

FEATURE

Have a real, non-intellectual experience, urges hermit priest

200 crowd into Knox as popular, annual lecture luncheon series returns with 'wonder' as first topic

By BRUCE WHITEHEAD
News Reporter

About 200 people hungry for sandwiches and spiritual growth filled Parksville's Knox United Church Tuesday for the first of a series of afternoon lectures aimed at elevating the life of the spirit.

Presented by the church's outreach committee, the highly popular luncheon lectures kicked off with a fascinating talk by a Roman Catholic priest, monk and hermit from Black Creek, near Courtenay.

Father Charles Brandt, ordained by the Bishop of Victoria as the first hermit-priest in two centuries, captivated the crowd with an extraordinary talk blending particle physics, quantum theories of the void and anti-matter, and a challenge to view the world as a unified being rather than through the eyes of consumerism.

Speaking on the broad topic of "wonder," Brandt shared both his own experiences and introduced popular scientific theories along with their interpretation by contemporary spiritual thinkers such as Thomas Merton.

"Humans begin their existence in wonder," began. "It is the very core of our being.

Brandt called wonder the basis for all spiritual, artistic, philosophical and scientific endeavor, then went on to softly condemn the stagnation of wonder through mass media and advertising. For example, he said, by the time today's children graduate from high school, they have spent more time watching television commercials than actually sitting in a classroom.

The marrow of Brandt's

talk, however, was really about something that has no substance at all. In discussing his views, he called the progressive concepts in quantum physics the "epic tale of our times," theories that show matter can be created out of nothing — and disposed of just as easily.

Referring again and again to the "void," or the "abyss," or the "empty wholeness" as the basic ground from which all matter issues forth, Brandt seemed with great ease (but somewhat less persuasion) to shatter accepted reality into sub-atomic smithereens — insisting that the human grasp of a material universe is mere illusion.

"We think of material stuff as the basis for our being. I'm suggesting material is not the only foundation for existence," said the soft-spoken priest in grey sweater and black corduroy pants. "We have to appreciate the power of the non-material, non-visible universe."

In what was possibly a reprieve from the confines of his elevated physical theories, Brandt suggested four concrete ways to make that appreciation more possible.

First, he said we must remember who we are, sentient and limitless beings, but ones purposely placed on the rind of a planet swirling in space. He told the audience to get outside a half hour before sunrise or sunset and really observe and feel the sensation of the sun entering or leaving our field of view.

"Most of us live in encapsulated lives," he said. "We are not really aware we are on an earth ... moving among other planets. We have not had an experiential awareness that we are actually living on the Earth. We have to have a real experience, not just an intellectual experience."

Next the hermit suggested humans investigate more fully the nature of the universe. Referring to the "new cosmology" surfacing in scientific circles, Brandt said conventional thinking on what the universe is made of and where it is going is changing as scientists turn away from atomic theories and look at the bigger picture.

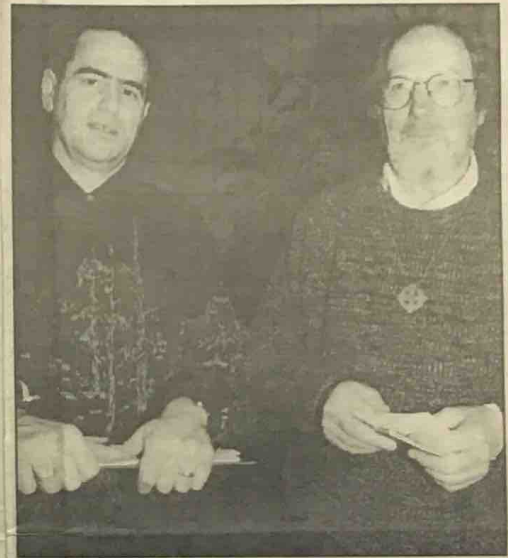
"The universe functions as a whole," the monk said, embarking on an elaborate concept of genesis that ultimately defies understanding. He said hard scientific evidence suggests that matter can be created out of nothingness, that the void is capable of generating energy, matter, and ultimately, life itself.

"I am asking you to consider a universe where existence arises out of fecund nothingness," he said. "We insist that only material things are real, but where there is

nothingness, elementary particles will emerge."

Brandt's final two suggestions were about combining the two previous ones. He said prayer, meditation and contemplation are the methods humans can employ to tap into this vital resource of creative nothingness. To do that, one has to smash the ego, make sacrifices, and commune with a sense of alternate reality. If we don't, we will be guilty of "passing on our mediocrity" to generations yet to come. He insists we are on "the verge of a new level of consciousness."

"It seems to be what the universe wants. We are being called into this new level of consciousness to free ourselves from our small, exploiting, ego-centred consciousness. We are talking about alternate reality — we're talking about God, really."



JOINED BY REV. Foster Freed of Parksville's Knox United Church (left), Father Charles Brandt, a Catholic hermit-priest, shared his experiences with about 200 people at the church's first in a series of luncheon lectures.