

The hermit of Vancouver Island

BY DOUGLAS TODD

The story goes that St. Francis of Assisi, who spiritually communed with animals and birds, was rewarded late in life for his dedication with the "stigmata"—actual marks on his body resembling the wounds of the crucified Christ.

Today, St. Francis' modern-day counterpart, Vancouver Island hermit-priest Charles Brandt, receives something more worldly: prestigious environmental awards.

Twenty-five years ago Brandt became the first man in North America to be ordained a hermit-priest, according to the island diocese. He spends almost every moment among his "brothers and sisters," the creatures in the West Coast forest.

At the end of a long, narrow dirt road through a stand of Douglas fir stands his small, tidy wooden dwelling marked with a sign reading "Hermitage" and a wooden cross taller than a man.

Next to his beloved Oyster River, Brandt, 68, walked recently in the pattering rain, breathing the pure air, completely at home on the earth he feels "is part of us."

Inspired by St. Francis, Brandt does his "walking meditations" among the forest's deer, raccoons, otters, woodpeckers, flickers, finches and warblers.

"You just put one foot in front of the other, with no destination in mind," he said. "You're just there—in communion with the animals and birds. St. Francis was in touch with all nature. To him, it was a revelation of God."

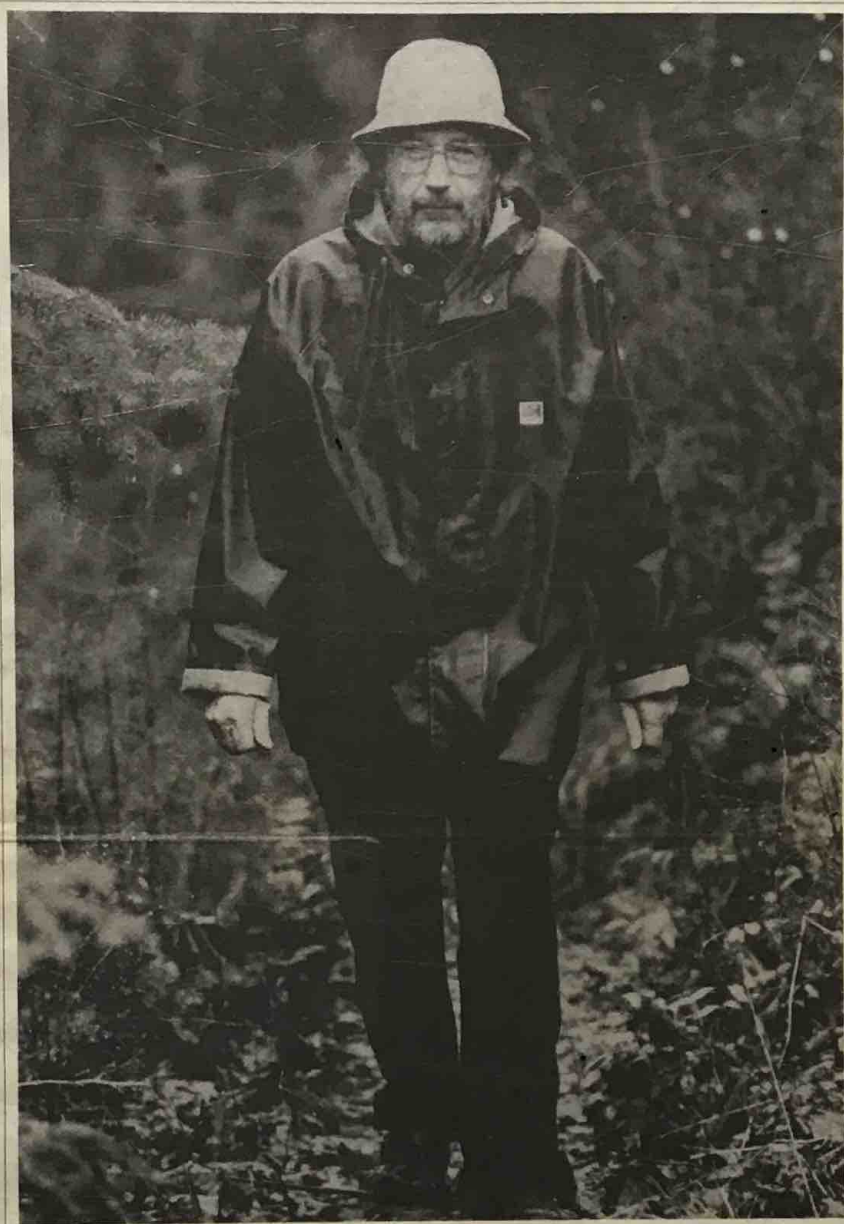
St. Francis also cherished his hermitages, where his followers spent lifetimes in devotion. Sitting cross-legged, Brandt commits more than five hours each day to solitary prayer and meditation. He also celebrates Mass daily by himself in his tiny wooden chapel.

Unlike the medieval church mystic Julian of Norwich, who literally had a brick wall built around her so she could connect with God without disturbance, Brandt makes clear he is not a "recluse." He is a hermit.

That means he spends only about 90 percent of his waking hours without human company.

In the other 10 percent, Brandt's love of nature, and people, draws him into the world of politics and teaching, just as it did St. Francis. Brandt leads meditation retreats at his hermitage, and is a member of many environmental groups. "I never go to the meetings," he says. But he writes letters—constantly.

For his undying dedication to saving Vancouver Island's Tsolum River from mining pollution, which



now working in North America.

He admits he sometimes battles loneliness.

He likes people—but feels his isolation is "really necessary."

He acknowledges his lifestyle requires discipline—which seems to be reflected in the precise perpendicular arrangements of his pens, environmental reports, art work, cups and book-preservation equipment (from which, as is hermit tradition, he financially supports himself.)

All these decades after leaving behind his home in Kansas City, working as a flight officer in the U.S. Air Force and obtaining a degree in ornithology at Cornell University, the hermit-priest feels he is only at the beginning of his spiritual journey, which is leading to "the death of the ego."

It is not an easy thing to do—to discover, as he says in his slow, almost-whispery voice, the deeper inner self—to realize that the human soul and the earth and the spirit of God are all interconnected, all one.

Like the monks of the 12th century, Brandt believes his life of prayer and contemplation is far from irrelevant to the world.

"It's absolutely essential. It does tremendous good. Through it we enter into the expanded consciousness of Christ. People in contemplative life are assisting in bringing about a major planetary consciousness shift. They're assisting in the dream of the earth. There's nothing more real you could be doing."

After studying theology in the U.S., Brandt found Canada's wilderness "unbelievably beautiful, like Eden." He admits one reason he was

drawn to Vancouver Island was for its steelhead fishing. Fishing organizations consider him an expert.

And although Brandt still dons hipwaders and steps out with his rod into the rushing water, his fishing now is nearly all "catch and release," out of concern for the creatures. He may, he says, eventually stop fishing, perhaps become a vegetarian.

Borrowing from mythologist Joseph Campbell, Brandt believes he is "following his bliss. There's nothing else I'd really like to do." Everyone should follow their bliss, he says. They should do what brings them joy; it will reflect creatively on the world.

After almost a lifetime of prayer for the planet, combined with activism, he believes ecological progress is occurring. The church, for example, is finally getting over seeing the natural world as evil and is returning to St. Francis' belief that nature mirrors God.

"I'm much more positive about the way the environment is going," he says, "than I was 25 years ago." Reprinted with permission of *The Vancouver Sun*.

Let everything growing from the earth bless the Lord

Daniel 3:76

put him uncomfortably in the public spotlight a few years ago, he received the Cal Woods Conservation Award.

For work spent protecting the ecological diversity of the "bio-region," he lives in near Campbell River, he was honoured with the Roderick Haig-Brown Conservation Award.

Brandt is a follower and friend of the renowned Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who developed a form of Christian-Buddhist contemplation and encouraged him to become a hermit. Brandt also bases his life's work on Thomas Berry, a noted Catholic eco-theologian. Brandt sums up his mission this way:

"The human community and the natural world must go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert."

With the full support of Vancouver Island Bishop Remi de Roo, whom Brandt considers "avant garde," Brandt is one of only a handful of ecclesiastical hermits

VANCOUVER SUN PHOTO BY DEBRA BRASH