

## Making Known the Sacred: From Perishing to Parishing Communities

*When despair for the world grows in me  
And I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
Who do not tax their lives with forethought  
Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
Waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

— Wendell Berry ("*The Peace of Wild Things*")

Today's crises of global inequity and ecocide<sup>1</sup> are calling the Christian church to responsibly re-imagine its role in the world. According to theologians Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, the task at hand is not "just another historical transition or simply another cultural change...This is the most momentous period of change... unparalleled in the four and a half billion years of history."<sup>2</sup> The question which these crises daringly ask Christians is: What does it mean to be a follower of Christ in today's inconceivably interconnected web of systemic-injustice and ecocide? Especially for Christians of relative economic privilege, this question is profoundly troubling because, despite one's intent, one's life is inevitably bound to the impoverishment of millions and to extreme degradation of land.<sup>3</sup> The harshness of this reality can be paralyzing, sparking despair, apathy, and false optimism.<sup>4</sup> Many say the modern Christian church is worthy of severe criticism based on how it has often played its part in these crises thus far. Indeed, since

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used in reference to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's description of today's mass environmental destruction in "The Vocation of Neighbour-love in the Face of Structural Injustice: Luther for the Twenty-first Century," in *Global Crises, Local Churches*, (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Centre, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Vocation of Neighbour-love in the Face of Structural Injustice: Luther for the Twenty-first Century," in *Global Crises, Local Churches*, (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Center, 2009), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Dittmar Mundel, "Active Hope in the Midst of the Babylonian Captivity of the Rural," in *Global Crises, Local Churches*, (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Center, 2009), 30-31.

the onset of the industrial and globalized world, the Christian church has too often stood complacently by the exploitation of millions of people and of the natural world.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it has morally certified these acts of destruction.<sup>6</sup> In so many cases, it has deemed these acts ethical under the pretense of caring for one's neighbour. Somehow, mass destruction of the earth is conducted "in order to better *care* for people's needs....While we are trying to be good to people, we are often being cruel."<sup>7</sup> In addition, the church, through its gradual marginalization from the political, economic, and social spheres of life - no longer viewed as a relevant or essential aspect of daily life - is now culturally and self-identified as an entity unto itself, rather than as a model of life in which political, economic and social spheres find identity and through which they act.<sup>8</sup> Numerous scholars argue that globalization will bring about a much needed secularization of the world because ever expanding and accessible scientific knowledge provides the explanations and solutions for which people might otherwise have sought through religion.<sup>9</sup> However, I offer that humans' neglect of sacredness in the world is a primary cause of the injustices and destruction reaped upon the Earth today. The crises of today's world present a profoundly religious problem.<sup>10, 11</sup>

In this paper, I first discuss the Christian theological context of today's ecocide. Throughout this section, I theorize the theological foundation on which hydraulic fracturing (the controversial process of unconventional gas-extraction) occurs, based on certain

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<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 306.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 14.

"transcendencies"<sup>12</sup> in Christian theology. This case study is used to highlight the increasing dualism between the body and the soul which Christianity, as it is widely used in Western culture today, perpetuates. In response to my critique, I aim to outline alternate understandings of Christian theology for the renewal of the natural world and reconciliation of the "sacred community."<sup>13</sup> I then examine the absence of the "priestly voice"<sup>14</sup> in today's culture and advocate its absence as the root cause of today's global inequity and environmental crises. Finally, I refer to the reflections of Roger Rosenblatt and my own reflections about the Natural World as a call to responsible action for a better future wherein the limitations of the natural world remind us of the foundation we all share and for which we all must care; a reminder of our roles as temporary stewards of the Earth.

### **The Christian Context of Creation's Degradation** *A Framework for Hydraulic Fracturing in North America*

Let us begin with the question posed by Wendell Berry: "How can modern Christianity have so solemnly folded its hands while so much of the work of God was and is being destroyed?"<sup>15</sup> Eco-theologian Thomas Berry has studied this phenomenon for the last 40 years and has written widely about the Christian context of Creation's degradation. Throughout his work, Berry examines four "transcendencies"<sup>16</sup> found in Christian theology which he theorizes have specifically contributed to today's ecocide. The first "transcendence" is the prevalent

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 114-116.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Berry defines this term as the "larger community of the entire planet, even the entire universe." He warns that "the human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or... perish in the desert."

<sup>14</sup> David Goa, *The Time of the Kingdom: An Orthodox Christian Understanding of History*, [<http://www.orthodoxcanada.org/goa/timeofkingdom.html>]

<sup>15</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 309.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 115.

Christian understanding of the divine as a "transcendent deity related by covenant."<sup>17</sup> This understanding has profound effects on our relationship, or lack thereof, with the Natural World. "Even when the Natural World is explained as created by the divine,"<sup>18</sup> the identification of God as sacredly separate from the earthly, fallen world can foster the de-sacralization of all earthly things, including humans. This de-sacralization of Creation perpetuates today's industrial model dependent on the destruction of Creation.

The second transcendency understands the human as "so special that it does not really belong to the inherent processes of the natural world."<sup>19</sup> This understanding, conscious or subconscious, "contributes to our sense of alienation from the Natural World."<sup>20</sup> When we see ourselves as separate, we may do as we please. The Natural World, thereby, becomes something which belongs to humans and can be exploited for one's own ends.<sup>21</sup> The limitations of the Natural World, then, are seen not as a reminder of our finiteness and Christian call of stewardship but as a nuisance enacting a temporary pause in the ongoing process of ecological rape until the next technological discovery. This "transcendancy" can lead us to be guilty of hubris in believing we are more than we are. Yet, in seeking to "transcend our definition as fallen creatures, we have only colonized more and more territory eastward of Eden."<sup>22</sup>

The third transcendency stems from an understanding of Christian redemption wherein the human fate is not the same as the world's.<sup>23</sup> This external view of destiny can let us off the hook, so to speak, from responsibly caring for Creation and being accountable for its state of health. Erich Fromm warns that the meaning of the resurrection is most certainly "not the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Gift of the Good Land," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 294.

<sup>22</sup> Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 229.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 115.

creation of *another* reality after the reality of *this* life, but the transformation of *this* reality in the direction of greater aliveness."<sup>24</sup> With eyes turned heavenward, we often are not conscious of and, thereby, responsible for the earth upon which we walk today, for tomorrow is heaven rather than earth.

These three transcendencies (transcendent deity, transcendent human, transcendent redemption) yield a fourth transcendency, a "transcendent mind." This "mind," according to Berry, creates and uses technologies on a moral basis despite the transcendency of technology which "enables us to evade the basic biological laws of the Natural World."<sup>25</sup> The sum of these transcendencies, pervasive throughout western culture today, is a significant part of the context in which alienation takes place between humans and the Natural World; in the destruction of Creation.

Berry and Clarke also identify the prevalent Christian response to post-Darwinian pathology underlying the ecological crisis: the "scientific story" of the universe is not understood as identical to the Biblical story of Christianity. Challenging the Christian Church's dismissal of science, saying that "science does not reduce the mystery, but rather, enhances it," these theologians urge Christians to "accept the scientific vision and see its religious value."<sup>26</sup> Teilhard de Chardin first "showed that the Christian story was identical to the universe story and that if we could only understand it in this light, then theological studies would become more integral."<sup>27</sup> Thomas Berry agrees that "theology, in recent times, has lost contact with [the] present story of the universe. In doing this, it has lost contact with the larger human

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<sup>24</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997), 115.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

community."<sup>28</sup> He critiques the way in which Christians explore their beliefs "solely from their own resources"<sup>29</sup> and concludes that until the Christian church embraces the universe story as its own, it will have nothing to say to the universe.<sup>30</sup> The increasing irrelevance of the Christian church is of great concern to Berry and Clarke for, in their opinion, there is nothing more important than to know the story, for "if you do not know the story, in a certain sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything."<sup>31</sup>

Wendell Berry further delineates the Christian context of today's ecocide by describing a dominant theological and cultural understanding that the body and soul are separable parts.<sup>32</sup> That a human is the added sum of a body and a soul is a dangerous interpretation of Genesis 2:7, for it implies that the body and soul are, in fact, separable. When body and soul are separable, each part takes on its own purpose rather than being one of the same, tied to the same past, present and future. For example, in the dominant theological duality of eternity and time, the body is understood as bound to time and the soul is understood as bound to eternity. Or, as is particularly prevalent in today's culture, the duality of good and evil are also each associated with a certain part; soul is often associated with good and body is often associated with evil. Wendell Berry discerns that this prevalent understanding of the separability of body and soul is the most fundamental root of countless other separations we see today: between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, etc.<sup>33</sup> When body and soul are understood to have separate fates, they perpetually live in violence with each other, for neither can fulfill its fate unless its counterpart no longer exists.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>32</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 313.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 313.

It is important to note that we are free, if we so choose, to live separately from our soul.<sup>34</sup> We are quite able, as is proven with each extinction of species, "to make a duality of our one living soul by disowning the breath of God that is our fundamental bond with one another and with other creatures."<sup>35</sup> Disconnected within ourselves and with others, then, we not only conduct bad "stewardship, stupid economics, or [betray] family responsibility; [we commit] the most horrid blasphemy... flinging God's gifts into His face."<sup>36</sup> It is hardly too much to say that Christian theology as it is often *used* today is "firmly founded on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast, Wendell Berry proposes a different formula: "soul = dust + breath."<sup>38</sup> This equation presents Adam "not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery."<sup>39</sup> As we are made from dust, this equation binds us to the earth. As we are made of breath, this equation binds us to all other living forms. Born bound to the entire sacred community, we are a soul.

I propose that these four "transcendencies," the disconnection between the Biblical story and the "scientific story," and the separability between body and soul, are extremely significant to the context in which hydraulic fracturing takes place in North America. Given *this* theological framework, it is no wonder that this process of unconventional gas-extraction is widely understood as simply one of the inevitable tasks to bring about progress where economic considerations are of ultimate value, for many of today's dominant Christian understandings only support this paradigm.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>36</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 308.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 313.

Hydraulic fracturing highlights a particularly interesting social phenomenon which, in turn, highlights a particularly interesting spiritual phenomenon. This topic is an increasingly controversial subject in North America and I surmise that one of the significant reasons for this is because hydraulic fracturing, a process which stems from the paradigm of unlimited economic growth, pits citizens' livelihoods in complete opposition to each other. According to the Canadian Association for Petroleum Producers, Alberta's oil and gas industry employs over 415,000 Albertans, which is equivalent to 8.9% of its population; working in this industry is how many Albertans support themselves and their families.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, for those who work in the industry, arguments against hydraulic fracturing, and any other industry-programs for that matter, seem personal because one's livelihood - and the livelihood of one's children - are seemingly at stake. Yet, there are also many Albertans who have been dehumanized as a result of the same industrial process. Their stories are chilling: the impacts of gas drilling on or near their land have had disturbingly harmful results for both their animals, their families and themselves.<sup>41, 42, 43, 44, 45</sup> Naturally, these Albertans want to see a change, if not a moratorium, on the process of hydraulic fracturing. Each side is passionate, people have been hurt, and it seems this alienation is only increasing.

The "other-ing" that occurs as a result is arguably of a similar root as the social and spiritual phenomenon about which Erich Fromm speaks. Analyzing pre-WWII German society, Erich Fromm discovered a people overwhelmingly free-from-belonging to a social order. He

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<sup>40</sup> Canadian Association for Petroleum Producers, "Canada's Industry: Alberta," December 1, 2012, (<http://www.capp.ca/CANADAINDUSTRY/INDUSTRYACROSSCANADA/Pages/Alberta.aspx>)

<sup>41</sup> Ernst Versus Encana, "Ernst Versus Encana Corporation," December 1, 2012, (<http://www.ernstversusencana.ca/>)

<sup>42</sup> The Council of Canadians, "Update: Ponoka couple's well-water polluted by nearby oil and gas activity," December 1, 2012, (<http://canadians.org/blog/?p=13213>)

<sup>43</sup> William Marsden, *Stupid to the Last Drop: How Alberta is Bringing Environmental Armageddon to Canada (And Doesn't Seem to Care)*, (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2007), 198-205.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Royte, *The Nation*, "Fracking our Food Supply," December 1, 2012, (<http://www.thenation.com/article/171504/fracking-our-food-supply>)

<sup>45</sup> Michelle Bamberger and Robert E. Oswald, "Impacts of Gas Drilling on Human and Animal Health," in *New Solutions*, Vol.22(1), (Baywood Publishing Co., Inc., 2012), (doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/NS.22.1.e>)



believed that it was because Germans did not see themselves as accountable to each other that so many, even the most educated, submitted to the next authority.<sup>46</sup> That next authority was the Nazi regime. Fromm found that this social disconnection significantly allowed for the Nazi authority to capture German culture with relatively little inner-resistance.<sup>47</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer also understood that Germans' submission to this authority, whether conscious or subconscious, was a result of a suppressed 'voice of summons' which calls humans to love their neighbour. Lutheran theology was misused in order to "numb their consciences."<sup>48</sup> As Dittmar Mundel summarizes, "Cultural captivity from a theological perspective occurs when one misuses religion to mask one's submission to human authorities and ideologies and to silence the countercultural voice that calls humans to 'do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before their God.'"<sup>49</sup>

The first question we must ask ourselves is: Do we, too, live in a free-from-belonging society? It may be that, just as German society was free-from-belonging to a social order, today's western society is arguably free-from-belonging to *both* a social- and nature-order and is often misusing religion to mask its submission to the authority of progress. Wendell Berry proclaims that "By denying spirit and truth to... Creation, modern proponents of religion have legitimized a form of blasphemy without which the nature- and culture-destroying machinery of the industrial economy could not have been built."<sup>50</sup> This industrial paradigm, pitting livelihood against livelihood, as exemplified by hydraulic fracturing, is perpetuating our submission to non-human solutions in every aspect of our lives and history tells us that there is a price to pay for the giving up of such responsibility. Erich Fromm's observation warns us that if we do not, very

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<sup>46</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1969).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Hans-Dittmar Mundel, "Cultural Captivity and the Need for a Liberating Education," in *the Holocaust's Ghost*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2000), 526.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>50</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 312.

soon, choose to be responsible for the wellbeing of our neighbour, our "freedom" from belonging to each other will overwhelm us and we will inexorably continue to submit our lives to the authority of progress, dehumanizing our neighbours and communities, destroying our land, and murdering the future. This corrosive freedom-from-belonging to a *social-order* has allowed for arrogance to enter so that the values of human community are neither known nor cared about. In addition, this freedom-from-belonging to a *nature-order* has allowed for machines to do our good work instead, disconnecting us from our land, each other and our soul. Indeed, "to be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human."<sup>51</sup> If, however, as Thomas Berry claims, "people *begin the effort* to take back into their own power a significant portion of their economic responsibility, then their inevitable first discovery will be that the 'environmental crisis' is no such thing."<sup>52</sup> The instant that one begins to take back responsibility over one's life and the wellbeing of one's neighbour, the structures which operate on the destruction of the earth and marginalization of millions of people will inevitably begin to crumble. Many of us ask the question today, "Does today's changing-climate-reality mean that we must all return to the land?" Certainly, many must. Yet I think we begin by taking back responsibility over our own lives, communities, and land in the ways we can today, and wait in active hope for the next opportunity to do it again. Perhaps, for many, this regaining of responsibility will lead to a return to the land. For others, it may manifest into a lifestyle shift amidst an urban setting which includes all aspects of life, especially one's work and skills. One cannot know what this future will actually look like but its sheer unpredictability most certainly does not mean that the future should not be imagined. It is essential to begin imagining.

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 106.

<sup>52</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Gift of the Good Land," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 251.

**Christian Theology for the Renewal and Reconciliation of Creation**  
*Sharing Identity through the Common Story*

The society about which Erich Fromm and Dietrich Bonhoeffer speak sheds an ominous light upon the social patterns of Western culture today. If the destruction and dehumanization, witnessed upon the earth most particularly during WWII, significantly resulted from the weakness of the German social fabric at the time, the second question remains: What, on this earth, can knit together a diverse people?

To begin answering this question, it is perhaps best to reflect upon a certain moment in childhood to which, I expect, most people around the world can relate. In this moment, a most mysterious thing takes place. It is the moment when a child asks to be told a story, not a new story, but one which the child has already heard before - if not, many, many times before. This is most certainly a mysterious thing, for the child already *knows* the outcome, the plot line, and the characters of the story very well. Yet, nevertheless, the child wishes to hear *this* particular story. Similarly, there is another moment to which many people can relate. It is the moment when one is gathered among others in song. It is certainly not a new song which no one has yet heard, because how might one sing it with people if not one of them yet knows it? It may be a song of patriotism, it may be a song passed down through the family, or it may be a Christmas carol. This is most certainly a mysterious thing for the person already knows the song, and the twists and turns of the melody. Yet, nevertheless, the person wishes to sing *this* particular song. Why?

Human communities are capable of containing collective memories. The narratives the community tells are instrumental in maintaining the community by shaping its collective understanding and in interpreting experience; these stories are the way that people know

themselves in community.<sup>53, 54, 55, 56, 57</sup> When a community actively manages its memory, a fascinating cycle emerges: the community is likely to embody the morals of the stories it tells.<sup>58</sup> This cycle is colloquially referred to as "the community narrative." Historians Sharon Gray and Mark Graham found that when a community does *not* share a deep collective understanding, "many people feel detached from the places where they live and have no particular sense of belonging or responsibility towards their community."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, a great danger exists when a community does not actively manage its memory. Its people neither identify with others around them nor learn from the community's past. In the words of Erich Fromm, the people of this community are free-from-belonging to a social order. Or, as Wendell Berry might describe, the body and soul of its people are disconnected and its people are thus disconnected from each other. The fragility of this story-less community suggests that managing the community's memory is an essential part of building its resiliency by binding together its members in a common identity. Indeed, communities hold the power to be "creators of their own histories, their own future, and their own identity."<sup>60</sup>

The question, "Why do we wish to hear a story or sing a song we already know intimately?" may well find its answer within this community-narrative phenomenon. It suggests that in the shared story of a community, its people find identity. With identity, they may find purpose. With purpose, they may find their work. In their work, they may find fulfillment. In

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<sup>53</sup> Sharon R. Gray, and Mark A. Graham, "This is the Right Place: Community-based Art Education at Utah's Springville Museum of Art," *The Journal or Museum Education* 32: 303-12.

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Reeves, *Measuring the Economic and Social Impacts of the Arts: A Review*, (England: The Arts Council of England, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Hurley, "Narrating the Urban Waterfront: The Role of Public History in Community Revitalization," *The Public Historian* 28 (4), 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Kim Dunphy, *Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities through Arts and Creativity: Australia*, (Burnaby: Creative City Network Canada, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Brinton M. Lykes, Ali Banuazizi, Ramsay Liem, and Michael Morris. *Myths About the Powerless: Contesting Social Inequalities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Sharon R. Gray, and Mark A. Graham, "This is the Right Place: Community-based Art Education at Utah's Springville Museum of Art," *The Journal or Museum Education* 32: 303-12.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

fulfillment, they may re-tell their story. The innocent request to hear the repeated story sheds light onto our deeply human desire to be reminded of that which gives us identity, that which gives us life.

Narrative is one of the strongest strands of all the major religious traditions. It is through the rich stories of these traditions that millions of people around the world understand themselves and their places, and have done so for centuries. In fact, the Latin root of the word 'religion' comes, in part, from the verb 'ligo' which means to tie, or bind, together.<sup>61</sup> Given this etymology, it may be appropriate to say that it is the role of religions to knit together the world. One of the most powerful ways it can do this is through the simple act of storytelling, an act for the common person. What story, then, might the Christian church tell to reconcile the humans and the Natural World? Thomas Berry believes that it is the "Sacred Story" which must be told, which is both the "Creation story" and the "scientific story." It is the story of being "a single mystery."<sup>62</sup> When the earth's fate and the human fate are understood to be the same, the finiteness of the earth is not the limitation but rather, the common language, the common work and the common place. This story, "prompting us to respect human beings, human communities, the earth and the fullness thereof as God's creation, is a potentially liberating hope-inspiring story. It liberates us by limiting us."<sup>63</sup> Understanding our self as a member of this sacred community, through our Sacred Story, we may walk joyfully in our callings to be stewards of the Earth.

Walter Brueggemann understands that it is the essential role of the Christian church to cultivate a prophetic imagination rooted in doxology.<sup>64</sup> "In awe and praise before the Creator of

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<sup>61</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, "Religion," Accessed 14 November 2012,

[[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=religion&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=religion&searchmode=none)]

<sup>62</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 313.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

Life" is the foundation out of which our criticism and active response must come.<sup>65</sup> It is the primary role of parishes to root their faith within doxology, particularly in this time of apathy and despair, so that when people find themselves on the brink of paralysis from glimpsing the magnitude of such global suffering to which they inevitably contribute, they will not succumb to paralysis but, rather, move in hope towards the alternate future. This alternate vision into which we must move needs to be rooted in the "gift of delight in existence"<sup>66</sup> because it will "foster a definition of the universe as a community of *subjects*."<sup>67</sup> This alternate vision becomes "the point of reference" then.<sup>68</sup> As Jürgen Moltmann describes, "It is this that gives [one] identity and continuity - even, and indeed, precisely, where [one] expends [oneself] in non-identity... In surrendering [oneself] to the work of mission, [one] is preserved by the hope inherent in that mission."<sup>69</sup> The call to 'take up our cross' is to risk expending ourselves. As such, "we need a horizon of expectation which makes the expending meaningful."<sup>70</sup> Moltmann outlines the task of the Christian church in today's age of diaspora:

Faith can expend itself in the pain of love; it can make itself 'into a thing' and assume the form of a servant, because it is upheld by the assurance of hope in the resurrection of the dead... Thus self-expenditure in this world... becomes possible and becomes human within that horizon of expectation which transcends this world... Hopelessness [arises] in a world of *lost horizons*. To disclose to it the horizon of the future of the crucified Christ is the task of the Christian Church.<sup>71</sup>

It is faith in an alternate version of the *present* which enables one to move through the paralysis of despair. Erich Fromm describes that "faith, like hope, is not a prediction of the future; it is the

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<sup>65</sup> Dittmar Mundel, "Active Hope in the Midst of the Babylonian Captivity of the Rural," in *Global Crises, Local Churches*, (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Centre, 2009), 24.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>68</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 333.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

vision of the present in a state of pregnancy."<sup>72</sup> Rooted in the awe and praise of the Creator of Life, we connect our lives to a Sacred Story, and move in active hope towards its actualization on earth.

The Christian faith paradoxically calls its daughters and sons to both individuation and interdependence. All of us, as creatures made of dust and breath, "are not ourselves without everything else... In this sense, we are not just simply genetically cousin to everything else but we have a certain *identity* with everything else."<sup>73</sup> Perhaps, that is why nature diversifies; as Thomas Aquinas says beautifully, "So that the perfection lacking to one would be supplied by the other." The Christian faith calls us to see Christ in each other, which is to acknowledge *ourselves* in each other; the sacredness of our common identity. David Goa speaks about seeing the "thou" in the other:

We need only to ask the Amish question, 'What will this do to my community?' to free our minds from the temptation to turn our aspirations into global ambition. For Christians, and many other religious women and men, the temptations offered under the rubric of Globalization are rooted in utopian notions of development, democracy, and human rights. We need to be careful here. The Christian faith calls its sons and daughters to be present. It does not call them to be right or successful, much less to bring about a new world order through some technique or ideological breakthrough. It calls us to walk the *local* pathways and experience that spiritual friendship which makes 'all things new' not because we have 'information' but because we have been touched by the mystery of the being *of* another person. The virtual world may offer various opportunities of use to the common good. What it simply does not and cannot offer is the 'breaking of bread' where the terror of history and the grace of our life story are present, when all 'you' becomes 'thou.'<sup>74</sup>

The Sacred Story knits even the most secluded creature on earth into the same community. This understanding enables one to care for even the most marginalized, for they are not only physically connected through the same soil upon which they walk but are, moreover, *a part of*

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<sup>72</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Towards a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 14.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> David J. Goa, "Incarnation or the Virtual No-where," (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Center, 2005), 2.

us. Mother Teresa prayed, "Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick, and, whilst nursing them, minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you, and say: 'Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve you.'"<sup>75</sup> This kind of love is completely alien to the logic of our current culture and its economic model. Wendell Berry writes:

Logically, in plenitude some things ought to be expendable. Industrial economics has always believed this: abundance justifies waste.... But this sort of logic is absolutely alien to the world of love. To the claim that a certain drug or procedure would save 99 percent of all cancer patients or that a certain pollutant would be safe for 99 percent of a population, love, unembarrassed, would respond, 'What about the one percent?' There is nothing rational or perhaps even defensible about this, but it is nonetheless one of the strongest strands of our religious tradition - it is probably the most essential strand - according to which a shepherd, owning a hundred sheep and having lost one, does not say, 'I have saved 99 percent of my sheep,' but rather, 'I have lost one,' and he goes and searches for the one.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to note that the kind of love to which the Christian faith calls its sons and daughters is of a transcendent source. Parker Palmer found that "there is nothing capable of binding together willful broken selves except some transcendent power."<sup>77</sup> Jean Vanier, too, echoing the words of Bruno Bettelheim, was convinced that "communal life can flourish only if it exists for an aim outside itself. Community is viable when it is the outgrowth of a deep involvement in a purpose which is other than, or above, that of being a community."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer distinguished between what he termed, human-love and spirit-love. "Human love can never understand spiritual love, for spiritual love is from above; it is something completely strange, new, and incomprehensible to all earthly love... Spirit-love recognizes the

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<sup>75</sup> Shawn Madigan, *Mystics, Visionaries & Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 425.

<sup>76</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 155.

<sup>77</sup> Parker Palmer, *A Place Called Community*, (Philadelphia: Pendle Hill, 1977), 18.

<sup>78</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Home for the Heart*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 307.



true image of the other person which [one] has received from Jesus Christ."<sup>79</sup> This distinction helps us better understand our common identity through the source of this great loving power. When we are connected to that source, we are a manifestation of that love because it is not our own.

The Christian faith calls humans to love in a radical, "indefensible"<sup>80</sup> way. The Sacred Story is the collective understanding out of which this radical love occurs as it knits together *all* the alienated creatures of the world. This shared narrative gives meaning to the Christian call of expenditure, of sacrificial love, igniting hope in even the most desperate of moments. "Soul-searing, life-shattering destruction and death are not the last word"<sup>81</sup> declares Cynthia Moe-Lobeda. Rather, when all reason for hope is gone, the sacred story is of itself hope to continue. We may continue "seeking justice and peace in all the earth because we see *this* as the end of the story."<sup>82</sup> Therefore, as Thomas Berry proclaims, "enter into the [call] with an attraction and a joy and a delight because this is a supreme opportunity being offered us."<sup>83</sup> Let us choose to rejoice in the magnificence of what is required of us, for surely in joy, we will be better stewards of our land and better neighbours of each other.

### **Speaking the Priestly Voice**

#### *Blessing in an Age of Sacred-Deficit-Disorder*

The modern Christian Church was greatly influenced by Gustavo Gutiérrez, author of *A Theology of Liberation*, and theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, authors of *Liberation*

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<sup>79</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 36.

<sup>80</sup> This term is used in reference to Wendell Berry's description of logic alien to the world of love.

<sup>81</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Vocation of Neighbour-Love in the Face of Structural Injustice: Luther for the Twenty-first Century," in *Global Crises, Local Churches*, (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Centre, 2009), 17.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 135.

*Theology*. Their work is affirmed by many others from various fields of study, particularly Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and Brazilian theologian Hugo Assman. These authors speak of the "epistemological privilege of the poor," that is, that the way the poor view history is closer to the *truth* than the way the rich, who have tended to be the chroniclers of history, view it.<sup>84</sup> In theological language, liberation theology lifts up that "the power for the redemption of humanity has been placed within the poor."<sup>85</sup> This phenomenon is particularly important to discuss today not only for social justice ministries but also for ecological ministries. We must ask the question: If the heart of poverty is the denial of dignity, does this same liberating phenomenon ring true for the Natural World, robbed increasingly of its dignity?

Thomas Clarke surmises that there is surely profound common ground between those called to social justice ministries and those called to ecological ministries, and, therefore, "primary energy must be invested in the empowerment of all the disparaged creatures of earth."<sup>86</sup> Thomas Berry lifts up the theology of the cross together with creational theology as a powerful energizer for Christians.<sup>87</sup> However, I propose the following simple similarity between human-poverty and Creation-poverty given the phenomenon of liberation theology as applied to today's degradation of the Natural World: poverty calls one into relationship with the poor. Within this relationship, one begins to learn the liberating pathways out of poverty, for only the poor themselves may know it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes that "from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled - in short, from the perspective of those who *suffer*, [is] an experience of incomparable worth."<sup>88</sup>

Particularly for Christians of privilege, "moral discernment is fatally flawed if it does not begin

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<sup>84</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 78.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997), 61.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>88</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, trans. Christian Kaiser (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 17.

with the cries, claims, and constructive proposals of those on the 'margins' of society."<sup>89</sup> In today's world, poverty is no longer human-specific; it has come to plague all Creation. The magnitude of today's suffering is calling the Christian Church into *relationship* both with the poor in human communities and with the poor, degraded Natural World.

How might the Christian Church help ignite or reconcile these relationships in the Natural World? David Goa articulates that the Christian Church must speak with two voices: the prophetic voice and the priestly voice; it is not the Christian Church unless it actively speaks both fluently. The prophetic voice, as it is understood in this context, refers to the active critique of the current state of the community. It evokes the social commentary of the prophets Amos and Isaiah. The critical voice of the Christian Church of today's cultural paradigm is extremely important, especially given its seemingly inexorable continuation. However, when the prophetic voice is not followed by the priestly voice, despair and apathy result again. There is nothing one can *do* if one does not hear, at the same time, the priestly voice. What is the purpose of the priestly voice? David Goa asserts that the priestly voice blesses.<sup>90</sup> In proclamation and sacrament, it blesses. In essence, that is all it does and that is *everything* it does. It is not the role of priests to *make* the world sacred, for all is already sacred, but rather, to *make known* its sacredness. The act of blessing "creation, water, the fields in springtime and at harvest, food, children, the leper and queen is an act of recognizing the sacred character of the being *of* the world. To bless is a simple elemental act of recognition that all that is given is, in its being, sacred."<sup>91</sup> The Christian Church, in response to a life within the Natural World, must speak the priestly voice, blessing all which it sees. With ears to hear the sacredness proclaimed, eyes to

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<sup>89</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Vocation of Neighbour-Love in the Face of Structural Injustice: Luther for the Twenty-First Century," (Camrose: The Chester Ronning Center, 2009), 19.

<sup>90</sup> David Goa, *The Time of the Kingdom: An Orthodox Christian Understanding of History*, [<http://www.orthodoxcanada.org/goa/timeofkingdom.html>]

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

see its revelation on earth, minds to attempt its fathomability, and hearts to praise its wonder, we humans are indeed capable of, and thus, responsible for making known the sacredness of Creation. "The faithful are called to respond with that loving communion first glimpsed in the Garden of Eden... Now, they are called to bless and heal life. That is the human vocation. That is the priestly centre of the being *of all people*."<sup>92</sup> When the Christian Church speaks both the prophetic and priestly voice, apathy and despair are vanquished by active hope and... *joy*.

### **Befriending the Earth: The Daily Task for the Ordinary Being**

#### *Concluding Reflections*

Well-known author, Roger Rosenblatt, wrote a short piece entitled "Kayak Morning: Reflections on Love, Grief, and Small Boats" two and a half years after his thirty-eight-year-old daughter passed away. His reflections in this piece seem to be a poetic expression of his grief. Rosenblatt does not speak about his daughter throughout these reflections, however. He does not elaborate about *whom* he has lost and how he feels about it. Rather, he writes primarily about the *setting* through which he paddles. Rosenblatt vibrantly and palpably describes the waters, birds, trees, murky rocks and skies. Yet, as he goes on listing observation after observation, it becomes clear that the space Rosenblatt describes is, in fact, deeply tied to the death of his daughter. For example, he writes, "Still waters, dark waters, water-colours, waterproof, watermark, high-water mark, waterbird, to be in hot water, brackish water, white water, water main, water lilies, waterworks, waterfront, water bug, water cannon, water table, watershed, dead in the water."<sup>93</sup> It becomes apparent through his reflections that each observation, each moment of his life, comes back to the death of his daughter. He says shortly thereafter, "It colours everything I do."

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, *Kayak Morning: Reflections on Love, Grief, and Small Boats*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), 5.

Rosenblatt notices the small details of his setting to a greater extent than most people do, I believe. Why is this?

I think that our culture chiefly values the plot line over the setting. When we read a book, we skim the paragraph detailing the mountainous passages and the valley's foliage so that we might hurry onto the next scene where the plot *moves* again. When we walk through the city, we tend to think about our *destination* more than we examine the cracks in the cement over which we stroll or the sound of the whistling wind. When we eat a meal, we put a bite of food into our mouths and immediately begin poking on the plate for the next bite rather than placing the fork down, closing our eyes, and experiencing the flavour. We seem to live in a false, optimistic future more than we live in the present, valuing the plot line above the setting. However, what happens when the plot line stops, when, for example, one's daughter dies, when one encounters bitter death? The plot line halts or may even disappear completely. With what are we left? Indeed, we are left with our setting. We are left with creek beds, smells, sounds and colours. The gift of Creation remains. Perhaps this is why Rosenblatt notices the details he does. The loss of his daughter is the loss of the plot line in which he once lived. In his grief, he now lives in a healing garden of sorts.

I refer to Roger Rosenblatt's reflections because they remind us of the gift of the Natural World in which we live, should we choose to care for it. His reflections enlighten us as to the mysterious healing power inherent in the Natural World when all reason for hope is gone. I also refer to Rosenblatt's reflections because I too am living within a healing garden of sorts right now. I will now conclude with my reflections on the Natural World in the hopes of blessing that which must be blessed.

This past Thanksgiving weekend, I saw my extended family for the first time since my close encounter with death in late August. On Saturday evening, all gathered around the campfire, my aunt asked me shamelessly, "Carmelle, you are 22 and you have just come as close to death as you can get. How has such an encounter with death at a young age changed your outlook? Has it changed the direction of your life?" I replied that, in fact, this "encounter" had *affirmed* the direction I had chosen and that the "change" this encounter had ignited, rather, was manifesting itself in the small, seemingly mundane moments of life; in the million moments a day that pass us by, often unnoticed forever. These moments have become exhilarating to me. I continued to answer her, describing how it is as though I have a whole new set of eyes. It is as though I have woken up in a healing garden of sorts, one which seems oddly familiar yet is so much more beautiful and overwhelming than I ever used to know. Each morning I wake up, I feel my lungs fill completely; I am often overcome by this miracle. A few weeks ago, my lungs were collapsed. Now I rhythmically feel their expanse. When I see birds flying above me, I am so joyful, so "distracted" by their fluidity, the mystery of flight. I notice the last leaf on a tree, hanging on with such a resiliency; I stop and watch its strength, reminded of the resiliency of the human spirit, something I witnessed from countless other patients every day in the hospital. When I glance down at my arms, hands and feet and see only smooth, pale skin where only weeks ago they were swollen blue, black and bloody from needles and procedures, I am humbled by how miraculous the body is that it can heal so wonderfully without a passing thought or request. I rejoice in the ability to run for 20 minutes in the cold air beside the lake, when just weeks ago I was having a respiratory tube removed from my esophagus and lungs. When I round the 5th corner and I begin to faintly hear my heart beat, I remember the generous gift of blood a stranger has given me. Even something as 'mundane' as looking through a window has

taken on new meaning. Just weeks ago I was not able to push myself out of bed to look outside, and when I finally could and I looked outside for the 'first' time, I broke down, so moved by the *gift* of nature we have been *given*.

Wendell Berry writes, "To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation... where we must go to be reborn - receive the awareness, at once humbling and exhilarating, grievous and joyful, that we are a *part* of Creation, one with all that we live from and all that, in turn, lives from us."<sup>94</sup>

As I conclude this research I am very hopeful and relieved. Although in studying the Christian context for Creation's degradation I have felt disheartened by the vastness of this tradition's influence in ecocide, I nonetheless conclude my research very hopeful and relieved. It is so hopeful that the Christian faith calls its daughters and sons to all those things which are deeply human to us, such as befriending, storytelling, sacrificing, experiencing and blessing the Natural World. It, too, is so relieving that the solutions to today's degradation and suffering *cannot* be solved by our technologies and economic system because this means that the way in which each of us lives our daily life *matters* deeply. It means that it is acts of joyfulness, friendship, praise and wonder - sacred acts - which actually possess the power to bring about the healing and full-wonder of our world and ourselves within it. This is Good News.

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<sup>94</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth," in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 99-100.

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