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Practicing Paradise: Contemplative Awareness and Ecological Renewal

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE*

What would it mean for Christians to take seriously the idea that we are called to practice paradise, to inhabit the world as if “everything is in fact paradise”? In the Christian contemplative tradition, one finds recurring attention to the notion that paradise is somehow knowable, graspable, and inhabitable in this present reality, and that this experience of paradise can be incorporated into a meaningful spiritual practice. This essay asks whether, in a moment of deepening ecological degradation, the contemplative practice of paradise might help us learn again how to imagine the world as whole, inhabit it with tenderness and care, and contribute toward its renewal.

The whole world has risen in Christ. . . . If God is “all in all,” then everything is in fact paradise, because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God.¹

—Thomas Merton to D. T. Suzuki, 1959

The Christian tradition has long cherished a vision of the world as paradise, a simple, harmonious whole made manifest in creation and renewed in Christ. From the garden in Genesis to the peaceable

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¹ Letter from Thomas Merton to D. T. Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 563–564.

kingdom in Isaiah to the heavenly city in the Book of Revelation, one encounters recurring images of this unbroken whole that is paradise. But what kind of place is it and where is it to be found? Is it part of a world that once was but is no longer? Is it an expression of a dream that can only be realized in the world to come? Or does it perhaps exist here and now, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear? The persistent presence of violence, suffering, and death makes it difficult if not impossible to believe in the idea that, in the world as we know it, “everything is in fact paradise.” It seems more honest to acknowledge that paradise is simply lost to us, that if it exists at all it must be as part of a future hope, never to be fully realized in our current existence. Still, there is a recurring dream that in fact paradise is somehow knowable, graspable, inhabitable in this present reality. If this seems quixotic, as indeed it almost surely must seem to any sober observer, one must nevertheless ask what the cost would be to us were we ever to stop believing in this possibility. That is, is the dream of paradise, still mysteriously present and alive to us even in the midst of suffering and loss and brokenness, necessary to the work of healing the broken world? Must we be able to imagine the world as whole in order to learn again to inhabit it with tenderness and care, to contribute toward its renewal?

I would argue that it is indeed necessary—for the sake of our own happiness and well-being and for the sake of our increasingly threatened world—for us to be able to imagine paradise. What is more, I would suggest that we must learn to *practice* paradise, to learn how to incorporate an awareness of this mysterious reality into the heart of our contemplative practice. Learning to do so can have a profound transformative effect on the life of the person who undertakes such a practice; but it also has the potential to effect a wide and deep transformation in society and the world. It is the connection between these two forms of transformation that I wish to consider here. In particular, I want to reflect on how the contemplative practice of paradise might help us address the growing fragmentation and degradation of the living world.² For those of us living at this particular moment

² The growing attention to the paradise motif in contemporary thought, and the effort to retrieve and reinterpret ancient religious understandings of this important theme, are striking. Among the works that have informed my own thinking are: Alessandro Scafi, *Mapping Paradise: A History of Heaven on Earth* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995); Milad Doueili, *Earthly Paradise: Myths and Philosophies*, trans. Jane Marie

of history, the loss of paradise is increasingly coming to be experienced through the loss of biological diversity, the extinction of species, the erosion of the very structure of the ecological web through which life is maintained. We are losing not simply our feeling for the world; we are losing the world itself. Yet, it is nevertheless true that our own deepening alienation from the living world—the increasing difficulty we experience in knowing how to see and feel its presence as intimately woven into the fabric of our lives—is part of the larger loss and contributes to it directly. Addressing this loss and engaging it, in terms of both its personal and its larger ecological meaning, has now become central to the work of contemplative practice.

There is a strange paradox at the heart of this challenge. Nothing, it seems, could be simpler or easier than waking up to and embracing the glorious, transcendent reality of one's life in the natural world. It is, or should be, something that comes naturally to us, like breathing: our original innocence. Yet it seems not to come naturally to us at all. We experience instead a profound and persistent alienation from the world. In theological terms, this is sin, an expression of our own estrangement from a place that we know (or once knew) to be our home. It is primordial in its force and its sweep. In practical terms, this alienation arises from our conscious or unconscious attachment to myriad problematic ideas about our life in the world, such as our susceptibility to the allure of power and security, to a freedom without constraints. The work of reimagining paradise will require an honest, critical examination of the patterns of thought and practice that contribute to the perpetuation of these attachments (and the destructive practices that arise from them). Only by struggling to become free from their overweening power will it be possible for us to learn again how to rekindle a simple awareness of the power and beauty of the living world: our life in paradise. This work has an inescapably personal dimension, but it is affected by and opens out onto larger, social, political, ecological realities. It will be necessary to learn to imagine them together if we are to envision and live into the task of healing the whole.

Todd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Markus Bockmuehl and Guy S. Stroumsa, eds., *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For an alternative reading of the paradise theme in Thomas Merton's work, see Kathleen Deignan, "Love for the Paradise Mystery: Thomas Merton, Contemplative Ecologist," *Cross Currents* 58, no 4 (Winter 2008): 545–569.

Here, I want to consider the question of what it might mean to practice paradise as part of the critical task of contemplative awakening to the living world in the present moment. The language of paradise has long figured significantly into the Christian understanding of what it means to live “free from care.” At its root, the idea of paradise expresses the conviction that one can learn, through assiduous spiritual practice and openness to grace, to overcome the anxieties and fears (our condition outside of or beyond paradise) that prevent us from opening ourselves to simple, open loving relationship with God and with all beings (human and non-human). The recovery of what is sometimes described as an “original innocence” has tremendous significance for those who realize it in their lives, creating a capacity for renewed intimacy and reciprocity with all living beings. But there has always existed a strong conviction within the paradise tradition of Christianity that the personal work of reimagining and re-inhabiting paradise has the potential to effect a transformation that touches every dimension of the cosmos. The hope for a final integration or transfiguration of all living beings—often expressed in the language of *apokatastasis panton* or renewal of all things—is a critical part of this paradise tradition. As the depth and extent of our destruction of the natural world becomes increasingly evident, the language of paradise has gained renewed significance within contemporary cultural and ecological discourse. Much of this clearly has to do with the extent of the loss we have experienced and the ache to be part of a world that is less fragmented, more whole. And if the language of paradise within such discourse often has a less explicitly religious charge than it once did, it continues to haunt the contemporary imagination and retains a potency that few other ideas have for helping us reimagine our relationship to and responsibility for the world. In that sense the dream of paradise remains crucial for the broader work of ecological-spiritual renewal.

It is in this sense that I wish to locate my reflections on the Christian contemplative idea of paradise among the growing chorus of contemporary voices who are calling for an utterly fundamental rethinking of our relationship with the natural world in terms of a recovery of paradise. One of the common features of this wider, shared discourse, and something that marks it as distinctively contemplative, is the growing sense that the transformation we need must go beyond a merely instrumental approach to dealing with environmental concerns and touch into the very depths of what the world is and who we are in the world. Reflection on the meaning of paradise as an

integral part of contemplative practice can, I believe, help us reach a more thoughtful understanding of the kind of relationship with the living world we are seeking to cultivate, and perhaps help us develop a shared language for doing so. Still, a word of caution is necessary here. The language of paradise has been frequently employed, after all, to express very different and often diametrically opposed ideas about what it means to live in the world—supporting not only the hope of a more whole, reciprocal way of living, but also an acquisitive, exploitive, and destructive ethos that leaves the world and those living in it diminished. The contemplative practice of paradise will need to retain a critical awareness of and response to the tendency to seek a paradise that serves only our needs. Only such a critical retrieval of the dream of paradise will be sufficient to help us heal our own increasingly fragmented world.

“Everything is in fact paradise”: Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki

To dwell in paradise: this is one of the oldest and most enduring images of spiritual longing to have emerged from the ancient Christian contemplative tradition. Its precise meaning has shifted and developed over time; but never far from the center of this longing is the hope that it might be possible to learn to live in the world with a simple awareness of the whole. At its root, this is an eschatological vision, born of a recognition that the world as we know it is broken and frayed but that it is possible to discern even in the midst of such brokenness what the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton described as a “hidden wholeness”—the true, unbroken character of the world that is always mysteriously present. The capacity to cultivate an awareness of this “hidden wholeness” and to live within and on behalf of it is one of the contemplative tradition’s primary contributions to the work of healing of the world. One catches a compelling glimpse of this contemplative vision of the whole in Thomas Merton’s remarkable correspondence with the Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher and philosopher D. T. Suzuki. Beginning in 1959, Merton and Suzuki exchanged several letters during the next several years, and eventually met one another in New York City in 1964. At the heart of their dialogue and friendship was a shared sense that it was in fact possible to learn to see and respond to the simple fact of existence free of the distorting force of egoic concerns, that it was possible to live as though “everything is in fact paradise.”

Thomas Merton wrote those hopeful words in a letter to Suzuki in April, 1959. It is a beautiful and compelling letter, full of deep feeling about Merton's growing awareness of how profoundly his contact with Zen Buddhism had transformed his awareness of his own Christian identity. It also expresses his hope that the Christian tradition as a whole might recover its own deepest intuition about what it means to live in God and that Christians might join with those from other spiritual traditions—such as Suzuki himself—in turning this transformed awareness into a force for healing in the world. At the heart of these reflections, indeed occupying the symbolic center of Merton's thought, is the idea that when one learns to penetrate into the heart of one's life, learns to let go of attachments, fears, ideologies—all those unhealed elements of one's life that leave one trapped and lost and fearful and unable to apprehend oneself and the world as graced and whole—then “everything is in fact paradise.” This is a strange and bewildering claim. Affirming its truth would seem to require one to remain willfully blind to the persistent presence of suffering, death, and evil in the world. Merton does not skirt these difficulties. Indeed, he acknowledges that the effort to learn what it might mean to inhabit paradise must include a sober reckoning with all those elements of existence that prevent its realization in our midst. Still, he refuses to succumb to the possibility that it is beyond our reach, that we cannot know paradise. In this, he gives expression to an eschatological vision of hope that was widely shared in the early church and in a particular way by the ancient Christian monastic tradition in which he himself stood. This vision has always held in tension the idea that paradise is both a future and a present reality—only fully realizable in eternity, but always breaking through in the present moment. Here, in his correspondence with Suzuki, it is the present moment, the taste of paradise that is the heart and soul of contemplative living, that interests Merton most. It is a vision of paradise that has the potential to transform our very sense of what it is to be alive in the world.

In Merton's first letter to Suzuki, dated March 12, 1959, he expresses a sense of “profound and intimate agreement” he feels in reading the teachings of Zen Buddhism—especially what he describes as “its beautiful purposelessness.”³ I will return to this theme later, for I believe it holds great significance for understanding what

³ Letter from Thomas Merton to D. T. Suzuki, March 12, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 561.

the contemplative tradition means when it speaks of inhabiting paradise. For now, I simply wish to acknowledge the deep sense of kinship between this idea of “beautiful purposelessness” and what the gospel tradition refers to as living free from care, or what Meister Eckhart would later describe as “living without a why.” Merton himself affirms this kinship in one of his characteristically exuberant outbursts to Suzuki: “It seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels,” he says, “and the Gospels are bursting with it.”⁴ It is precisely this deep, mutually illuminating kinship that he seeks to understand and express in his letter of April 1959. And it is here that the idea of paradise comes more clearly into play. Three ideas are central here: transfiguration, identity, and grace.

It is intriguing to note that Merton’s reflections on transfiguration arise directly from what he describes as Suzuki’s “deeply moving and profoundly true intuitions on Christianity.” Suzuki had written to Merton that “God wanted to know Himself, hence the creation,” prompting Merton to acknowledge the importance of this idea in Christianity, especially among Russian Orthodox thinkers such as Sergius Bulgakov and Nicolai Berdyaev. “The Russian view,” Merton says, “pushes very far the idea of God ‘emptying himself’ (kenosis) to go over into His creation, while creation passes over into a divine world—precisely a new paradise. Your intuition about paradise is profoundly correct and patristic,” he tells Suzuki. “In Christ the world and the whole cosmos has been created anew (which means to say restored to its original perfection and beyond that made divine, totally transfigured. The whole world has risen in Christ, say the fathers. If God is ‘all in all,’ then everything is in fact paradise, because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God.”⁵ Here one encounters a staggeringly beautiful vision of Christian faith in which one is invited to behold the divine as encompassing, indeed transfiguring the entire living cosmos. It is a vision of the whole that has been expressed and celebrated almost from the beginning of the Christian tradition—in the cosmological Christologies found in

⁴ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, March 12, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 561. See also Merton’s comment in his letter dated April 11, 1959: “We have very much the same views, and take the same standpoint, which is, it seems to me, so truly that of the New Testament.” *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 563.

⁵ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 563–564.

the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, and throughout patristic thought.⁶

The force and reach of this vision is astounding: nothing is separated from God; everything is transfigured. And we dwell within this transfigured world. But is it possible to live as though this were true? Too often, it seems, we live instead with a continuous awareness of the vast gulf that separates our intuition of the truth of this vision from our capacity to embody and practice it in our lives. Still, it is precisely here, in response to the question of what kind of awareness is possible for us, that the contemplative tradition has the most to contribute in helping us heal this gulf. Merton's letter to Suzuki takes up this question directly, posing the question of "whether or not the Resurrection of Christ shows that we had never really been separated from [God] in the first place. Was it only that we *thought* we were separated from [God]?" he asks. Perhaps. Even so, he concludes "that thought was a conviction so great and so strong that it amounted to separation." Here, entering imaginatively into the mythic time of the first paradise, Merton reflects on the poignant question of how any sense of separation from God ever arises in our consciousness, and why it is that knowing ourselves to be inseparable from God, we nevertheless separate ourselves continuously. This is, he suggests, an indisputable and unavoidable existential fact. In theological terms, it is the expression of original sin. "In this sense," Merton acknowledges, "there is exclusion from paradise. But yet," he insists, "we are in paradise, and once we break free from the false image, we find ourselves what we are: and we are 'in Christ.'" ⁷

We find ourselves. We are "in Christ." We are in paradise. Here is a central paradox of Christian faith: we experience ourselves as separated and alienated from God and the world. But we also know, on a deeper level, that there is no separation. The great challenge is unearthing and living into this deeper identity in Christ and through it into a deeper identity with everything.

⁶ See for example, Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in the Christian Tradition, Volume I: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden, second edition (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1987); J. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius, and Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁷ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 564.

The question of identity, and whether it is possible for us to discover and live into a more authentic and less superficial and egoic identity than the one we habitually fall prey to, preoccupied Merton his entire monastic life. Here, in his correspondence with Suzuki, he engages this question with particular force. He seeks to express to Suzuki what Christian identity has come to mean to him in light of his contact with Zen Buddhism and his understanding of how the paradise tradition in Christianity contributes to authentic Christian living. But he first makes clear what it cannot mean: reducing Christ to particular social and conventional images, to a projection, to a “symbol of a certain sector of society, a certain group, a certain class, a certain culture.” This, he says, is “fatal,” and is inimical to any honest attempt to open oneself and live into the mystery of Christ. Instead, he says, “The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be ‘found in Him’ and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself.”⁸

How simple and beautiful this vision of Christian life is—with its intimate sense of being found, of knowing and being known by the Other. Yet, to realize this in one’s life requires risk, vulnerability. It means letting go completely of all images and ideas about God, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the desert. This is what Merton means when he says to Suzuki: “Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him (it is like the cow-catching pictures) and He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself.*” Merton would elaborate further upon these insights in his formal dialogue with D. T. Suzuki found in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. But it is difficult to think of another place in his writings where he speaks so personally and passionately of his own felt sense of what it means to walk this pathless path. Something about being in conversation, about feeling the deepest thing within him called forth by the discerning mind of his esteemed interlocutor, stirred him. “Oh, my dear Dr. Suzuki,” he exclaims with disarming openness, “I know you will understand this so well.”

And what of paradise? Merton concludes these reflections with a promise to Suzuki to have someone at the monastery copy out for

⁸ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 564.

him the *Exultet*—explaining to him that it is sung on Easter night in celebration of the mystery of the Resurrection. “You will see what the Church really thinks about the ‘new creation’ and new paradise in Christ,” he tells him. “Right after the *Exultet*, the first chapter of Genesis is sung, with obvious implications.”⁹

Here in this simple primer of faith, offered to a friend from another spiritual tradition, one begins to see the connections between the theological vision underlying Christianity’s idea of the new creation—the transfiguration of the living world imagined as a new paradise—and the contemplative’s commitment to live out this vision in personal terms. “Life in Christ,” the gift given to every Christian through the resurrection and in baptism, is life in paradise. And while it is deeply personal, it is not merely personal. It touches on and includes everything, every fiber of the cosmos, every person living and dead, everything. To inhabit paradise is to feel oneself participating deeply in this mysterious whole, living in it, loving it. All of this, claims Merton, comes to us through grace.

Merton defines the Christian doctrine of grace for Suzuki simply as “the gift of God’s Life to us.” But he makes it clear that for all its simplicity, grace is fundamental and is at the heart of what it means to live in paradise. “The realization, the finding of ourselves in Christ and hence in paradise,” he says, “has a special character from the fact that this is all a free gift from God. With us, this stress on freedom, the *indeterminateness* of salvation, is the thing that corresponds to Zen in Christianity. . . . There is always this sudden irruption, this breakthrough of God’s freedom into our life, turning the whole thing upside down so that it comes out, contrary to all expectation, right side up.”¹⁰ Grace here is nothing more or less than the means by which one wakes up to oneself, to God, and to the world. As such, it is critical to any understanding of what it might mean to live in the world as if it were paradise.

The End of the World

When I was a child, I had a recurring dream. It was a mild summer day. I was walking barefoot through an open field full of tall grass.

⁹ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 564.

¹⁰ Letter from Merton to Suzuki, April 11, 1959, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 565.

An expansive feeling enveloped me as my body arched to meet the curve of the hill. Suddenly there appeared before me a large metallic cylinder embedded in the earth. My curiosity got the better of me: I reached out and pressed it. In an instant, the whole universe imploded.

I think about this dream often and, even though it has been many years since I last experienced it, it haunts me still. I will not try to offer an interpretation of it here. Rather I simply want to convey the kinds of feelings it provoked in me, and the associations it conjures up in me even now. I remember the feeling of intense well-being walking through that field, the sense that this was a place of endless peace, that there was nothing here that could harm me. The earth was tender and embraced me. I could have walked through those fields forever. When I saw that metal cylinder, I instinctively recoiled. I thought: this should not be here. I sensed the threat, the danger that it held. But I could not resist the impulse to touch it. There was something too about the moment just before I pressed it, that brief instant before the world disappeared, that I remember: I knew what this meant. I knew this was the end. And I was suddenly engulfed in a wave of sadness. Then everything was gone.

I grew up under the shadow of the bomb. Air raid drills were a regular part of my school life. Climb down under your desks, children, keep your heads down (and, as some acerbic commentators later added to this scenario: kiss your ass goodbye). Was I conscious of the depth of this threat at the time? I am not sure. But it seems clear that the awful prospect of the world's imminent destruction had seeped into my subconscious mind and that this awareness, along with myriad other threats, became incorporated into my dream life. One of the worst aspects of that dream was the helplessness and inevitability I felt: I had to touch that cylinder. The bomb had to explode. The world had to end. And each time I found myself on that hillside, the whole process was cruelly repeated.

Reflecting on the dream now, I find myself thinking more about the field, about the grass swaying in the breeze and how it felt to walk through it. It was not like any place I knew in my actual life, but it was easy enough to associate it with other places I had come to know and love near my home in the Pacific Northwest: the weeping willow tree in my backyard I climbed and hid away in, swaying for endless hours under the deep blue sky; the abandoned field across the street from my house filled with huge gnarled cherry trees that was for me and my

friends a place of secret enchantment; the marsh down the hill where I went with my brother to search for frogs and tadpoles; and in the distance, Lake Washington, welcoming us every summer into its deep, cool waters. I already knew what paradise felt like. That it should reappear in my dream was really not so surprising. But that it should be destroyed so suddenly and completely was appalling and terrible, a loss beyond my capacity to describe even now.

At the center of the dream is a sense that violence—an impersonal mechanized violence—dominates the world, and that there is nothing I or anyone else can do to prevent its destructive force from laying waste to everything. Certainly the threat of the bomb contributed to this sense. But I realize now that there were other threats, closer to home, that may also have entered into this terrible dream. There was the chronic damming of the Columbia River and the consequent decimation of the salmon population. There was the systematic clear-cutting of the ancient forests, hidden from view behind the so-called vista corridors that were left intact along the interstate highways we traveled (I still remember the pungent smell of the pulp mills near my grandparents' house in Tacoma, though at the time I did not connect this with the destruction of the forests). And far off the coast, the hunting and killing of whales continued unabated.

All of this constituted the fraying and fragmented field of being in which my childhood unfolded. In a sense, there is nothing remarkable about it. Indeed, the scope and extent of violence which many children face coming into the world far exceeds anything I have described here. Still, I mention it because I think it is useful to pause and consider how deeply the fragmentation and violence of the world we inhabit penetrates into our souls, and how painful it can be to reckon with this loss and with the terrible wasteland that seems increasingly to be taking its place.¹¹ And because it raises the question of whether the paradise tradition can still have meaning for us in the face of such loss. What I have described from my own experience is, after all, but one instance of a much larger pattern of loss and destruction within which we increasingly find ourselves living. The particular character of this loss in North America and beyond has been well documented

¹¹ For an account of how such traumatic experience affects the human capacity to encounter, take in, and respond to the world, see Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), especially 129–160.

in recent years.¹² This research makes clear what we have long suspected: that we once inhabited a very different and more abundant world than the one we live in now. It also makes clear our own complicity in this diminishment, and our awareness, not only recently but almost from the very beginning, of what we were doing. This growing awareness of the tearing of the fabric of the living world and of how our own attitudes toward it and way of living in it have contributed to its erosion marks a significant change in human consciousness. It may be that we still carry within us faint traces of the memory of what it felt like to live in a world that was whole; but these traces are growing increasingly faint. In light of this, one wonders whether it is still possible to affirm that “everything is in fact paradise.” Or is this an illusion, a dream that is no longer possible for us?

I do not pretend to have any clear answer to this question. But I think it is important for us to face up to it honestly and carefully if we are to have any hope of recovering a world that is ecologically whole. I believe the dream of paradise, so cherished within the Christian contemplative tradition, is still viable and has something significant to contribute to this work—not least in its insistence that the world is, has been, and will again be whole. The eschatological character of this vision of the whole is one of its chief virtues, for it invites us to invest hope in both the present and the future, insisting that we can come to know the world as eternal and whole (even if partially and provisionally) in the present moment, while also acknowledging that the ultimate transfiguration of all things is yet to be realized. But the very hope of such a transfiguration can inspire a deeper level of attention to and care for the world we now inhabit. This, I believe, is a crucial part of what it means to “practice” paradise: to learn to see and cherish the world, even in its degraded condition, as whole.

¹² Mark V. Barrow, Jr., *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Steve Nicholls, *Paradise Found: Nature in America at the Time of Discovery* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009). William H. MacLeish, *The Day Before America: Changing the Nature of a Continent* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1994). For an account of critical episodes of environmental collapse at even earlier moments of human history, see Ian Whyte, *World Without End? Environmental Disaster and the Collapse of Empires* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

The Purposeless Life

I am especially struck with the idea of the purposeless life, “filling the well with snow.” I suppose all life is just that anyway, but we are obsessed with purpose.¹³

I want to return here to the idea of the purposeless life, something that figures prominently in Merton’s correspondence with Suzuki and finds many echoes in the Christian contemplative tradition, in ecological thought, and in contemporary discussions about the relative weight and value we place on utility, productivity, and purposefulness in our culture. The ancient Christian contemplative tradition gave considerable attention to the question of whether it was possible to learn to live “free from care.” This idea traces its origins to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount on the importance of learning to live free from anxiety and is expressed most eloquently in reference to the “birds of the air” and the “lilies of the field” (Matt. 6:19–34). These images had tremendous potency for the early monks, for they captured precisely the character of the life they believed they were called to live: free, open, alive, unburdened by the debilitating power of anxiety and fear. The ascetic practices they undertook—both the practical, embodied practices involving detachment and simplification of their lives as well as the more hidden, interior practices involving the reckoning with and gradual healing of their own obsessive thoughts—were all oriented toward helping them realize within themselves an authentic and enduring freedom. The notion of *amerimnia*—which can be translated variously as “insouciance” or “freedom from anxiety” or “freedom from care”—figured critically into the monks’ understanding of what it meant to live with true contemplative simplicity. And it was bound closely to the question of what it meant to recover or learn to reinhabit paradise.

The longing to live “free from care,” or to live what Merton in his letter to Suzuki calls “the purposeless life,” should not be mistaken for a simple disregard for others or for the world, or a willingness to live “without care” for persons or things. Rather, it expresses a hunger to discover a more honest, free, and open way of living in the world that enables one to see and respond to the other without succumbing to the temptation to think of such relationships only in terms of their

¹³ Letter from Thomas Merton to D. T. Suzuki, October 14, 1964, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 569.

utility and purpose. Indeed, one of the fundamental questions raised by the contemplative tradition has to do with how best to understand purpose and utility in human life, and whether the meaning of things depends on their having a purpose or a use. Does our insistence on the fundamental value of utility and purposefulness also undermine our very capacity to see and notice and respond to the world on its own terms? At its root, these are also questions about what kind of value we attribute to things like play, imagination, attention, and prayer, and whether they can be understood, at least in conventional terms, as having any purpose at all.

Echoes of such questions can be heard in contemporary debates, certainly in North America, about the relative weight and value we place on purpose and utility in our culture, our economic lives, and even our spiritual practice.¹⁴ And about how little patience we have for allowing the deeper kinds of knowledge and understanding acquired through long, slow contemplative practice—what environmental philosopher David Orr refers to as “slow knowledge”—to grow and develop within us.¹⁵ I will return to this question below. For the moment, I want simply to note the resonance between this understanding of knowledge and the kind of knowing that contemplative traditions have long advocated, and to suggest that it is precisely this kind of knowledge or sensibility that will be necessary if we are to develop a capacity for examining critically the assumptions that govern our way of living in the world.¹⁶ Especially important in this regard is the cultivation of the kind of capacious awareness that can help us learn to feel and take in the beauty and power of the world for its own sake and refrain from evaluating it purely in terms of its utility. Here the contemplative tradition can be seen as deeply sympathetic to a strain of thought within ecological literature and poetry that places

¹⁴ See, for example, Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), and the recent documentary film on American education by Vicki Abeles called *Race to Nowhere*, <http://www.racetonowhere.com/>.

¹⁵ David W. Orr, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35–42.

¹⁶ The fundamental questions of how and why we place such a strong value on “utility” and “purpose” and why alternative modes of being, rooted in idleness, play, and prayer, have such a difficult time being accepted and cultivated in contemporary American culture have been examined, albeit from different perspectives, by Mark Slouka, “Quitting the Paint Factory: On the Virtues of Idleness,” *Harpers* (November 2004): 57–65; and Walter J. Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* (Winter 1989): 14–18.

great value on the practice of noticing, describing, and feeling the simple pleasure of the physical world for its own sake. And while the cultivation and practice of such awareness may not be sufficient in itself to help us redress the pernicious effects of our utilitarian and acquisitive culture, the recovery of such capacity will almost certainly be necessary to the kind of sustained imaginative, ecological, and spiritual renewal that we need.

So, there is a paradox: contemplation is useless; it partakes of a dimension of living that cannot be given a precise utilitarian value. Indeed, at its deepest level, it resists being forced into such categories. At the same time, it is necessary and important (that is, useful) to the task of renewing human culture and healing a fragmented and degraded natural world. Contemplation has no end or purpose beyond itself. The contemplative seeks only to become more aware of, more alive to everything and everyone. And yet it has a *telos* or end toward which it moves and which it helps to facilitate: the great consummation or recapitulation of all things in God, the new heaven and new earth long dreamed of by prophets and mystics. Contemplative practice invites one to enter into this paradoxical space and to become mindful of the mysterious presence of God always emerging in the present moment and always leading toward the fulfillment of all things in the age to come. The relinquishment of purpose at the heart of contemplative practice can in this sense be understood and experienced as having a profound meaning and even, paradoxically, a kind of purpose.

Still, the contemplative tradition often expresses a suspicion of purpose that is too narrowly conceived, that threatens to undermine the upwelling of the free and spontaneous response to life that is the soul's true freedom. Even amidst the kind of necessary and helpful distinctions that sometimes arose in ancient monastic literature—such as John Cassian's well-known differentiation between the *scopos* or immediate aim of the contemplative life (purity of heart) and the *telos* or ultimate end (the reign of heaven) of that life—there is a sense that contemplative living cannot be reduced to means and ends. It always transcends them, reaches past them into the space of pure freedom—the reign of heaven.¹⁷ In spite of this, one encounters

¹⁷ John Cassian, *Conference I*. For a discussion of the background of this distinction, see Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38–39. This distinction had already been made by Clement of Alexandria and

in this literature a persistent anxiety over whether or how to measure and quantify progress. Something of this concern is expressed in a story from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: “Abba Sisoës said to a brother, ‘How are you getting on?’ and he replied: ‘I am wasting my time, father.’ The old man said, ‘If I happen to waste a day, I am grateful for it.’”¹⁸ It is not easy to know what particular concern underlay this brother’s response to Abba Sisoës, or to be certain of the meaning of Abba Sisoës’s expression of gratitude for his own occasional experiences of simple, profligate living. But seen in the context of the monks’ consistent expression of hope that they might learn to live “free from care,” Sisoës’s response takes on a very particular meaning: it expresses the value the ancient monks attributed to relinquishing all plans, all projects, all designs for one’s life and resting instead in the beneficent abundance of God’s providence.

Such freedom from care was not acquired simply or easily. Indeed the entire literature of Christian contemplative thought can be understood as a sustained attempt to learn how to relinquish those habits of mind that prevent one from realizing it in one’s life. The very difficulty of realizing such freedom from care perhaps helps to account for the importance attached to those images of transformed existence that appear from time to time in this literature. A haunting, mirage-like image of this paradise and of the freedom enjoyed by the monks who inhabited it is conveyed in a story told by Abba Macarius. He had been prompted by the Spirit to go out in the remotest part of the desert. “There,” he recounts, “I found a sheet of water and an island in the midst, and the animals of the desert came to drink there. In the midst of these animals I saw two naked men. . . . They said, ‘It is God who has made this way of life for us. We do not freeze in the winter, and the summer does us no harm.’”¹⁹ Macarius was shaken by this image and, looking upon these two figures, was pierced with the realization that he had not yet become a true monk. But it also spoke to his deepest aspirations about what the contemplative life could be: an unfettered, graced existence, like our ancestors in

it is likely that it was from Clement that it came to be used in Evagrius’s works and from there to Cassian. As Columba Stewart notes, “The two fundamental themes of ‘purity of heart’ and ‘reign of heaven’ . . . underlie the whole of [Cassian’s] theology” (p. 38).

¹⁸ Sisoës 54; Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 222.

¹⁹ Macarius 2; Ward, *The Desert Christian*, 125–126.

paradise enjoyed before us. Macarius's encounter with these ghostly figures in the remotest region of the desert served as a reminder that the recovery of paradise was not merely a dream, but could be realized in one's life. As historian Peter Brown notes, the monk's "decision to 'sit alone' in the desert gave reality to a long tradition of speculation on the lost simplicity of Adam: 'the glory of Adam' was summed up in his person."²⁰

Adam (and Eve) in the garden: here we have what is perhaps *the* archetypal image of "the purposeless life" within the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. The particular contribution of the contemplative reading of this story is its suggestion that the original innocence or simplicity known to our ancestors in the ancient garden can—through a gradual process of healing and renewal of the mind—be recovered and made manifest in our own lives. The concrete character of this life as it is described in the monastic literature, especially the descent into the wild, trackless places of the desert, should not be ignored. Those who embarked upon this life did so with the full hope of realizing the ideals of contemplative living in the most practical, embodied terms. And the particular physical character of their lives in those wild places has real significance for understanding what contemplative living meant to them. Still, one should be careful not to literalize these images or identify the meaning of contemplative life too closely with a particular gesture (such as withdrawal into solitude) or a particular place (such as the desert). The greatest miracle of this way of life and its greatest value, after all, is its witness to the transformation that can take place in the imagination, the freedom and simplicity that can take hold in one's soul. If the contemplative tradition has anything to offer to us in this moment of acute loss and fragmentation, it is the conviction that this vision of the whole can be restored to our world.

The Contemplative Practice of Paradise

Is such a vision hopelessly quixotic, an exercise in nostalgia or wishful thinking about a world that once was but can no longer be? Perhaps it cannot help but appear to be so. Yet I wonder if that is really true. I want to suggest rather that our effort at retrieving and

²⁰ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 86.

living into such a vision of the whole may well prove to be one of the most crucial moral and spiritual tasks we can undertake in the present moment. If we understand the recovery of paradise as the ancient monastic tradition did—as a fundamental deepening of our capacity to see and inhabit the world as charged with spiritual significance—there is hardly anything that will remain untouched by such a vision. Such a renewal will require us to rethink (and perhaps reject once and for all) our persistent tendency to imagine the world only in terms of its usefulness to us and to open ourselves instead to its presence as pure gift. This is both an imaginative and a practical task. We will need to dream the world anew and somehow find a way to inhabit it in our embodied lives. What will this imaginative retrieval of paradise look like in practice? Addressing this question will, almost inevitably, require us to attend to the testimony of particular persons. I want to conclude, then, with a brief reflection on Thomas Merton's effort at engaging this question some years after his initial meeting with D. T. Suzuki.

In April 1964, during a period in his life when Merton had begun to spend increasing amounts of time in his hermitage, he found himself drawn to reflect in his journal on the meaning of "heavenliness":

All the trees are fast beginning to be in leaf and the first green freshness of a new summer is all over the hills. . . . Mixture of heavenliness and anguish. Seeing "heavenliness" suddenly for instance in the pure, pure, white of the mature dogwood blossoms against the dark evergreens in the cloudy garden. "Heavenliness" too of the song of the unknown bird that is perhaps here only for these days, passing through, a lovely, deep, simple song. Pure—no pathos, no statement, no desire, pure heavenly sound. Seized by this "heavenliness" as if I were a child—a child mind I have never done anything to deserve to have and which is my own part in the heavenly spring. Not of this world, or of my making. Born partly of physical anguish (which is really not there, though. It goes quickly). Sense that "heavenliness" is the real nature of things, *not* their nature, not *en soi*, but the fact they are a gift of love, and of freedom.²¹

²¹ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 5: 1963–1965, Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 99 (April 23, 1964).

Merton's late journals are filled with simple, delicate descriptions of the natural world, expressions of his deepening capacity to see and feel the simple, luminous beauty of the world. Some of Merton's friends, especially Czeslaw Milosz and Rosemary Radford Ruether, found his views of the natural world too romantic, not sufficiently attentive to the presence of inexplicable suffering and death found everywhere in nature. Merton acknowledged the importance of these challenges, though he never relinquished his sense of the world's fundamentally sacramental, paradisaical character.²² The struggle to hold all of this together within a single contemplative intuition gradually began to yield a more complex and ambiguous feeling for the natural world: heavenliness and anguish exist together. As the ancient Jewish and Christian wisdom traditions affirm, they are bound together eternally. If "heavenliness," something Merton elsewhere describes in terms of "the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ now,"²³ is to have meaning and significance for us in our present existence, it must somehow take account of the enduring and painful presence of anguish—both the inexplicable pain and suffering that are part of the reality of our embodied lives in the natural world as well as the anguish manifested in the myriad distortions and abuses of paradise that we ourselves visit upon the world. And more than this, it must lead to a willingness to stand within that anguish and to seek meaningful forms of resistance to the patterns of thought and ways of living that continue to diminish and impoverish the world.

In much of Merton's later writing, one sees the effort to identify and retrieve a meaningful idea of paradise joined to a fierce resistance to the increasing presence of "false paradises" within contemporary thought and practice. This is particularly clear in two important late essays, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," and *Day of a Stranger*, which frame the ideal of contemplative living as being both utterly "purposeless" and necessary to the work of social criticism and political resistance.²⁴

²² For Merton's correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether, see *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 497–516, esp. 504–508. For the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, see *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 37, 50, 64–73.

²³ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 87 (March 7, 1964).

²⁴ Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 9–23; Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City, Utah.: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981).

His correspondence from this period also reveals his continued attention to this theme and his growing suspicion of the kind of secular expressions of hope that promised an illusory paradise on earth. In a letter to Mary Childs Black, dated January 24, 1962, Merton notes the continuing importance of the Shaker's vision of eternity present on earth, and the danger of purely secular versions of paradise: The Shakers, Merton observes, "saw the deceptiveness of the secular hope, and their eyes were open, in childlike innocence, to the evil, the violence, the unscrupulousness that too often underlay the secular vision of the earthly paradise. It was a paradise in which the Indian had been slaughtered and the Negro was enslaved."²⁵ In a letter to Madame Camille Drevet, dated July 1, 1965, he calls attention to the problematic character of "the ancient American myth of rejuvenation, justification, and a totally new start. By definition this is the land not only of 'liberty' but also of primeval innocence and indeed complete impeccability."²⁶ He notes ruefully the patterns of blindness and exploitation that have issued forth from this particular vision of paradise. And in a letter to Leslie Dewart, dated September 1962, he acknowledges the tremendous harm that has been done by what he describes as "the illusion of America as the earthly paradise, in which everyone recovers original goodness: which becomes in fact a curious idea that prosperity itself justifies everything, is a sign of goodness, is a *carte blanche* to continue to be prosperous in any way feasible." This illusion of prosperity, Merton warns, leads us to believe that "we are entitled to defend ourselves by any means whatever, without any limitation, and all the more so because what we are defending is our illusion of innocence."²⁷

It is chilling to read these comments today and to feel how little has changed and how deeply attached we remain to our own profoundly destructive visions of paradise. It serves as a reminder of the need to continue to cultivate our own contemplative critique, one that can address the ongoing patterns of our destructive presence in the world and our anguish over this. But such a critique must also help us

²⁵ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 31.

²⁶ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 99.

²⁷ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 282–283. For a thoughtful contemporary critique of the paradise myth that resonates with many of Merton's observations, see David Oates, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* (Corvallis, Ore.: Oregon State University Press, 2003).

find language for affirming that even amidst such anguish, heavenliness is real, and is woven deeply into our present experience.

“We already have everything, but we don’t know it and don’t experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.”²⁸ This is how Thomas Merton expressed his sense of the contemplative life during his visit with the community at Redwoods Monastery in California in 1968. Here again, one hears an echo of the ancient monastic notion that, as Columba Stewart expresses it, “contemplation and prayer are a kind of participation in heavenly beatitude.”²⁹ In Merton’s conference at the Redwoods, as in so much of his later work, it is the possibility of realizing this beatitude in the life of the person of prayer that concerns him most. One senses here a reflection of his own long struggle to simplify contemplative practice, to allow it to take hold of his own life on a deep level beyond the usual concern with means and ends. “We have been indoctrinated so much into means and ends,” he said, “that we don’t realize that there is a different dimension in the life of prayer.” It is mostly a matter of “giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”³⁰

“We have what we seek.” Here, in its simplest form, is how the Christian contemplative tradition understands the mystery of paradise. It is present to us always—in “the mature dogwood blossoms against the dark evergreens in the cloudy garden.” In the “song of the unknown bird.” In everything that exists. It is accessible to all of us. All we have to do to encounter it, to feel the heavenliness of things, is to open our eyes or ears. “Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each.”³¹ That is Henry David Thoreau’s advice, and it is not far from what we sense in this journal entry or in Merton’s earlier correspondence with Suzuki or in the ancient monastic teaching on contemplative practice. The simple reality of existence is

²⁸ Cited in David Steindl-Rast, “Man of Prayer,” in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 80.

²⁹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 60.

³⁰ Cited in Steindl-Rast, “Man of Prayer,” 80–81.

³¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, August 23, 1853, in *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 200.

deeply graced. It is our growing awareness of this truth, the recovery of our original innocence, or what Merton calls our “child mind,” that accounts for our capacity to experience the world—even amidst the anguish we feel at its brokenness—as luminous, revelatory. If we are to participate in the healing and renewal of the world, we will need to risk inhabiting and embodying in our own lives the truth that “the whole world has risen in Christ,” that “everything is in fact paradise, because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God.”

