equipment to do their exercises. One day, I heard the assistant asking a client if she needed anything. The reply: "Only willpower."

WAI CHAN, Toronto

**PET PEEVE**

"Can I make a suggestion?" is my least favourite question ever.

@JENNYJRUBIN

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