

Eden can have snow banks and stalled cars, Vivian and I thought as we neared Black Creek on the northeast shoreline of Vancouver Island.

A record snowfall had blanketed the area two days before we headed our car out of Victoria to keep our rendezvous. Out snowplows and warm sunshine meant we could drive the 250 kilometers to Black Creek without hazard.

In early afternoon, following his careful directions, we reached the place Charles Brandt has called home since 1969. Our host met us at the entrance to his snow-blocked lane. Together we walked to his hermitage through a wonderland of tall trees overlooking the Oyster River.

Charles Brandt is a Roman Catholic priest, an environmentalist, and a modern sort of hermit (though an exceedingly connected one). My wife and I were visiting him at CNT's request to learn more about his theological and ecological vision. And especially to understand why this priest sees meditation as the key to both spiritual health and a healthy environment.

So how does a modern hermit live? Here's a glimpse of a typical day in the life of Charles Brandt:

- Six morning hours are devoted to prayer, meditation, celebration of Mass, spiritual reading, and writing. He celebrates the Eucharist alone in his tiny chapel. He meditates again in the afternoon, twice.

- After lunch and "siesta," he works in his spacious conservation laboratory. He contracts he accepts as a binder and restorer of valued books and historic records enable him to be self-supporting.

- A 45-minute walk is daily "must." During it Brandt communes with other creatures—the trees, flowers, insects, birds, fish and animals that share this 27-acre property.

- Most days "there's something outside or inside that needs repairs." It's clear he is an orderly householder.

- Correspondence and extensive reading merit daily attention.

- Sometimes he goes fly-fishing. This brings the hermit into intimate relationship with the river and many of its creatures.

- Usually he releases his catch of steelhead, salmon or trout. Sometimes he asks himself whether he has "any right" to use such stress to these fellow beings.

- He recognizes the power the news media have in setting the public agenda, so occasionally he gives interviews.

- Sometimes he leaves the hermitage for limited periods. He is an active member of several environmental and diocesan groups. Queenswood House of Studies in Victoria is a "second home" where he conducts workshops and silent retreats. Less frequently he

addresses major conferences; not only environmental ones, but also religious gatherings like the Canada-wide conference of Christian meditators hosted in Winnipeg last year.

- He counsels individuals who want to learn the discipline of meditation. Sometimes he hosts small groups at the hermitage. Father Brandt believes his advocacy of contemplation is his main contribution to the environmental cause.

- Somehow this unhurried man, now 73, fits these and other activities into his average day.

Like everyone else, the man beside the Oyster River has a life story.

On February 19, 1923, Charles Alfred Edwin Brandt was born to Alvin Rudolph Brandt and Anna Chester Bridges on a small acreage outside Kansas City, Missouri. There were five other children.

He speaks warmly of his parents. At 71, his mother graduated with a university degree in English literature. His father was an air force pilot in World War I. When young Charles was in his late teens and the United States entered the Second World War, he too enlisted in the air force and became a pilot.

Long before he won his pilot's wings, however, there were other things to consider: young Charles became a serious bird-watcher. Scouting whetted his budding interest in nature. As a senior Scout he taught bird study and became acquainted with native Indian culture in the area.

When he got a chance to go to university (not until after the air force interlude), Brandt chose Cornell, and earned a degree in ornithology. Later he studied wildlife conservation at the University of Missouri. There he became a friend of Starker Leopold, whose

father, Aldo Leopold, is called "the father of North American ecology."

As a student, Brandt was deeply impressed by the senior Leopold's "land ethic."

"He challenged us to think like a mountain," Brandt remembers. "The mountain says, 'Why are you

humans taking all my timber? It's causing runoff of moisture and nutrients the forest community requires!' The mountain asks us to do what is right. And what is right? The land ethic means we respect and preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the whole biotic community. That's what's right."

There are other mentors in Brandt's personal gallery of influences. Among them: St. Benedict of Nursia, St. Francis of Assisi, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Thomas Merton, Teilhard de Chardin, Hugo Lasalle, Prioress Pascalene Coff.

It is clear that Dom John Main, the Benedictine monk whose teaching brought about an international revival of interest in wordless meditation among Christians, is a major influence on Brandt's spiritual life.

Closer to home, there is Vancouver Island's pioneer prophet of conservation Roderick Haig-Brown, and his wife Anne; and Bishop Remi De Roo, who has supported Charles Brandt's endeavors since the two men first met.

Brandt did not begin his spiritual searchings as a Roman Catholic. Those searchings began in earnest in his early 20s. After university, Brandt lived for a time in England, and was ordained an Anglican priest of the Community of the Resurrection. He returned to the United States and was inspired to begin living as a hermit, under guidance. In 1955 he was received into the Catholic Church after reading Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* and Dom Bede Griffiths' *The Golden String*. For eight years he lived as a Cistercian monk while studying for the Catholic priesthood and improving his book-binding skills at New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa.

In the early 1960s, still with the Cistercians at Dubuque, Brandt learned "through the religious grapevine" that a hermit colony was forming on Vancouver Island. He received permission to make inquiries. As the inquiries progressed, he met Bishop De Roo. "The bishop said that if I was accepted by the hermit colony, he would consider my request for priestly ordination."

The colony Brandt had heard about was established in September 1964 by the Benedictine monk Jacques Winandy, along the Tsolum River in the Comox valley. Brandt's request for admission met with a positive response, and his arrival in March 1965 brought to seven the number of hermits living there.

On November 21, 1966, true to his word, De Roo ordained Brandt a diocesan priest in Canadian Martyrs' Church, Courtenay. News reports described Charles Brandt as the first person to be ordained a hermit-priest in the Catholic church in two centuries.

In the Tsolum River colony each self-supporting hermit lived apart in a small dwelling. After several years, members agreed that frequent maintenance meetings were conflicting with the solitude to which each had felt called. They received permission to seek individual sites within the diocese of Victoria. Father Brandt built his hermitage beside the Oyster River. And there he remains today.

One way or another, Charles Brandt has had time to think deeply and with complexity about the earth, its living communities, and its Creator. He agrees with Thomas Berry that we live in an uneasy period "between stories." On the embattled environmental front, he sees this as a time of both crisis and opportunity, promise and danger.

Globally the "fragile blue-green oasis" that is Planet Earth, home to billions of humans and trillions of other species, is under massive assault by corporate giants. Casualties include

depletion of the ozone layer, carbon dioxide build-up, acid rain, increasing levels of toxic pollutants in water, air and soil; loss of topsoil, spreading desertification, destruction of rain forests, loss of vital watersheds, depletion of oxygen, and the loss of animal, plant and microscopic species.

There is nothing quite so final as the extinction of a species, Charles emphasized as we talked on during the long early spring afternoon. And no one knows the full extent or ultimate consequences of the ongoing toll as more species depart the face of the Earth forever, while others join the endangered list.

The global woundedness is also found locally. In the bio-region of north Vancouver Island, three rivers and their sustaining watersheds have suffered grievous damage.

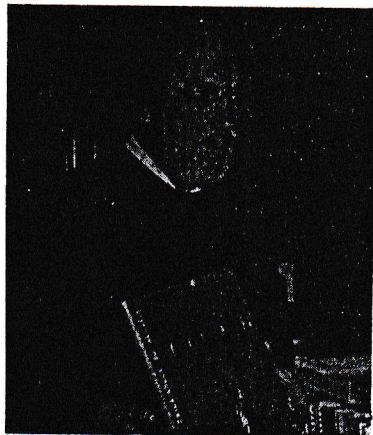
The Tsolum River, which once boasted big runs of salmonids, is considered "dead" after clear-cut logging in the 1950s, and 20 years of acid runoff (AMD) from an abandoned mine site east of Mount Washington. Many life forms in the river were destroyed, while the mine promoters were free "to get in and get out quickly with profits, leaving their poisonous mess behind them." The mining venture responsible for this particular crime against Creation went into receivership after a few years in operation.

The watershed that feeds the Oyster River has suffered major damage from similar industrial assaults. The Oyster has a much depleted supply of fish and other species.

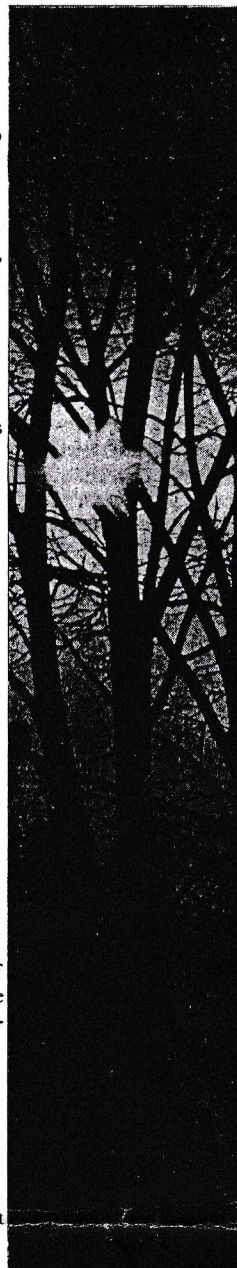
Similarly, the Campbell River area to the north has been hurt by dam construction and overfishing in the Strait of Georgia.

On the positive side, there are examples of environmental reclamation, and signs of growing public realization that the rape of Mother Earth must stop. The ravaged rivers are fighting to come back to health, thanks to the efforts of concerned citizens, environmentalists, some resource companies and governments.

In 1985 the Comox chapter of the B.C. Steelhead Society made reclamation of the abandoned mine site on Mount Washington its main project. Brandt was one of the initiators of the project. Other residents joined the cause. Today the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee, which Brandt chairs, has won the support of the B.C. Ministry of the Environment. Committee members hope \$1 million in promised public funds will finance an analysis of the site and of the damage caused, and will enable researchers to recommend the best way to restore life-giving potential.



Charles Brandt, holding one of the valuable books he has restored.





Charles Brandt finds fly-fishing an ambiguous activity, but does it anyway—in the shallow Oyster River waters near his hermitage.

Meanwhile the Oyster River Watershed Management Committee meets every other month. Area residents are welcome to join and many do.

I asked Brandt if the people in control of logging interests were able to hear the concerns of environmentalists like himself.

"Yes, to some extent," Brandt replied. "MacMillan Bloedel and Timber West have altered logging plans to a degree. There is still some old-growth timber left on the higher elevations. They would have logged that off in 10 years but now they've agreed to extend the period to 30 years. There won't be any clear-cut logging on a large scale. Also, the companies are going to cover old logging roads to restore original land contours. Those roads are the primary cause of silt runoff. Together, these measures should help the river recover."

Charles Brandt's commitment to the vast sweep of environmental issues is balanced by a capacity to be fascinated by small, precise, material details. His work as a conservator of paper artifacts—besides helping him to earn a living—is an important part of his environmental witness. After studies in Europe, the U.S. and Canada, he worked with the Canadian Conservation Institute, Ottawa, and with Manitoba's Provincial Archives, where he set up a "state-of-the-art" laboratory. In 1994 he accepted his most challenging assignment. University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collection Library asked him to restore its copy of *Liber chronicarum* (the "Nuremburg Chronicle"), published in 1493 when printing was in its infancy. This "first picture book for the bourgeoisie" used over 1,800 wood cuts.

Like several other aspects of this multifaceted hermit's life, Brandt's special interest in the conservation of paper artifacts manages to combine an age-old monastic skill with up-to-the-minute science. From time to time, the priest teaches paper conservationist classes at the University of Victoria and at several B.C. colleges.

When he comes back to the big picture—the planet-wide crisis in the relationship between the human species and the rest of the earth community—Brandt's approach continues to blend ancient intuitions with very recent information. He often

sounds, precisely, like a priest describing a big pastoral problem.

He calls careless misuse and deliberate abuse of the natural world "an addiction." As with any addiction, the first response of the addicted is denial. "Perhaps we will have to nearly hit bottom before we'll realize we have to change our ways or die as a species."

He sees two approaches to bringing about this change—one that won't work in the long run and one that will. "We can lie down in front of logging trucks and join other protests, but these won't change our addictive habits. Instead, we need new reasons to hope."

A dawning awareness that there is a better way to live is starting to wake us up, Charles Brandt believes. He says this higher consciousness can be fostered in two ways: first, learn and pass along the "new story" of a revised Earth story and an emerging Universe story; second, learn to practise meditation.

As to the first, Brandt is convinced the Earth story and Universe story together provide convincing reasons to hope we can live a happier life. This story further reveals the Hand of Providence guiding us to fulfillment.

Brandt quotes Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis: "We have been working out of a human-divine, human-human set of relationships, to the almost total exclusion of an earth-human relationship. If we are to move into a more hopeful and creative future, we humans must reach out in heart and mind to all the other species with whom we share this Earth."

This bonding extends to the far reaches of the universe. All beings, all elements are destined by the Creator to come together "in a mutually enhancing manner in order to form a single sacred community."

The hermit-priest is particularly heartened by *The Universe Story*, the book co-authored by gravitational physicist Brian Swimme, and Thomas Berry, Passionist priest and "geologist." Brandt particularly loves the book's description of "cosmogogenesis." He thinks it could be "the most important scientific discovery of all time."

Cosmogogenesis, Brandt says, tells us that "the universe is a developing reality. It has a beginning and it's going somewhere. It's creative. It's evolving with intention. It has its own central values." This newly discerned story complements the ancient story of God's

creative intentions as told in Genesis.

From the Universe's value of *differentiation*, we learn the unique worth of each individual being. No two snowdrops, no two humans are the same. The universal value of *subjectivity* tells us the natural world is a community of subjects to be communed with, not a collection of objects to be exploited. And the universal value of *communion* tells us each being is bonded to every other being.

"Whatever we do that enhances these values is good; whatever we do that hinders their development is detrimental," Brandt sums up as he finishes explaining his enthusiasm for *The Universe Story*.

Brandt thinks an appreciation of this unfolding story will help persuade us to become "co-creators" instead of destroyers. To become more creative, he challenges us to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of the "new physics," of First Nations' spirituality, and of women's central place in the environmental cause. Further, he urges us to recognize that the Christian "option for the poor" applies to other ill-treated species as well as to humans now denied respect and justice in God's Creation.

Brandt has been sharing this vision for years. At the Victoria Diocese's Synod in 1991, he helped persuade 80 delegates to approve this decision: "Accept responsibility to protect and foster the health of the Earth, acknowledging the human community and the natural world as a single sacred community. In doing this, let us be guided by the wisdom of those who are spiritually in contact with our Earth, the Native People, and encourage new models of community based on a relationship with the entire cosmos."

Reading good books and voting for worthy resolutions at meetings is not, for Brandt, the essential route to the heart of the matter. What is essential, he believes, is meditation. "There is no spiritual practice that leads us into communion with the natural world more effectively than the practice of contemplation."

Through daily meditation, he explained, a person can over time express her or his inmost truth. Gradually, perceptions and attitudes change for the better. Gradually, habits and behaviours change as we are guided to

become the persons the Creator calls us to be: not in isolation from other seekers but in communion with them.

Meditators recite in silence a chosen mantra. *Mara natha*, Aramaic for "Come Lord," is the mantra Charles Brandt, like many others, invokes during meditation. Over time, the mantra we choose to pray will bypass our clamouring egos (which always want to control the agenda). Eventually, our true self will be "awakened by the Spirit," Brandt explains hopefully.

In his words: "We open our consciousness to the resurrected, glorified, ascended, infinitely expanded human consciousness of Christ, and through the Spirit are carried to the Father and then to every creature in the universe."

For Brandt there is "a direct connection between meditation and the bringing about of a greater presence of the human community to the natural world." The vision that summons him foresees a sacred community of all beings, united in the Risen Jesus, the Cosmic Christ. Finally the Creator God will be all in all, and a liberated creation will live in a time-free Eternal Now.

He summed up his expectations: "To help bring about a deepening relationship between the human community and the earth community, we need to know the new story of the Earth and the Universe. And the practice that best accompanies this vision is meditation."

As he approaches the 30th anniversary of his ordination, Father Brandt witnesses daily to an alternative wisdom that radically challenges the conventional wisdom.

Each day this resolute, quiet-spoken man renews the credo Dom John Main taught: "We find Christ in our hearts, then we find ourselves in Him, and in Him all Creation."

"Where is Charles Brandt now?" I asked.

His reply: "The real Charles Brandt, the true self, is somehow gradually being born. This is the great mystery about every person. We're not identical with God but neither are we separate from God. We're connected. Somehow, we're taken up in Christ, whether or not we realize it.... This is the light I move toward."

Grant Maxwell, now retired and living in Victoria, was the first editor of *Compass* magazine and has had wide experience in Catholic journalism.