

Softly, Softly: Contemplative Ecology in Our Time of Need
A Zoom retreat with Br. Aidan Owen, OHC

Quotations and Selected Bibliography

Berry, Thomas, *The Dream of the Earth*.

Delio, Ilia, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being*.

Bourgeault, Cynthia, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*.

Guroian, Vigen, *The Fragrance of God*.

Guroian, Vigen, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*.

Hadejwich, "All things are too small for me," in Jane Hirschfield, ed., *Women in Praise of the Sacred*.

Harkness, Edward, "Union Creek in Winter" from <https://www.terrain.org/2017/poetry/letter-to-america-harkness/>

Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Korn, Peter, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*.

Langlands, Alexander, *Cræft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*.

Merton, Thomas, *A Year with Thomas Merton*.

Solnit, Rebecca, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*.

Symeon the New Theologian, "We Awaken in Christ's Body," from *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, Stephen Mitchell, ed.

When I garden, earth and earthworm pass between my fingers, and I realize that I am made of the same stuff. [...] Man is a microcosm in whose flesh resonates and reverberates the pulse of the whole creation, in whose mind creation comes to consciousness, and through whose

imagination and will God wants to heal and reconcile everything that sin has wounded and put in disharmony. (Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise*, 7)

We're increasingly constrained by computers and a pixelated abridgement of reality that serves only to make us blind to the truly infinite complexity of the natural world. Most critically, our physical movements have been almost entirely removed as a factor in our own existence. Now all we seem to do is push buttons. (Langlands, 11)

Isn't someone who is crafty also someone who simply has a way of doing things that is different from our own? Like the witch, the crafty so-and-so is the outsider, the non-conformist, the maverick, the renegade. Their craftiness is about bringing together all their powers to get on in the world outside of the Establishment, or perhaps even despite the Establishment. If we don't already, should we not admire craftiness a little more? (Langlands, 20)

Against a rising tide of automation and increasing digital complexity, we are becoming further divorced from the very thing that defines us: we are makers, crafters of things. When our lives once comprised an almost unbroken chain of movements and actions as we interacted physically with the material requirements of our existence, today we stare at screens and we press buttons. When we made things, we accumulated a certain kind of knowledge, we had an awareness and an understanding of how materials worked and how the human form has evolved to create from them. With the severance from this ability we're in danger of losing touch with a knowledge base that allows us to convert raw materials into useful objects, and hand-eye-head-heart-body co-ordination that furnishes us with a meaningful understanding of the materiality of our world. [...] We must never lose sight of the fact that the most intelligently designed, the most versatile and the most complex piece of kit we have at our disposal is our own body. As John Ruskin put it in 1859, in our hands, we have "the subtlest of all machines." (Langlands, 22-24)

Unfortunately Western religious traditions have been so occupied with redemptive healing of a flawed world that they tend to ignore creation as it is experienced in our times. Consequently one of the basic difficulties of the modern West is its division into a secular scientific community, which is concerned with creative energies, and a religious community, which is concerned with redemptive energies. So concerned are we with redemptive healing that once healed, we look to be more healed. We seldom get to our functional role within the creative intentions of the universe. (Berry, 25)

"I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly. As I was walking up to the church this morning, I passed that row of big oaks by the war memorial--if you remember them--and I thought of another morning, fall a year or two ago, when they were dropping their acorns thick as hail almost. There was all sorts of thrashing in the leaves and there were acorns hitting the pavement so hard they'd fly past my head. All this in the dark, of course. I remember a slice of moon, no more than that. It was a very clear night, or morning, very still, and then there was such energy in the things transpiring among those trees, like a storm, like travail. I stood there a

little out of range, and I thought, It is all still new to me. I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me.” (Robinson, *Gilead*)

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one to shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.” (Robinson, *Gilead*)

“Self emptying is also, in the deepest sense, *self-disclosure*, which is fundamentally a creative act; it tends to bring new worlds into existence by revealing what had formerly been present only in potential. From a metaphysical perspective, explosion rather than implosion in the principle of actualization. Many of the most subtle Christian theologians believe this is how God originally created the world, through a radical self-outpouring: ‘the prodigal who squanders himself,’ as Karl Rahner puts it. It is also, clearly, how Christ redeemed it—storing up nothing, clinging to nothing, equally at home in humiliation and glory. His ultimate act of self-emptying upon the cross is what brings into being the New Creation.” (Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*)

“When surrounded by fear, contradiction, betrayal; when the ‘fight or flight’ alarm bells are going off in your head and everything inside you wants to brace and defend itself, the infallible way to extricate yourself and reclaim your home in that sheltering kingdom is simply to freely release whatever you are holding onto—including, if it comes to this, life itself. The method of full, voluntary self-donation reconnects you instantly to the wellspring; in fact, it is the wellspring. The most daring gamble of Jesus’ trajectory of pure love may just be to show us that self-emptying is not the *means* to something else; the act is itself the full expression of its meaning and instantly brings into being ‘a new creation’: the integral wholeness of Love manifested in the particularity of a human heart.” (Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*)

“Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. [...] Hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth’s treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. [...] I say [this] because I have noticed: wars will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act. The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave.” (Solnit, p. 4)

“Joy doesn’t betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection.” (Solnit, p. 24)

Union Creek in Winter

By Edward Harkness

There’s no word for it so far, the word
for what it means to be in love with you
in our sinking world, what it means to hike
through new snow, to hear beneath
the glass of creek ice the flow of winter
percolating its way through the ravine
not quite soundlessly toward lower ground
to join the wild roar of the American River.

The word that means we’ve loved
through the avalanches of our time,
loved while the wars raged, paid for
with our taxes, loved while our loved ones
voted for hatred, for *I want the false past I want
what’s coming to me*, protected as they’ve been
by their skin white as this very snow draped
on hemlocks in the ravine’s wavering light.

The word that means we’re not alone,
we share that same nature wonder,
for the flicker tapping on a far-off tree,
the delicate calligraphy of a mouse’s
prints along our path, as if Tu Fu
has been here too, who knew, even then,
even in the Tang Dynasty, beauty
leaves behind its faint notations.

The word that means we will go on,
we will follow an earlier trekker’s snowshoe
trail, slog on bundled to keep the chill
from overtaking us, descend again steeply,
then climb again switchbacks above the creek
away from its cold murmurings, to our car
and the long drive back to the war zone
of now. Armed with our little courage,

we must drive straight to the front,
strap on flak jackets and begin the slow
search for survivors, slow search
for the words that might revive them.
Even now we're feverish to make contact,
to know what to listen for, to learn to hear
those muffled cries from deep in the rubble.
If we knew the words we might save

those most weakened, most in danger of giving up.
If we knew the words we might keep the world,
its rivers, its ice, its bitterroot, its winter wrens,
its hemlocks, its moonlight, its children,
its Shakespeare, its Szyborska, its rosehips,
its green and orange lichens, its Dylan,
its kora players, its humming birds, you,
me, and our Muslim neighbor, Maya, alive.

Hadejwich of Brabant

Translated by Jane Hirshfield in Women in Praise of the Sacred

All things
are too small
to hold me.
I am so vast

In the infinite
I reach
for the Uncreated

I have
touched it,
it undoes me
wider than wide

Everything else
is too narrow

You know this well,
you who are also there

We awaken in Christ's body
by [Symeon the New Theologian](#)

English version by Stephen Mitchell

We awaken in Christ's body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhood).

I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous? — Then
open your heart to Him

and let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
we wake up inside Christ's body

where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
and He makes us, utterly, real,

and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed

and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light
he awakens as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.

— from *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, by Stephen Mitchell