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Alone in America:
Solitude, Nature, and the Sacred from Walden to the World Wide Web

By

Brian G. Campbell

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion
American Religious Cultures

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An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

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Drawing on archival research, oral history interviews, and online ethnography, this dissertation traces the cultural history of solitude in North America. Through a series of case studies, I argue solitude is not merely an oddity at the margins, but is a shared symbol of the sacred, powerfully linked with a constellation of trends in contemporary American religion and culture, including the rise of individual spirituality and the decline of religious affiliation, the religious dimensions of nature and place, and the impact of information technologies in facilitating both isolation and connection. I chart the development of a distinctive American tradition of solitude. Thoreau's *Walden* solidified and spread a particular stereotype and cemented specific practices as defining sacred solitude: simple living, contemplation of nature and self, writing, and moral integrity. In this same late-nineteenth century context, hermits, backcountry guides, environmentalists, and intellectual elites in New York's Adirondack region established a lasting link between solitude and a particular kind of place: wilderness. This link between solitude and the wild deeply influenced the culture of American environmentalism and religion, and directly inspired William James and his theorizing of individual religious experience. I continue to follow this dynamic tradition of solitude as it spread in several tangled strands. Through a series of case studies, I examine those who took up the tradition of wilderness solitude in the twentieth century, at once reinforcing its historic stereotypes and also creatively redefining the norms of sacred solitude. Next, I trace the influence of this wilderness tradition on two small groups of Roman Catholic hermits, who in the 1960s, began to revive ancient Christian traditions of solitude in the North American context. Finally, I examine the impact of communication technologies, which have helped facilitate a surge in the number of individuals living in solitude, and have created new opportunities for those in solitude to connect with one another and the world.

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Preface

In 1990, Noël Murchie, recently divorced and in her mid-50s, decided it was time to break with the past and find a new home. For the next two years, she lived alone in a small cabin perched on a rocky cliff at the edge of an island in Washington's San Juans. When she sat down to write about her solitary experience, she titled her memoir *The Accidental Hermit*. Murchie acknowledged that she claimed this title with some humor and hesitation, since "purists might suggest that tagging myself such was slightly hoaxy." She had a clear sense that invoking the word "hermit" brought with it a whole set of well-established cultural meanings. "Official loners," she wrote, were usually "fusspot men with noble, deliberate missions: mute, meditating monks… intellectual naturalists… [and] ascetics who take vows of poverty/simplicity/humility/charity/ chastity/stability/obedience."[1]

I met Noël Murchie in 2009, at a café a short walk from where the ferry dropped me on the island. This was one of my first research interviews, and I was eager to hear about her experience of living in solitude and writing about it. Having read her book, I was especially struck by her strong sense of what a "real" hermit was like, and her only somewhat humorous feeling that she was a "fake" one. She was not trying to contemplate religion or nature, prove her moral purity or renounce all luxury. She was looking for a quiet place to live to continue her work as a freelance writer. It was an accident Murchie wound up in a remarkably remote cabin, the only available rental on the island. Over time, the place began to shape her identity. She was becoming a hermit, but in her words,

[1] Noël Murchie, *The Accidental Hermit* (Orcas, WA: Nine Toes Press, 2000), 4-5.

a “cheating hermit,” who “went to the grocery store and had a car,” a hermit who was “hooked on *Wheel of Fortune*” and held out hope she might meet a man.[2]

Noël Murchie was also eager to ask me questions. She knew from our email exchanges that I was piecing together the story of a fascinating, but virtually unknown phenomenon in American religion and culture. Since the 1960s, there has been a surge in solitude. Hundreds, if not thousands of individuals have chosen to withdraw from society to live alone, to be more attentive to God, to self, to nature, or just to be more attentive. The vast majority of these contemporary hermits do not fit the stereotype Murchie and others often imagine of the bearded, ragged-robed recluse in the wilderness hut. The real story is much more complex. Americans are integrating solitude into modern life in a variety of ways, and in a variety of contexts. Some modern-day hermits make their homes in the remote wilderness, but others cultivate sustainable, contemplative lives in cities and suburbs. Most, it seems, are women. Even as some reject modern technologies altogether, many isolated individuals use mobile phones, social media, and the internet to connect with family and friends, and even cultivate networks of solitude with others living alone.

My visit with Noël Murchie was one of several stops on an island-hopping research trip. Through a combination of oral history interviews and archival research, I explored the rich history and diversity of solitude in the scattered islands of the Pacific Northwest. I stopped to meet Murchie on my way back from Vancouver Island, where I had gone to visit Father Charles Brandt, one of the founding figures in this modern revival of solitude, and the focus of Chapter Four. He has lived as a hermit since 1965, when he built a cabin near the Tsolum River, joining a group of Catholic monks from

[2] Noël Murchie, interview with the author, October 9, 2009, San Juan Islands, WA.

around the world who came to the rainy wilderness of Vancouver Island to rediscover the solitary spirituality at the foundation of Christian monasticism. Brandt was also looking to be closer to nature. Long before he converted to Catholicism and became a Trappist monk, he was a naturalist. As a child he read Thoreau and dreamed of living alone in a fire lookout. He got a degree in ecology and developed his skill as a nature writer and photographer.

I first learned of Charles Brandt the way I find many contemporary hermits – on the Internet. As I read newsletters and online conversations among contemporary Catholic hermits, many described a revival of solitude beginning in the 1960s and traced this to Brandt and this band of brothers, the Hermits of St. John the Baptist. Together with Remi De Roo, Bishop of Victoria, they set in motion a process that would recognize the hermit as a consecrated vocation in the Catholic Church. After exchanging emails with Brandt, I arranged to interview him and Bishop De Roo. I traveled to Vancouver Island to document this history and see the few hermitages that remain in the thick, damp forests along the Tsolum River, even as the hermits have scattered.

These were by no means the first hermits to settle on islands in the Pacific Northwest, as I would learn in the archives of the Orcas Island Historical Museum. Just a few miles from where I met Noël Murchie is Matia Island, at 145 acres, a mere dot on the map. In 1892, Union Army veteran Elvin Smith claimed the island as his home. He wrote, “I was surrounded by God’s handiwork and of but little of the handiwork of man, and I think I am influenced accordingly.” Locals called Smith “the hermit of Matia Island,” and over time, his reputation spread, thanks to his unusual vegetarian diet and practice of long distance faith healing. Once a week, Smith rowed a boat to Orcas Island

to collect his mail, literally buckets full of letters requesting his aid. Each morning, he would wake at 4 a.m. to pray, focusing the power of his mind and performing what he called “therapeutic suggestion” to cure “any disease that can be cured with drugs and many diseases that drugs cannot even help.” Smith explained that the solitude of his island home gave him the freedom to cultivate his spiritual gift. He read and digested the Bible and also observed the “wild animals in their native health,” who “do not suffer with disease, for they have never learned to violate God’s laws.”[3] Alone with God and nature, he devoted himself to healing others.

Stories of solitude have long been part of the landscape of the islands in the Pacific Northwest, circulated by word of mouth, printed in regional newspapers and magazines, and occasionally provoking fascination from a broader audience. Not long after my visit, the *New York Times* profiled Nick Fahey, who had spent 16 years alone on another small island in the San Juans. The story featured a picture of his weathered cabin, and described his few amenities, including solar panels to charge his cell phone. Online, the *Times* story included an interactive feature profiling five more “destinations for solitude seekers,” highlighting exotic locales well-suited for readers eager to “act out” the “common fantasy” of “getting away from it all.”[4] Clearly, the lure of solitude extends well beyond the islands of the Pacific Northwest.

This research trip encapsulates the mix of methods that have characterized my study of solitude, a cultural history that combines archival research, oral history interviews, and online ethnography. This dissertation focuses on individuals like these, who live alone, and on the particular places they call home, situating them within a

[3] “Letter 2” Elvin Smith to Alphia Rambo, November 24, 1905, Archives, Orcas Island Historical Museum.
[4] Sarah Maslin Nir, "Embracing a Life of Solitude," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2010.

broader historical and cultural context. Past stories of solitude echo in the present, shaping both private and public attitudes about what counts as a "real" hermit, and what sort of place is right for being alone. An eager public consumes each story of newly discovered solitude, reinforcing established norms and sustaining the mystique of those who live alone.

Linking these individual cases with their historical and cultural context, this dissertation traces the history of solitude, and reveals its connection to a constellation of trends in contemporary American religion and culture, including the rise of individual spirituality and the decline of religious affiliation, the religious dimensions of nature and place, and the impact of information technologies in facilitating both isolation and connection. As I visited archives and visited individuals living alone, I came to see the solitude as a distinctive tradition within American culture, richly diverse but linked by many common threads. Hermits like those I encountered in the Pacific Northwest were "getting away from it all," but in the process, they were also becoming part of something larger. Their individual stories weave together and tell a broader story of solitude in American culture, one tied closely to American ideas of religion and nature. Solitude is largely hidden from view, and is also entangled in some of the most powerful, most sacred themes in American life.

Introduction

In 1901, in the first of his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, William James announced his working definition of religion: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” Later in his lectures, James elaborated this focus on solitude:

> Ecclesiastical institutions hardly concern us at all. The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast. First-hand individual experience of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witnessed its birth. Naked comes it into the world and lonely; and it has always, for a time at least, driven him who had it into the wilderness, often into the literal wilderness out of doors, where the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, St. Francis, George Fox, and so many others had to go.[1]

At the dawn of the twentieth century, this preeminent American scholar identified solitude as the very foundation of religion, the purest and most direct way of relating to the divine. Solitude, he declared, was a universal human experience, and thus a key category for understanding the varieties of religious experience. James called scholars of religion to shift their focus away from established institutions and instead focus on innovative individual religious experiences, the kind often received as heretical, and the kind most at home in the wilderness.[2]

Nearly a century later, Clifford Geertz, another esteemed American scholar of religion, declared James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* “at once dated and exemplary.” Its focus on solitary spirituality seemed to Geertz, “almost ultra-

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[1] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 31, 335.

[2] *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 316.

contemporaneous" in an era of "New Age and postmodern excitements," and this seems even more so now, as polls chart the growth of religious "nones," individuals unaffiliated with institutional religious bodies.[3] Geertz noted however, that James' focus on solitude and "radically personal" "deep-experience" also seemed "quaintly remote" and no longer "adequate." Religion, Geertz argued, was a cultural system that could not to be reduced some pure, private space but instead consisted of interrelated, collective symbols impossible to tease apart:

> In what we are pleased to call the real world, 'meaning,' 'identity,' 'power,' and 'experience' are hopelessly entangled, mutually implicative, and 'religion' can no more be founded upon or reduced to the last, that is, 'experience,' than it can to any of the others. It is not in solitude that faith is made.

The real world is thoroughly "entangled," and religion, he noted, is at the core of the most knotted public conflicts, from immigration policies, school curricula, and abortion debates to riots, terrorism, and fatwas. Geertz, however, resisted reducing religion to such public spheres, calling for increased attention to "the personal inflections of religious engagement" and praising James for his "intense, marvelously observant, almost pathologically sensitive attention to the shades and subtleties of thought and emotion."[4]

Taking up the challenge of both James and Geertz, this dissertation probes the cultural history of solitude in America, examining the religious experiences of the most isolated individuals and exploring how their solitude is entangled in collective symbols, practices, and politics. Drawing on traditional documentary research, face-to-face fieldwork and online ethnography, I survey the stories of those who have chosen to live

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[3] See, for example, "“Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).
[4] Clifford Geertz, ""The Pinch of Destiny": Religion as Experience, Meaning, Identity, Power," in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

alone and the public responses their stories have provoked. In the chapters ahead, I demonstrate the development of a distinctive American tradition of solitude, defined by particular practices and linked to particular places. This dynamic tradition of solitude has spread in several tangled strands, especially among individuals drawn to live alone in nature and American Catholics seeking to revive ancient Christian traditions of solitary spirituality.

Through these individual and collective cases, I argue solitude is not merely an oddity at the margins, but is a shared symbol of the sacred, and an unseen connective thread tied to several key themes in American religion and culture. Solitude functions "like the nucleus of an atom," to borrow the words of Catherine Albanese, an ever-shifting sacred center that "fixes the orbit of the more partial symbols that surround it."[5] Most prominently, this study examines the historic link between solitude and wilderness, which developed as mutually reinforcing symbols of purity and authenticity. In addition, I highlight stories of solitude invoked to validate the myth of a simpler, more primitive past, free of the contamination of technology. The mystique of solitude also reinforces the sense that spirituality is most authentic when tailored to one's private tastes, disaffiliated from traditional religious institutions. Tracing the genealogy of sacred solitude, I bring these powerful associations into focus, and in the process reveal the points of instability, where these orbits prove less predictable, and solitude less fixed. Just as it did for William James, solitude continues to represent the promise of a pure, universal experience untainted by the messiness of social life. In the end, though, solitude

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[5] Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, Chicago History of American Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7.

is even more vital a cog in American religious culture precisely because of its tangled connections.

Solitude and the Polarity of the Sacred

Throughout American history, solitary individuals have been represented as sacred symbols, embodying social ideals, especially rugged individualism, personal religious seeking, and a reverence for nature. Separate from mainstream society, these figures exemplify the possibility for a life rooted in the place one lives. Even as solitary individuals come to exemplify cultural values, they also reveal the ways these same social values, taken to the extreme, can foster social isolation, political radicalism, and countercultural, individual religiosity at odds with established authority. Solitude, I argue, is sacred in a polar and polarizing way.

Drawing on the interpretive tradition of Émile Durkheim, I understand the sacred as a collectively produced representation of a society's identity and values.[6] The sacred reinforces the order, integrity, and ideals of a social group. Solitary individuals, as sacred symbols, embody the culture's shared vision of what life should be. But the sacred does not only have this positive valence. It is powerful precisely because it is fraught with tension. The sacred represents a society's norms, and also embodies their potential violation or transgression. It is a force of social cohesion and dissolution. Solitude is

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[6] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995). Roger Caillois, Robert Hertz, and more recently William Paden and Carol Burnside have developed this interpretive tradition of the polar and polarizing sacred. Robert Hertz, *Death & the Right Hand* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960); Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man and the Sacred* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); William Paden, "Sacrality as Integrity: "Sacred Order" as a Model for Describing Religious Worlds," in *The Sacred and Its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996).

inspiring but also dangerous, challenging conventional ways of life and conventional approaches to spirituality. Solitary individuals in America thus occupy a dual role, at times treated as cultural saints and objects of romantic reverence, but also as eccentrics or extremists, odd at best and dangerous at worst.

This sense of the sacred is distinct from the most common scholarly and colloquial uses of the word, which understand the sacred substantively, as that which individuals encounter in their most profound religious experiences. Here, the sacred is another name for the divine, the transcendent, the ultimate, or the wholly other. Several scholars are prominent in this tradition, defining the sacred as “holy” (Rudolph Otto), “power” (Gerardus van der Leeuw), or “real” (Mircea Eliade).[7] Eliade described how the sacred “irrupts” in what he called “hierophanies,” profound experiences in which everyday time and space are transformed by “the presence of something *other* than the natural.” Eliade often described the sacred in spatial terms, as the “axis mundi,” the fixed point that serves as the organizing center of the cosmos, a stable center precisely because it is so fully separate.[8]

This phenomenological approach has key limitations that make it problematic for my analysis. Defining the sacred as a fixed, absolute reality obscures its inherent tensions, its polar and polarizing quality, and its contested, changing norms. In emphasizing individual emotional experience, this approach downplays the social context

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[7] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1923); Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. John Evan Turner, 2 vols. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, [1st American ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).
[8] *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: World Pub. Co., 1963), 19; *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 36-42.

that swirls around such powerful and seemingly private moments.[9] Rather than locating the sacred solely in such individual experience, I foreground the tangle of connections between individuals and their social, cultural, and natural worlds, particularly the points of tension when personal experience comes in contact with public attitudes toward solitude. I employ the interpretive lens of the sacred to tell a broader story, to understand the significance of solitude in collective processes of meaning-making and social solidarity.[10] This is not to say the individual does not matter, but rather to understand why isolated individuals matter so much, why their stories of solitude provoke charged public responses.

Durkheim anticipated the rise of the individual as a locus of the sacred, especially in modern Western society. He observed the emergence of a "cult of the individual," which "consecrated the individual and made him pre-eminently worthy of respect."[11] Durkheim recognized an inherent tension in this sanctification of the individual. The "collective" or "moral" individualism that promoted basic rights and respect was essential to fending off selfish forms of individualism, narcissism and egoism. Without some shared sense of the limits of individualism, personal desire threatened to spin free

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[9] On this distinction, see W. Richard Comstock, "A Behavioral Approach to the Sacred: Category Formation in Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, no. 4 (1981).

[10] Robert Orsi attempts to maintain a similar balance. He challenges historians to take seriously what he calls "abundant events," "experiences of radical presence or realness." Orsi insists that critical scholarship leads one to analyze the "network of routes" in which "presence radiates out" from the initial event, thus tracking the ways individual experience is embedded in broader social and cultural processes. See Robert A. Orsi, "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 7 (2008).

[11] Quoted in Robert Neelly Bellah, "Introduction," in *Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society, Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Neelly Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xxiv.

of the moral restraints of society, leading to "anomie," the absence of meaning and morality.[12]

The sacred serves to maintain the integrity of the social order, defining the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not. These boundaries are often taken for granted, so fundamental to society that they seem natural, stable and unremarkable. When the integrity of the social order is threatened, though, tensions become visible and it becomes clear that acceptability is constantly being negotiated and monitored. The sacred is constantly negotiated and monitored, and becomes particularly charged when individuals test its limits. The ideal of sacred solitude is a potent symbol of both the possibilities and limits of individualism.

Thus, the sacred is not a fixed, absolute reality, but a shifting set of symbols and practices, which are socially constructed and contested. This dissertation tracks the historical process by which solitude comes to represent particular social ideals. Stories of solitude circulate publicly, shaped to fit a socially constructed stereotype of sacred solitude. I foreground the social processes that craft this collective ideal, tracing the history of this stereotype to the late nineteenth century and beyond. I pay particular attention to cases that stir controversy, revealing competing claims for how "authentic" solitude should be defined. This interpretive framework focuses attention on what is at stake in the purity of the solitary's identity, and why this is potentially polluted if he or

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[12] On Durkheim's views on individualism, see Stjepan Gabriel Mestrovic, *Émile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology* ([Totawa, N.J.]: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 128-41.; Robertson, "Individualism, Societalism, Worldliness Universalism: Thematizing Theoretical Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 38, no. 4 (1977).; Gordon Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 102-04.; and Bellah, "Introduction."

she participates in the world of work and money, technology and communication, politics, relationships and sexuality.

Defined sociologically rather than substantively, the sacred is a dynamic process, not confined to formal religious institutions, traditions, texts, and rituals. This interpretive framework helps make sense of a wide range of cultural tensions and contradictions, especially those that become charged in debates over integrity and authenticity.[13] The sacred is pervasive in popular culture and politics. Its polar and polarizing qualities are often most visible in contexts that are unsettling and irreligious, in cases that blur the line between what is traditionally labeled sacred and profane.[14] To understand the polarizing qualities of sacred solitude, this dissertation examines solitaries who are well-loved and well-behaved, but also individuals including Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski who achieve iconic status in popular culture not in spite of, but because of the dark, dangerous side of their solitude. I highlight these tensions and contradictions in public discourses about solitude, and also in individuals who navigate established norms in their own contexts. I pay particular attention to moments when these conversations buzz with energy, when sacred norms become contested and redefined.

This study tracks the sacred dynamics of solitude, and in the process, I aim to show the value of the sacred as an interpretive framework. As Gary Laderman argues, the

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[13] This echoes David Chidester's approach in *Authentic Fakes,* which places "the question of authenticity as the central problem of religion in American popular culture." David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), ix.

[14] In 1938, Roger Caillois, Michael Leiris, and Georges Bataille formed what they called "the College of Sociology," committed to the study of "sacred sociology." They stressed the polarity of the sacred, a force of both cohesion and dissolution. They focused on sacred dynamics in contexts that were shocking and dark, including violence, sex, and death. They explored the "left hand of the sacred," which unsettled the social order, revealing both its rigidity and fragility. This school resisted defining the sacred by its separation from and opposition to "the profane." Rather than see these as separate orders of reality, sacred and profane were understand as "dynamically oppositional," their tensions part of the same order, indeed tensions that define that order. See Denis Hollier, ed. *The College of Sociology (1937-39)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Paden, "Sacrality as Integrity: "Sacred Order" as a Model for Describing Religious Worlds."

sacred "is a robust, dynamic, shaping-shifting force that now more than ever is free-floating and disconnected from conventional anchors, such as specific [religious] texts… or particular institutions like the church." As he contends, this approach brings into focus the wide array of cultural forces that function as sacred: "Ostensibly secular aspects of social life, like sports, music, science, violence, or sexuality, can have meaningful religious dimensions in practice and experience that have nothing to do with God or religious traditions."[15] Solitude, like these other spheres of the sacred, is more than isolated individual experience, and more than a marginal subculture. Solitude serves as an orienting node in the increasingly free-floating religious cultures in America.

Defining the Scope: Singletons, Hermits, and the Genealogy of Sacred Solitude

In the past half century, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of Americans who live alone. In his 2012 book *Going Solo,* sociologist Eric Klinenberg documents this dramatic, and rarely discussed transformation: "In 1950, 22 percent of American adults were single. Four million lived alone, and they accounted for 9 percent of all households… Today, more than 50% of American adults are single, and 31 million–roughly one out of every seven adults–live alone… People who live alone make up 28 percent of all U.S. households." Klinenberg examines the social changes that have enabled this shift, including economic prosperity, the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and increased longevity. He stresses this trend extends beyond the U.S., common across the remarkably culturally diverse range of the most developed nations, from Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark to France,

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[15] Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States* (New York: New Press, 2009), xvi.

Australia, Canada, and Japan. "American culture," he argues, "is not the driving force" behind this broad, global phenomenon of living alone.[16]

Solitude does, however, have a distinctive cultural history in North America, and therefore a particular meaning and power. Klinenberg acknowledges Americans have long been fascinated with Transcendentalists, lone rangers, and solitary adventurers in the wild, which are "icons of American popular culture, symbols of our romantic fantasy of an unfettered self." He downplays the importance of those iconic Americans who pursue and promote solitude, and instead tries to capture the broadest sociological understanding of those he labels "singletons," unmarried adults who live alone, but are otherwise quite social in their work and play.[17] This dissertation takes a different approach, focusing attention on the small, but influential subset of individuals who embrace solitude as fundamental to their identity, and who structure the whole of their lives around their desire to be alone. These solitary individuals are quite conscious of the cultural mystique surrounding solitude in North America. Some embrace it, situating themselves as part of an established tradition, while others creatively adapt and subvert historic stereotypes of solitude. Most describe solitude as something they have chosen, whether in a moment they can pinpoint or in a long, complicated process. Some resist the agency implied by calling solitude a choice, instead describing it as a calling, and not one they have always accepted easily. The cases that follow reveal many concrete examples of the sort of technological and sociological shifts Klinenberg cites as influencing the global growth of

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[16] Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 4-5, 10.
[17] *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 8, 13.

singletons, but they also reveal the remarkably durable, yet dynamic influence of solitude's distinctive North American cultural history.

Rather than establish my own measure of what actually counts as solitude, I have chosen to include a wide range of cases in which individuals consider themselves solitary. I investigate this self-understanding and especially highlight cases in which this claim of solitude becomes contested. I focus in particular on those whose stories become public in some way: through their own writing (including books and blogs), through the words and images of others (books, news articles, photographs, films, and online media), or through their connections with others in solitude (hermit newsletters and online groups). There is no easy way to account for how many individuals live in solitude now, or at any time in the past, and I cannot speculate about how many live alone but do not make this choice somehow public. I deal with more public cases and characters not only out of necessity, but also because this offers a window into broader cultural attitudes toward solitude.

The cases represented here include a diverse assortment of people, and indeed there is no single name to identify them all. In this dissertation, I use the terms solitude and solitary as the most generic descriptors, including all those who live alone. Throughout American history, such individuals are also labeled with more loaded terms. They are called recluses, loners, and most often, hermits. Hermit is a frequently contested term, one that carries a sense of both reverence and ridicule. The word traces its roots to the earliest Christian monastics who withdrew to the desert beginning in the third and fourth centuries. In North America, the term hermit developed as a caricature of this religious history blended with the culture of wild, frontier masculinity. The hermit has a long,

shaggy beard and ragged clothes, lives in a primitive dwelling, and practices some combination of asceticism and nature mysticism. The newsletter *Raven's Bread,* written by and for contemporary solitaries, captures this stereotype with its regular "Wood B. Hermit" cartoons, which satirize the stereotype of the scruffy old holy man. In doing so, the cartoon disarms the myth of a monolithic hermit identity, even as it continues to reproduce the stereotype.

Image redacted due to copyright concerns.

Paul Fredette's Wood B. Hermit, *Raven's Bread Newsletter*

Because of the particular history and meaning of the word hermit, I use it only when others apply it to specific individuals and groups, whether they use it with devotion or disdain. I am especially careful in using this term because it is also an official vocation recognized by the Catholic Church. In 1983, Canon Law defined a hermit as one who lives a "stricter separation from the world… through the silence of solitude."[18] Individuals within this world are quite particular about how they use the word hermit, and they often debate the limits of its scope.

Rather than define these terms at the outset, this dissertation takes a genealogical approach to the history of solitude in America, examining the process by which solitude

[18] Code of Canon Law, c. 603, §1, in *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

comes to have particular meaning and power, and interrogating the public struggles to define what counts as sacred solitude. Behind the narrow stereotype of solitude is a history of simplification and purification, circumscribing complex stories to fit into an idealized form, and turning individuals into icons. By focusing in on particular stories, I aim to unearth this history of contingencies and complexities, expanding the scope beyond a stereotype and revealing a richer, more diverse set of possibilities for what solitude has been and can be.[19]

The first two chapters trace the emergence of solitude's sacred cultural status, from the colonial period to 1900, uncovering the processes through which a particular and potent version of "authentic" solitude was both constructed and contested. Chapter 1 examines newspaper stories, popular tales, and visual representations of solitude alongside philosophical and theological texts. These circulated widely to establish narrative conventions and a recognized stereotype of the solitary character in America. This process culminated with Thoreau's *Walden,* which solidified and spread the stereotype, cementing particular practices as defining sacred solitude: simple living, contemplation of nature and self, writing, and moral integrity. The chapters that follow trace the long afterlife of Thoreau in American culture, as individuals faithfully adopted and creatively adapted these practices.

In the same era Thoreau's experiment established Walden Pond as a sacred site for solitude, New York's Adirondack Mountains became even more alluring as a

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[19] Such a genealogical approach has its roots in Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). For a concise discussion of genealogy and an example of this approach, applied to Henry David Thoreau, arguably the most iconic solitary in American cultural history, see Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature : Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*, Modernity and Political Thought.

destination that combined sublime wilderness and the mystique of solitude. Artists, philosophers, preachers, tourists and conservationists flocked to the area, where they together constructed wilderness and solitude as mutually reinforcing symbols of the sacred. Chapter 2 traces the history of hermits, backcountry guides, environmentalists, and intellectual elites in the Adirondacks as they established a lasting link between solitude and place, a link that influenced the culture of environmentalism and religion, and directly inspired William James and his theorizing. By the end of the nineteenth century, these qualities of place and practice came to define the most "authentic" solitude, establishing a broadly recognized stereotype of sacred solitude that would be an enduring cultural ideal.

Chapter 3 chronicles the unfolding story of solitude in the wilderness through the twentieth century, focused on individuals whose solitude was motivated by a desire to be connect with and care for the natural world. Through a series of case studies, I examine those who took up the tradition of wilderness solitude, at once reinforcing its historic stereotypes and also creatively redefining the norms of sacred solitude. Even in remote wilderness contexts, these solitary individuals were entangled in a web of historical and cultural influences, and caught up in the competing interests of media, the public, and the state. Solitude in the wild was increasingly mediated, managed, and commodified. These cases reveal the power and persistence of established norms, and also the creativity and agency of solitary individuals as they negotiated the contested meanings of solitude and wrenched commodification their way.

The next two chapters trace the influence of this wilderness tradition on Roman Catholic hermits. Beginning in the 1960s, a handful of Catholics sought to revive the

ancient Christian tradition of solitude in the North American context. Drawing on oral history interviews, I reconstruct the stories of two prominent groups of pioneering hermits, the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist and the Spiritual Life Institute. Each was marked by remarkable collaboration, as individuals worked through existing monastic networks and established new communities to support their solitude. As they restored Catholic eremitic tradition, wilderness became a place set apart, but also a point of contact, where hermits encountered diverse religious cultures and the contemplative and activist American tradition of wilderness solitude. They creatively combined these strands, establishing a distinctive culture of Catholic solitude in North America.

The final chapter follows this theme of collaboration, examining religious networks of hermits, in print and online, which have spread and shaped the practice of solitude over the last thirty years. I juxtapose these with the case of Christopher McCandless. In the decades since this solitary wilderness wanderer died, a community of fans has developed online, sharing stories and images of their pilgrim travels, and policing the norms of sacred solitude in the wild. These examples demonstrate how communication technologies are changing how people live alone, providing new ways to connect with one another and with the broader world. The Internet has enabled a remarkably diverse mix of individuals to share their stories, proving that solitude in contemporary North America is more than a narrow stereotype. They live in the wild, but also in rural trailer parks, urban apartments, and suburban ranch homes. Those drawn to solitude include not only growing numbers of Catholic hermits, but also Evangelicals and Buddhists. Solitary homesteaders still withdraw to their own Waldens, but now they publish not just books but blogs. Technology has opened new possibilities for being alone

while staying connected, and in the process introduced new questions and challenges for contemporary solitaries. These modern day hermits have made radical choices in how they structure their lives, but they also offer many lessons for anyone yearning for deeper connections to place and simpler, more sustainable ways of being in a world increasingly saturated with technology.

Solitude and Scholarship on American Religious Cultures

This study examines solitude in conversation with two particular areas of scholarship: 1) the study of spirituality in America; and 2) the relationship of religion, nature and place.

Spirituality in America

I situate the late twentieth century surge in solitude within the context of the well-documented rise of eclectic, individual spirituality and the restructuring of established religious institutions. In 1985, Robert Bellah and his collaborators published the landmark *Habits of the Heart*, warning that American individualism had "grown cancerous," causing a decline in community, and particularly in historic religious communities that undergird democracy. The authors observed the increasing privatization of religion, famously exemplified in the case of Sheila Larson, who described her faith as "Sheilaism."[20] They argued such personal, private faith was thriving not only among isolated individuals, but also within religious groups, which were themselves becoming

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[20] Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221. Bellah notes that the section on Sheila Larson provoked some of the most critical response to *Habits of the Heart*. See Robert N. Bellah, "Reading and Misreading *Habits of the Heart*," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 193.

"enclaves of expressive individualism," more concerned with nurturing "self-realization" than acting collectively for the common good.[21]

A wave of scholarship flowed in the wake of *Habits of the Heart*, aimed at painting a more nuanced picture of individual spirituality and understanding the changing role of traditional religious institutions. Sociologists including Phillip Hammond, Robert Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof, and Robert Fuller traced these trends to the shifting religious landscape of post–WWII America and the generation of Baby Boomers.[22] Catherine Albanese, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Courtney Bender emphasized that the historic roots of individual spiritual seeking stretch deeper than the baby boom. [23] In his 2005 book, *Restless Souls,* Schmidt specifically highlighted solitude as a key theme within the history of spirituality in America, tracing shifting attitudes toward the practice, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Schmidt claimed Americans were historically quite leery of solitude, which was cast as suspiciously Catholic, and a threat to the Protestant establishment and the civic-virtues of republicanism. Solitude grew in popularity, he argued, thanks to Trancendentalists William Rounseville Alger, Orestes Brownson, and Henry David Thoreau, who helped reposition solitude as part of an

[21] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 228.
[22] Phillip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America*, Studies in Comparative Religion (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992). Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). British sociologists of religion have noted similar trends in European contexts. See, for example,Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005); Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century*.
[23] Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

emerging post-Protestant culture of religious liberalism and therapeutic personal spiritual seeking.[24]

This dissertation builds on the foundational work of these sociologists and historians, filling out the story of solitude, past and present, as part of a new and developing interdisciplinary field for the study of spirituality in America. In 2012, after a three-year collaborative project sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, Courtney Bender and Omar McRoberts, published a "working paper" mapping this field.[25] They identify three "interrelated focal points around which this emergent field has taken form," each of which has been defining for my approach to solitude as well. First, they highlight genealogical methods that probe the "emergence, the variant usages, and the apparent naturalization" of the concepts and practices that define spirituality. Second, they point out increasing scholarly attention to the "sites of spirituality," stressing that spirituality is embedded in particular places and institutions. It is produced, mediated, and circulated through particular channels, and shaped by changing communication technologies. Third, they emphasize the crucial task of interrogating the complex intersections of popular and scholarly conceptions of spirituality. These scholars push against a simplistic contrast between religion and spirituality, in which spirituality is defined by its "lack of institutions, authority structures, community and even history." Instead, they contend, spirituality is not only private and internal, but also public and political. It has its own forms of social connectivity, its own institutional structures and

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[24] Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 63-100.

[25] Courtney Bender and Omar McRoberts, "Mapping a Field: Why and How to Study Spirituality," (2012). One driving motivation for this new wave of spirituality scholarship is the desire to understand the increasing number of "spiritual, not religious" Americans, the "religious nones" who claim no affiliation with a religious community, yet according to polls are "religious or spiritual in some way." See, for example, ""Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation."

cultural norms. Spirituality is not an ahistorical disposition or universal property of the self, but in fact has a complex history. Rather than take its current constellation of meanings and practices for granted, we must investigate "new" trends in light of this history of changing conceptions.

My approach of solitude is consistent with this emerging interdisciplinary field. Solitude, like spirituality, has a distinctive history in North America, not set apart in isolated individual enclaves but collectively constructed and contested, defined by particular places and practices. This study probes the history of solitude, demonstrating that even those secluded in solitude were and are still entangled in the trends and tensions that shape the story of spirituality in America, in both popular and scholarly circles.

Solitude is not merely a recent trend, proof of declining religious community or rampant individualistic "Sheilaism." Throughout history solitude has long depended on networks of connection, linking secluded individuals with one another and with the wider world. Since the 4th century, Christian hermits have often clustered their individual cells close together, gathering for occasional worship and fellowship. Prominent solitaries in American history have also lived near one another or exchanged correspondence. In the last several decades, hermits and solitaries have flourished in America as they have developed new webs of connection, particularly online networks: websites, blogs, listservs, and virtual communities. New technologies may be quickening the decline of certain forms of community and the rise of certain forms of individualism, but they are also creating new possibilities for community and new opportunities for connectivity in solitude. [26]

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[26] In the age of the Internet, scholars are rethinking the meanings of community that transcend locality, and they are developing models to describe the broad but sometimes shallow social connections fostered by

Religion, Nature, and Place in America

This dissertation highlights solitude as a prominent theme in the historic relationship between religion, place, and nature in America, joining in another increasingly rich conversation within the study of religion in America. Catherine Albanese's *Nature Religion in America,* the seminal work in the field, argues that nature functions as an organizing sacred center for a number of diverse strands of American religion. Albanese casts a wide net, wanting to show nature's role in this broad array of American religious cultures, ranging from Native Americans to Transcendentalist mystics to mesmerist healers to New Age Shamans. She argues "nature religions" have too often slipped "between the cracks of the usual interpretive grids" in part because of the pluralism of its different unorganized, noninstitutionalized "denominations."[27]

Like Albanese, I take a genealogical approach, focused on solitude as a key tradition within this plurality of nature religions, adding to the rich and growing set of recent texts in the field that explore particular strands of American nature religion.

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new technologies. Harrison Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012). Barry Wellman, *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). Other important voices in this conversation on community online include Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978); Wellman, *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*; James E. Katz Ronald E. Rice, Sophia Acord, Kiku Dasgupta, and Kalpana David, "Personal Mediated Communication and the Concept of Community in Theory and Practice," in *Communication Yearbook 28*, ed. Pamela J. Kalbfleisch (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Oxford ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1993); Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002). A number of scholars focus on religious "community" in particular, including Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online : We Are One in the Network*, Digital Formations (New York: P. Lang, 2005); Stephen O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996).

[27] Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, 199. See also *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

Rebecca Kneale Gould's *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* addresses many similar themes: individualism and community, simple and self-sufficient living, lived religious practice, and the sacredness of nature.[28] Sarah McFarland Taylor's *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* examines the growing movement of "environmentally activist Roman Catholic vowed women religious" and their practices of "reinhabiting" both their Catholic traditions and their bioregions.[29] Gould and Taylor each combine historical and ethnographic methods to give rich accounts of their particular cases. Each argues that by taking seriously the ecological context of both religious communities and scholars of religion, the field of religion and nature poses important ethical and theoretical challenges to the broader field of religious studies.

Like Gould and Taylor, I combine historical and ethnographic methods to highlight an otherwise hidden lived religious practice, and like homesteaders and Green Sisters, those drawn to solitude represent a small subculture within the history of religion and nature in America. In contrast, however, I contend solitude is more than an isolated subculture. Throughout history, solitary nature spirituality has been entangled in a broader cultural context, with solitary individuals constructed as sacred, polarizing figures, at once inspiring and unsettling. This study tracks attitudes toward solitude in popular media, from early American newspapers to contemporary Internet chat groups,

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[28] Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
[29] Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), ix.

and highlights the strategic ways solitary individuals represented themselves in these polarized, public contexts.[30]

This dissertation specifically probes the entangled history of wilderness and solitude in America, through the stories of particular places and particular individuals. Here, I build on the influential work of historian William Cronon, whose research challenges the fixation on sublime, unsettled wilderness within American environmentalism, by uncovering the historic processes behind this sacred status. He argues this fixation on wilderness "poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism" because it obscures the focus away from the "mundane" urban and suburban contexts where most people live, excusing the unsustainability of our everyday lives in place.[31] Just as Cronon "troubles" wilderness, I aim to disrupt the romance of solitude, interrogating another sacred pillar of American environmentalism, not to speed its "death," but to offer a firmer foundation, and a more nuanced story of solitude than the historic stereotype. This study joins a chorus of recent work that challenges other key

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[30] Here, I am influenced by two interdisciplinary works of American cultural history: Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). and Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion, 2001). Adams traces the history of circus freaks, sideshow performers, and other odd characters on display. She analyzes film and photography, museums and exhibitions, literature and popular media, weaving these together with her own ethnography among contemporary freaks in the New York performance art scene. Adams examines changing representations of toward "others" as a lens on the broader cultural politics of difference and identity. Cresswell's history of tramps also crosses disciplinary lines, considering cultural representations of these homeless hobos, and demonstrating the significance of legal and economic factors. A geographer, Cresswell is especially skilled at demonstrating the ways this class of placeless poor disrupt the spatial status quo in America. Tramps provoke fascination and fear because they are always out place, challenging the settled social and political norms. Like these authors, I argue that a small, marginal, yet provocative group of individuals – those who live alone – are important players in the broader dynamics of American culture.

[31] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature " in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996). Cronon's article triggered a spirited "wilderness debate." See Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, *Reinventing Nature?: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995). J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

concepts, reimagining a post-environmentalism[32] for a post-wild,[33] post-natural,[34] post-human world.[35]

Solitude in Practice and in Place

This study highlights two key sites where the defining norms of solitude have been constructed and contested. Solitude embodies social ideals by its association with in relation to a particular set of *practices* and particular relationship to *place*, which together define the most exemplary, most sacred way of living alone. As I have searched archives and blogs, these themes emerged again and again. As I communicated with hermits in person and online, I consistently heard how their identities were shaped by a strong sense of place, and expressed through specific practices. The first two chapters develop these themes historically, examining Henry David Thoreau as a key model of sacred solitude in practice, and the Adirondack wilderness as a key in the historic link between solitude and place. In the remaining chapters, I track these norms of sacred solitude as they continue to evolve in new contexts.

Practice

Recent scholarship on American religious cultures has prioritized the study of practices, part of a broad shift toward what is variously labeled "vernacular religion,"

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[32] Ted Nordhaus Michael Shellenberger, *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* Kindle ed. (2011)
[33] Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011)
[34] Paul Kevin Wapner, *Living through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).
[35] Donna Haraway, *Simions, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

"lived religion" or "everyday religion."[36] This practices "turn" has dramatically reshaped the field, highlighting the complex religious worlds that exist both within and beyond the bounds of churches and traditional religious communities. This shift among scholars of American religion reflects a broader turn toward practice in social theory, focusing attention on the world of everyday activity and the tensions between individual subjects and the systems they inhabit.[37] As one of the most influential scholars of lived religion, Robert Orsi, stresses, this approach "emphasizes dissent, subversion, and resistance, rather than harmony, consensus, and social legitimation."[38]

This study examines a broad range of practices, including those that are obviously religious (meditation, prayer, study of scripture, etc.) and those that are seemingly mundane (how they dress, eat, and generally keep house). These regular and sustained "practices" are more than a set of routines or mechanical techniques, but are rather intentional actions that express their identity and values, defining the meaning and purpose of one's solitude. Practices are meaningful for individuals in part because they are "socially established," their meanings are defined, over time, by complex social

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[36] Leonard Norman Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995); David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[37] Many theorists have been influential in this focus on practices, including Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel de Certeau. They examine the interplay between the individual actors and the larger structures that both constitute and constrain particular embodied activities. They stress that power operates not only from the top-down, but throughout social and cultural systems, in the routine activities of individuals' lives. These activities also represent the possibility for improvisation and innovation, for resistance to the present social order. See Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000).; Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984). Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[38] Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15.

processes. For solitary individuals who distance themselves from religious institutions, such practices are a key way they negotiate their relationship to broader social and religious dynamics. Individuals creatively craft religious identities, adapting and combining practices from a wide array of institutions and traditions. Even those who define themselves as "spiritual, not religious" are often quite thoughtful about developing spiritual practices that are grounded in historic traditions and supported by a broader community.[39]

The same is true with practices related to also the everyday, material order these individuals create. Their home "economics" ("eco" from the Greek "oikos," household) is always related to a broader economy and ecology, and their domestic practices often express important priorities in how they choose to relate to this broader world. Thus, in my ethnographic work, I have been attentive to how individuals organize their time and space, the their everyday routines and rituals. I have traced the histories of particular practices, how they have evolved for individuals and for the broader history of solitude in America. These practices are a primary way individuals and the broader public negotiate the meaning and purpose of solitude, and thus, they are a primary site for negotiating what is sacred.

Place

Solitary individuals have long been seen as exemplifying a profound connection to place, as people who settle down and pay attention to the world around them. Place is often central to the solitary's identity, even part of one's name. The word hermit is

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[39] See Wuthnow, *After Heaven*; Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*.

derived from the Greek and Latin *eremos*, meaning desert or wilderness. In ancient and modern times, particular hermits are often named for the place they live (e.g. North Carolina's "Fort Fisher Hermit") and places are named for having a hermit (the Grand Canyon's "Hermit Trail"). This dissertation analyzes the connections between solitude and place, bringing together scholarship of cultural and humanistic geographers, along with religious studies scholars increasingly attentive to spatial dynamics.

Humanistic geographer Yi Fu Tuan offers one important framework for interpreting this connection, differentiating between the concepts "space" and "place." Space is undifferentiated, an abstract and empty container, while place is familiar, distinctive, and endowed with meaning and significance. Tuan's work examines the ways humans develop a relationship with a particular place, which becomes part of their identity and a foundation for moral concern. He describes the yearning for a deep connection to place, what he calls "topophilia," and he argues that this sense of groundedness is essential in developing the capacity to care not only for one's immediate environment, but also for the broader world.

The particular meaning and power of a place, then, is constructed over time, through active engagement. People shape a place through their physical work–clearing and cultivating land, marking boundaries, and erecting buildings–and through their cultural work–naming features of the landscape, representing the place visually, telling stories about its past, and developing distinctive local practices. [40] Through these place-making practices, spaces become places. In the words of cultural geographer David Harvey, they become "permanences," sites of relative stability, meaningful and secure

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[40] Y. Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974); *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

anchors in a changing world.[41] Religion scholars have long recognized the critical link between place and the sacred. Jonathan Z. Smith argues, “Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement,” a spatial expression of the relationships of the human and more than human world.[42] Sacred space asserts a particular symbolic and social order, and, consequently, Smith stresses, the processes of place-making are inherently political, and sacred space is contested space.[43]

Whether in archival documents or oral history interviews, the individuals I observed consistently linked their experience of living alone with the surrounding landscape. I clustered my research in particular regions, traveling to visit with solitary individuals to better understand their connection to the natural landscape and the dwelling where they make their home. I was especially attentive to the religious and everyday domestic practices that connect them to place: how they arrange their homes and manage the space inside and out; how they describe the cycles of the seasons; how they interact with the plants, animals, and people around them; how they keep in touch with the broader world, especially online; how they connect with multiple scales of place in their work and in what they buy and consume.

Solitude has long been linked with the dwellings where individuals live–the hermit bound to his hermitage. The sacred stereotype imagines primitive dwellings as most authentic, and there are plenty of examples of solitary individuals in caves and cabins, huts and hand-made shacks. Others disrupt this traditional trope, practicing

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[41] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 295.
[42] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 129-46.
[43] See also David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal, "Introduction," in *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.

solitude in places like mobile home parks, brick ranch subdivisions, high-rise apartment buildings, inner-city slums, and prison cells. Whether they are settled in remote, rustic hermitages or more conventional contexts, these individuals each negotiate the authenticity of their solitude and sacredness of their place. They develop their own distinctive practices to connect with their place, attentive to the world around them, regardless of whether it fits the imagined ideal.

This dissertation also highlights how places bear the memory of solitary individuals, even after they are gone. Through processes of memorialization, those who have connected to place so deeply are made even more permanent parts of the landscape. Walden is now linked with Thoreau and his time alone in the woods. Tourists and pilgrims flock to Concord to see this place of solitude. The Unabomber's cabin is now on display in a D.C. museum. Countless other cabins, caves, and hermitages have been preserved as memorials to solitaries. These places serve as sacred sites, transmitting traces of the past and presenting particular messages about solitude as potentially exemplary and potentially extreme.[44]

Sources and Methods

Researching the history of solitude, I have assembled and analyzed a wide variety of documentary sources, primarily cultural productions by and about individual solitaries: books, journals, memoirs, correspondence, news articles, films, newsletters, and blogs. These serve as an archive of the various cases and traditions of solitude. They reveal how

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[44] There is an extensive literature on places as sites of public memory. See Richard R. Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol*, 1st ed., History, Culture, and Society Series (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking, 1995); Michael A. Elliott, *Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the identity of the particular solitary is constructed, and in particular how this is represented in various public forms. These sources document the historical "facts" of these individual stories of solitude, and they reveal the cultural "facts" that shape particular stories into public ones–processes through which they circulate and combine to constitute a history and tradition of solitude in America.

Along with these textual sources and methods, I also visited with selected hermits and solitaries to conduct oral history interviews. This approach was particularly fitting. Oral history has long been utilized as a way to give voice to those otherwise hidden from view. Face-to-face interviews invite individuals to narrate their own stories, serving as historical sources and also interpreters. The encounter is a collaborative conversation, a shared, creative process. Oral history's dynamic, subjective qualities make it especially suited for the goals of this project, revealing how solitary individuals understand their lives as at once set apart and also entangled in a broader history and culture. As oral historian Michael Frisch writes, the strength of this approach that it explores "how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and it social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them."[45]

I visited with twenty-five individuals, about half selected for their role in historic cases of solitude and networks of solitaries, and others spanning the religious diversity of the recent urge in solitude. I clustered these oral history interviews geographically (in the Pacific Northwest, the San Francisco Bay area, Western North Carolina, and the Colorado Rocky Mountains) not only for logistical ease but also to explore the

[45] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays in the Craft and Meaning of Oral History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 188.

connections between solitude and sense of place regionally. Almost all graciously invited me to meet them in their homes, the places so much a part of their solitude, and many insisted on taking me to see significant places in the surrounding environment as well. I spent anywhere from several hours to several days with each individual, beginning with questions about their personal path to solitude, and evolving into more expansive conversations about the meaning and purpose of solitude, not only for them, but for the broader world.

Collecting these individual stories reinforced an important truth about oral history as a research method: more than an exchange of information, the interview is a communicative, performative act, and one not altogether new within the tradition of solitude. For centuries, those living alone have offered hospitality to those seeking to learn more about their solitary existence, and particularly within Christian tradition, there is a long tradition of confessing one's personal story. Many of those I visited were experienced interviewees, practiced at describing their solitude to journalists and scholars alike. Additionally, many have published their own memoirs or narrated their stories in newsletters, videos, or audio recordings. The act of sharing their stories affirms the significance and meaning of their solitude, confirming they remain in dialogue with the world, even as they act to separate themselves from it.

In addition to face-to-face field research, I have also gathered data through the emerging practice of online or virtual ethnography.[46] While the Internet serves as an

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[46] SeeChristine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2000).. Within religious studies, a number of scholars are employing online ethnographic methods. See Oliver Krüger, "Discovering the Invisible Internet: Methodological Aspects of Searching Religion on the Internet," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005); Douglas E. Cowan and Jeffrey K. Haddon, *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, Religion and the Social Order ; V. 8 (New York: JAI, 2000); Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford ;

archive of documentary sources, it is also a cultural space in which hermits and solitaries interact with one another and with the broader world, negotiating their individual and collective identities. I regularly follow several dozen hermit listservs, blogs, and online forums that are sites for this Internet culture of solitaries. Online ethnography extends the methods of traditional participant observation and adapts these to the online contexts in several key ways.

First, online ethnography investigates the complex ways the world of the Internet is interrelated to the offline world. Here, this means considering how solitary individuals use the Internet and other communication technologies to interact with one another, but also for other purposes. How do online networks relate to offline ones, such as religious hierarchies? How do individuals balance multiple uses for technology, for work, entertainment, information, social networking, shopping, etc.? How do they structure the time and space in which they access the Internet? How do their choices about technology relate to commitments such as simplicity and sustainability?

Second, online ethnography is distinctive because it relies on a limited mode of "observation," one that is primarily textual. Because of the constraints of textual computer mediated communication, solitaries must develop creative ways to express their individuality and authenticity to one another. This demands close readings of email messages, blog posts, and other text to understand the cultural conventions of different sites. How do individuals use quotes, screen names, emoticons, etc. to cultivate an online identity even when they cannot see who is or is not wearing a particular habit? This

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New York: Berg, 2000); Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005).

textual focus need not inhibit attention to visual data. Bloggers in particular use graphics and images to express their identity online, and hermits increasingly post videos.

Third, online ethnography demands particular ethical considerations, especially because of the blending of public and private space on the Internet. While many hermit blogs and websites are public, there are a number of very active listservs and forums that require membership. Online ethnographers acknowledge that "lurking" in such contexts is acceptable at the outset, reading and observing as a way to understand the norms of a group. In each of these groups, after this initial period, I introduced myself and my research, eliciting responses that revealed any privacy concerns. While most individuals and groups welcomed my questions and interest, others preferred I leave them out of my research, which I have done.

This dissertation traces the stories of isolated individuals as they intersect with a broader cultural history of solitude in America. The chapters ahead zoom in to detail the lives of particular individuals and particular places, while simultaneously scanning the wider world to understand the collective attitude toward solitude. I blend and layer a variety of sources and methods to achieve this this panoramic focus, tracking solitude in print and on film, in person and online. Such of a mix of methods is critical as scholars continue to map the contours of American religious culture, particularly its increasingly individual-centered spiritualities, which thrive in the borderlands where the private meets the public, the past meets the present.

Chapter 1. Constructing Sacred Solitude in Print and in Practice

On June 24, 1694, German mystic, pietist, and theosophist Johannes Kelpius arrived in Philadelphia along with forty followers. They settled in the woods along Wissahickon Creek, then at the outskirts of the young but growing city. The group practiced celibacy and contemplative solitude. Most lived together in a large cabin. A few constructed hermitages to be more alone, including Kelpius, who lived in a cave. They came to the wilderness of the New World to seek spiritual purity in preparation for the advent of the millennium, which the original leader of the group, astronomer and mathematician Johann Jakob Zimmermann, had predicted would come later that year. Kelpius saw the group as inheritors of a long tradition of wilderness spirituality, writing, "God hath prepared always his most eminent Instruments in the Wilderness."[1] The hermits remained faithful for many years, even after the millennium failed to arrive. Kelpius died in 1708, but several continued to live in solitude and prayer, studying scripture and the stars.

Kelpius and his followers exemplify the long history of solitude in North America and the eclectic blending of Protestantism, mysticism and nature spirituality scholars now recognize as integral to the story of religion since the colonial period.[2] American Lutherans trace their roots to these early hermits. After living in solitude, Justus Falkner

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[1] Kelpius, "Letter to Hester Palmer, May 25, 1706," in Johannes Kelpius, *The Diarium of Magister Johannes Kelpius, with Annotations by Julius Friedrich Sachse* (Lancaster, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1917).The group became known as the "Hermits of the Wissahickon" for their emulation of the fourth century Christian hermits, the Desert Fathers. Kelpius and his followers were also called the "Society of the Woman in the Wilderness" for their identification with the woman in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, who found refuge in the desert to await the coming of Christ.

[2] See, for example Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*; Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*; Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*.

worked as a Lutheran missionary in New York and became the first German Lutheran ordained in the North America.[3] Zimmermann and Kelpius were also influenced by the mystical teachings of Jacob Boehme and Jewish Cabbala.[4] In 1961, the Rosicrucian Order erected a large stone monument beside a cave, claiming it was the original cave of Kelpius, the "sanctum for his meditations." The monument claims Kelpius and his "Monks on the Ridge" were the first Rosicrucian colony in America, members of a secretive esoteric society with mystical knowledge that enabled them to read the "great Book of Nature."[5]

In his 1850 *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time,* historian John Fanning Watson lists Benjamin Lay as another well-known, cave-dwelling hermit in colonial Philadelphia.[6] A hunchback, Lay stood just over four feet tall. He had a long white beard. He lived as self-sufficiently as possible. He made his own clothes, grew his own vegetarian food, and drank only water and milk. According to Lay's biographer, "His tender conscience would not permit him to eat any food, nor wear any garment, nor use any article which was procured at the expense of animal life, or that was in the

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[3] Julius Friedrich Sachse, *Justus Falckner: Mystic and Scholar, Devout Priest in Germany, Hermit on the Wissahickon, Missionary on the Hudson* (Philadelphia1903).
[4] Elizabeth W. Fisher, ""Prophesies and Revelations": German Cabbalists in Early Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 109, no. 3 (1985).
[5] The monument is in what is now Fairmount Park, not far from Hermit Street and Hermit Lane.
[6] Watson compiled a record of Philadelphia hermits, listing Lay alongside Kelpius and his fellow monks. He described Lay as living "in a cave near the York Road, at Bianchtown." John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time; Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants, and of the Earliest Settlements of the Inland Part of Pennsylvania, from the Days of the Founders*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Philadelphia1850), 20. Biographer Roberts Vaux records this detail differently, explaining, "On the rural spot of his choice, he built a cottage, resembling, in its construction, a cave." Vaux claims Lay "improved a natural excavation in the earth, near a fine spring of water, so as to afford himself a commodious apartment. The interior part of the room of his cave was neatly ornamented with festoons of evergreen, and in other respects, the room was conveniently fitted for his purpose. Here was kept his library of books, which amounted to nearly two hundred volumes, comprising some of the works of the best authors in theology, biography, poetry, and history. In that seclusion he reflected, read, and wrote." See Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford, Two of the Earliest Public Advocates for the Emancipation of the Enslaved Africans* (Philadelphia: Solomon W. Conrad, 1815), 16, 29-30.

remotest degree, the product of the labor of slaves."[7] Having witnessed the horrors of slavery in Barbados, he became a passionate advocate for abolition. Lay committed to these personal "habits of the most rigid temperance, self-denial, and frugality," believing such moral purity was essential for his public campaign against slavery.

Although Lay was often identified as a hermit, he was anything but withdrawn in silence. He published hundreds of pamphlets and tracts denouncing slavery. He once hosted his friend and publisher, Benjamin Franklin, along with Pennsylvania governor William Penn, to eat with him in his "primitive abode" and hear his position on slavery. He was especially known for the creative ways he tried to provoke fellow Quakers to take the issue more seriously.[8]

Lay separated himself from society, though not in total solitude. Not only was he an active public figure. Benjamin Lay was also married. His wife Sarah, also a hunchback, was apparently in full support of his activism and his ascetic practices of purity. So, why was he so often called a hermit? Why would Watson's history of Philadelphia list him as such, alongside his more solitary neighbors, the celibate monks

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[7] *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford, Two of the Earliest Public Advocates for the Emancipation of the Enslaved Africans*, 16.

[8] Lay once addressed a meetinghouse, challenging those "who profess 'to do unto all men as ye would they should do unto you '—and yet, in direct opposition to every principle of reason, humanity, and religion, you are forcibly retaining your fellow men, from one generation to another, in a state of unconditional servitude." He concluded that slaveholding is like thrusting a sword through the hearts of innocents. It would be "as justifiable in the sight of the Almighty, who beholds and respects all nations and colors of men with an equal regard, if you should thrust a sword through their hearts as I do through this book." He then drew his sword stabbed it though a large volume, in which he had inserted a bladder of red pokeberry juice, which sprayed over Lay and those near him. See *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford, Two of the Earliest Public Advocates for the Emancipation of the Enslaved Africans*, 23, 17-18. Lay frequented meetinghouses in the Philadelphia area, though he never gained membership in a meeting in America. According to Wilfed P. Cole, on several occasions Lay was "forbidden entry" or "bodily removed." Cole proposes that Lay may have staged "America's first 'sit-in.'" John Greenleaf Whittier recalls the episode, in which Lay refused to cooperate with the aggressive expulsion attempts of a "burly blacksmith," who ultimately tossed him to the gutter of the street. See Wilford P. Cole, "Henry Dawkins and the Quaker Comet," *Winterthur Portfolio* 4(1968): 36; John Greenleaf Whittier, "Introduction," in *Journal of John Woolman* (Boston: Robert R. Osgood and Company, 1871), 13-14.

and mystics? Lay was marked a hermit for his combination of eccentric appearance, primitive dwelling, self-sufficient lifestyle, and zeal for moral and spiritual purity. Such a mix has characterized hermits throughout American history, and made them at once fascinating and troubling to the broader public.

Stories and images of Benjamin Lay continued to circulate widely in the nineteenth century, as social reformers and spiritual seekers increasingly celebrated such stories of solitude as sacred symbols of countercultural ethical conviction. [9] Quaker abolitionist texts often featured his biography and his portrait, maintaining the mystique associated with Lay, his “hermit” cave, his eccentric appearance, and his moral authority. These writers used several images to capture the polarities Benjamin Lay embodied. Profiling early abolitionists in 1815, Roberts Vaux remarked that Lay “appeared rather like a comet, which threatens, in its irregular course, the destruction of the worlds near which it passes, than as one of those tranquil orbs which hold their accustomed place, and dispense their light, in the harmonious order of heaven.”[10] In 1871, Quaker poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier echoed this sentiment, describing Lay as “the irrepressible prophet who troubled the Israel of slaveholding Quakerism, clinging like a rough chestnut-burr to the skirts of its respectability, and settling like a pertinacious gad-fly on the sore places of its conscience.”[11] A year later, Whittier published a poem celebrating Johannes Kelpius. Again, he depicted this hermit in polar terms. He was “the maddest of good men” and “weird as a wizard,” reading apocalyptic texts in “his hermit

[9] See Henry Dawkins, *Engraving of Benjamin Lay. After Oil Portrait by William Williams in the National Portrait Gallery.,* ca. 1760. Haverford College Quaker Collection. MS Coll. 850. For a detailed history of the image, see Cole, "Henry Dawkins and the Quaker Comet." Cole notes that in the original version, Lay was holding a copy of Thomas Tryon’s *The Way to Health, Long Life and Happiness…* (1683), which advocated vegetarianism. Later versions of the Lay portrait replaced this with anti-slavery texts.
[10] Vaux, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford, Two of the Earliest Public Advocates for the Emancipation of the Enslaved Africans*, 23, 16.
[11] Whittier, "Introduction," 14.

den by the Wissahickon," using his secret "Stone of Wisdom."[12] These solitary individuals were at once inspiring and unsettling, potentially prophetic and potentially mad.

Kelpius and Lay were among the first of many Americans who chose to live alone, apart from mainstream American society, and like these earliest colonial era hermits, subsequent solitary figures were not merely private characters but also objects of public fascination. Authors and artists produced a steady stream of stories and representations of such individuals, feeding the public desire know more about these eccentric characters–what they ate, how they dressed, and where they lived. Yet solitary individuals were more than mere curiosities. Eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences also wanted to understand why they lived alone, and wanted to make meaning of their break with society. Through this period, solitude was increasingly represented as sacred, in a polar sense. Like Kelpius and Lay, solitary individuals symbolized wisdom, spirituality, and moral integrity, but they were also portrayed as eccentric social misfits.

This chapter ventures through the images and stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, tracing how solitude was socially constructed as sacred, and how marginal and mysterious individuals became public characters. I begin by surveying popular tales and visual representations of solitude, which circulated widely during the period, along with philosophical and theological texts addressing the growing fascination with solitude. These popular representations and elite texts characterized solitude as potentially inspiring, but also potentially dangerous. Consequently, they asserted

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[12] *Pennsylvaina Pilgrim and Other Poems* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), 33. Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt writes that Whittier performed a kind of "romantic alchemy" with Kelpius, and I would add with Lay as well. Whittier shaped their stories to fit the late nineteenth century pattern for interpreting solitude. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 70.

particular norms to define its most ideal expressions. The chapter culminates with an extended look at Henry David Thoreau's two-year experiment at Walden Pond. Thoreau became normative, an exemplary model of sacred solitude, in particular through his particular combination of religious and everyday domestic practices: living simply, contemplating nature and self, writing, and living with moral integrity. By the end of the nineteenth century, these stories and practices together formed a well-established stereotype of solitude, defining its most authentic, most sacred expression–eccentric, but not too eccentric; wild, but not too wild.

Solitude in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America

In 1757-8, one of the first colonial era magazines, *The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies,* featured a regular column from "Theodore, or the Hermit," penned from his hermitage, "a most romantic and retired spot, not far from our metropolis." He described the column as a kind of monthly hermit sermon, "propagating a veneration of our holy and undefiled Christianity" and promoting "the universal practice of religion and goodness, in opposition to the degeneracy of the times."[13] Theodore was one of many whose solitude became a public story, and one that served to articulate collective ideals. Colonial booksellers and printers circulated stories of solitude in newspapers, almanacs, chapbooks and broadsides. They reproduced British stories and poems, with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* by far the most popular.[14]

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[13] Theodore, "The Hermit No. 1," *The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies* 1757.

[14] Examples include Thomas Parnell's "The Hermit," James Beattie's "The Hermit," and Oliver Goldsmith's "Edwin and Angelina, or The Hermit." See Eric Slauter, "Being Alone in the Age of Social Contract," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2005): 37; Coby Dowdell, "The American Hermit and the British Castaway: Voluntary Retreat and Deliberative Democracy in Early American Culture,"

Publishers also featured homegrown tales of New World hermits. The popularity of these stories demonstrates what literary scholar Coby Dowdell describes as the "cultural cachet of the hermit figure throughout the antebellum period."[15]

One of the most revealing examples was James Buckland's *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit, Who Lived Upwards of Two Hundred Years* (1786).[16] In the story, Captain Buckland and a companion stumbled upon the cave while exploring the uncharted territory beyond the Allegheny Mountains. They found a bald, white-bearded man who told how he became "an innocent hermit." After losing his young love in England, he set off for the New World, only to be shipwrecked into a life of solitude.[17] The frontispiece referenced earlier illustrations of Robinson Crusoe, depicting the hermit posed in front of a sinking ship in a scene virtually identical to Defoe's cover. This "old hermit" was an American Crusoe, born British, but now native to the wilds of America, where he "lived alone in contemplation of the works of nature." The story depicted him as a man in harmony with his environment, emphasizing his vegetarian diet, earthen

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Early American Literature 46, no. 1 (2011): 122-3. On the influence of *Crusoe* on American ideas of solitude, see Shawn Thomson, *The Fortress of American Solitude : Robinson Crusoe and Antebellum Culture* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

[15] Dowdell, "The American Hermit and the British Castaway: Voluntary Retreat and Deliberative Democracy in Early American Culture," 127.

[16] Historian Eric Slauter establishes the story's popularity by chronicling the variety of locations and formats in which Buckland's *Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit* was published: "Single-sheet broadsides with accompanying woodcuts printed in Boston and vended by rural peddlers brought the story to areas beyond the centers of print capital; small, badly printed chapbooks emerged from Springfield and Worcester, Massachusetts, Hartford and Norwich, Connecticut, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Providence, Rhode Island, and most likely found ready readers among children; printings in Massachusetts almanacs put the text in the hands of provincial adults for at least a year." Slauter, "Being Alone in the Age of Social Contract," 62.

[17] According to the text, he was shipwrecked around 1585, or around the time Sir Walter Raleigh's first colonists settled Roanoke Island. Buckland and his companion are the first people he has encountered since, and they explain that he now resides in a new nation, recently independent. See Dowdell, "The American Hermit and the British Castaway: Voluntary Retreat and Deliberative Democracy in Early American Culture," 132.

dwelling, and simple lifestyle. Buckland concluded by offering directions "for anyone to go and find the hermit, and satisfy his own curiosity." [18]

The story was so popular it inspired an unofficial, satirical sequel published the following year. Dr. Samuel Brake supposedly followed Buckland's directions and found the cave. The hermit asked Brake to publish his writings, which were piled in a corner of the cave, written on "barks of trees, and some on skins made into a kind of Parchment." Shortly after, Brake convinced the hermit to have some rum, which killed the hermit by day's end. Brake buried the hermit in his cave, after shaving his beard, "carefully preserved as a great curiosity, it being at least twelve inches long."[19]

These two tales exhibited conflicting attitudes toward solitude. Buckland's tale celebrated the hermit as innocent and pure. The sequel highlighted how easily this innocence was corrupted. The story poked fun at the eccentric hermit, but even more, it parodied the popularity of the tale itself, making a mockery of Dr. Brake and the misguided enthusiasm of those out searching for solitary characters. The hermit died, a casualty of his fame, but lived on through these tales, through his own writing, and the traces of sacred curiosity that remained in his cave and his beard. The sequel satirized the hagiographic reverence of popular hermit tales, exposing the solitary as more hoax than holy man.

By the late eighteenth century, the hermit was an established character in the American cultural imagination. Stories about solitude circulated widely, building on and borrowing from one another. There were traces of Crusoe in Buckland and Brake. Together, such stories established narrative conventions that shaped conceptions of

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[18] James Buckland, *A Wonderful Discovery of a Hermit, Who Lived Upwards of Two Hundred Years* (Worcester, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1786), 10.
[19] Samuel Brake, *An Account of the Wonderful Old Hermit's Death, and Burial* (Boston1787), Broadside.

solitude. The authors were not the only ones aware of these emerging patterns in how solitude was represented. In many stories, the hermits were self-conscious of their own publicity. When visitors arrived, the hermit was prepared to show off his eccentricities, tell his story, and unveil his written words of wisdom for publication.[20] Hermits were also familiar characters in visual media, reaching beyond literate, adult audiences. Beginning in 1789, David Bowen's traveling wax museum, one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment, featured a replica of "An Old Hermit."[21] A 1790 pictorial broadside printed for children included an image of a bearded man described as a "venerable hermit," living in the wild, his life "just and calm."[22]

This popularity continued into the nineteenth century. Newspapers regularly reported stories of recently "discovered" hermits, and these demonstrate a remarkable diversity to the developing dynamics of solitude. The headlines highlighted hermits who were not just bearded white men. There were also a number of women and African Americans. The stories took great interest in hermits who appeared impoverished, but were supposedly hoarding away a secret fortune.[23] Not all lived in caves and cabins in the wild. News stories announced the presence of "urban hermits" in cities across the country.[24] In 1886, the *New York Times* reported "a queer development of metropolitan life," the "hotel hermit." The story claimed, "almost every one of the Broadway hotels

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[20] Dowdell outlines a genre he calls "the hermit's tale," in which an old man is discovered by travelers. The hermit offers hospitality and shares his story, often in the form of a written manuscript later to be published. Dowdell, "The American Hermit and the British Castaway: Voluntary Retreat and Deliberative Democracy in Early American Culture," 137.
[21] "The American Hermit and the British Castaway: Voluntary Retreat and Deliberative Democracy in Early American Culture," 123-4.
[22] Slauter, "Being Alone in the Age of Social Contract," 64.
[23] "A Gold Seeker Turned Hermit," *Albany Evening Journal*, May 16 1867; "$50,000 in an Old Log Hut," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 21 1887.
[24] "The Hermit of Creicaco," *North American*, Aug. 6 1853; "A Hermit in a City," *North American*, July 9 1872; "A Hermit in a Great City," *Boston Journal*, Feb. 4 1873.

has at least one recognized hermit."[25] These stories do not just feature secluded recluses. Newspapers often covered instances when hermits attracted visitors and public attention, such as one "Hoboken Hermit," "daily visited by many who are curious to see his lonely habitation, and who desire to converse with this strange being."[26]

Newspaper stories consistently speculated about what motivated individuals to live alone. Many emphasized their desire for moral purity or romantic longing to commune with nature, but news accounts also highlighted more lamentable causes for their break with society. As Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt notes, many nineteenth century tales stressed the "low and fearful standing of solitude as destitution."[27] Several texts depicted hermits as poor and lonely, driven to solitude by grief, fear, and shame: Robert Voorhis, a "cruelly mistreated" former slave; John Conrad Shafford, whose wife and daughter died tragically; and "hermitess" Sarah Bishop, driven to solitude after being raped by British soldiers during the American Revolution.[28]

These popular tales and news reports demonstrate the broad fascination with individuals living alone. Local papers routinely printed hermit stories from across the country, as publishers gladly fed the hunger for more. These stories were quite diverse, yet they managed to solidify and spread particular patterns of representation. Exceptional characters were consistently described in relation to an imagined ideal type. "Women hermits," "black hermits," and "urban hermits" were among those marked as different from the hermit norm. Americans had mixed feelings about these eccentric, solitary

[25] "The Hotel Hermit," *The New York Times*, Oct. 17 1886.
[26] "A Hermit in Hoboken," *San Francisco Bulletin*, Sept. 15 1869.
[27] Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 70.
[28] *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 70-3.

characters. Popular stories represented hermits as inspiring examples of personal integrity, but also as loathsome loners shrouded in mystery.

Philosophical and theological texts reflected this ambivalent attitude toward solitude portrayed in popular stories. The most respected reflection on the topic was German physician Johann Zimmerman's *Solitude,* which was translated into English and published in America throughout the nineteenth century. Newspapers and magazines printed excerpts, and well-read individuals, including Thoreau, kept copies of Zimmerman's text in their personal libraries.[29] The author recommended "occasional retirement" into solitude as therapeutic, especially for the mind, allowing one to cultivate "the habit of thinking with steadiness and attention." He warned, though, that such retirement was best kept temporary, to avoid "solitary indolence and inactivity." Permanent retreat was best reserved for a rare few: "A very extraordinary temperament of mind and constitution of body are required to sustain, with tranquility and endurance, the various fatigues of continued solitude; and certain it is, that a human creature who is constantly pent up in seclusion, must, if he be not of a very exalted character, soon become melancholy and miserable."[30]

Unitarian minister William Rounseville Alger took a similar position in his 1866 book, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or The Loneliness of Human Life.* Alger hoped readers would "learn from it how at the same time to reap the benefits and shun the evils of being alone."[31] He described solitude as a universal feature of religion, and its highest expression. Alger was well respected in Transcendentalist circles for his 1856

[29] Grant Loomis, "Thoreau and Zimmermann," *The New England Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1937).
[30] John G. Zimmerman, *Solitude; with the Life of the Author* (Charlestown, MA: G. Davidson, 1830), 27, 255, 389.
[31] Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, vii.

anthology, *The Poetry of the East,* and his work on solitude likewise looked to the "meditative old East" for models of solitary spirituality.[32] He compared the Christian seeking solitude in the monastery with "the Buddhist devotee" seeking the "sanctuary of the contemplative Buddha" and the "Brahmanical ascetic" who "journeys on, over hill and plain, his alms dish in one hand, his staff in the other, alone, silent, buried in a thought." In all these traditions, "The true and pure religious emotions are essentially solitary."[33]

Like Zimmerman, though, Alger insisted dwelling alone was not for everyone. Solitude was potentially dangerous, and best left to the saintly few. "The highest, greatest, deepest souls irresistibly seek solitude, unspeakably enjoy it, and shrink from society… But to the multitude the direct and solitary contemplation of their relations with the unknown and the infinite is too awful; it must be shared, diluted, relieved by organic fellowships and poetic associations." [34] Alger urged readers to take "scrupulous care… to avoid errors and exaggerations" of solitude.[35] He profiled thirty-seven greats of solitary spirituality, including Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Dante, and Wordsworth.[36] Alger used these "sketches of lonely characters" to illustrate the proper practices for exercising this restraint, and thereby avoiding the dangers inherent in living alone.

Alger proposed another way to insure the proper approach to solitude: to "envelop the soul" with "the gigantic solitudes of nature."[37] He reflected on particular landscapes best suited for solitude: the desert, the mountains, prairies, forests, the poles, the ocean,

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[32] Quoted in Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 82.
[33] Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 51.
[34] *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 50-52.
[35] *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 91.
[36] *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 329.
[37] *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 20.

and places of ruin. He contemplated regions around the world, but was especially enthusiastic about the promise of "the aboriginal woods of western North America," which "seem as if they might harbor a million anchorites." He praised California's "gigantic cedar-groves of Mariposa" as "the heart of solitude, where the genius of antiquity is enthroned on a couch of gray repose."[38]

Alger's attitude reflected the broader culture of the late nineteenth century, which constructed solitude as sacred, in a dual sense. The solitary symbolized the daring pursuit of purity, with all the dangers that entailed. Alger warned that solitude should be practiced with great caution to keep its polarities in check. He prescribed a simple, contemplative solitude enveloped in the vastness of wild nature, insisting the where and how of living alone made all the difference. The most ideal solitude was distinguished by a particular set of *practices* and particular relationship to *place*. This echoed the dominant representations of solitude from the previous two hundred years, and in the late nineteenth century, these themes became even more established. Chapter 2 examines the

[38] *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 23. It is not clear that Alger ever visited the Mariposa Grove, but instead heard about it from fellow Unitarian minister Thomas Starr King, who wrote to Alger July 14, 1860, during his first visit to the Sierra Nevada mountains. Starr King shared his awe at the "the Big Trees of Mariposa," a "natural temple in which man is a mite enormous." He preached a series of sermons in San Francisco celebrating the Sierras and over the next year, published a series of letters in the *Boston Evening Transcript.* Though not the first public descriptions of the Sierras, these reverential writings were among the most influential in establishing Yosemite as a place worth protecting and a place to venture for solitary spirituality. For Star King's letter, "Among the California Big Trees," see Charles William Wendte, *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1921), 112-13. See also Thomas Starr King and Ed. John Adam Hussey, *A Vacation among the Sierras: Yosemite in 1860* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1962).

Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted was another key voice in bringing national attention to Yosemite. His 1865 report insisted this "great glory of nature" should be made a park for the "free use of the whole body of the people forever," for "the exercise of the esthetic and contemplative faculties." Frederick Law. Olmsted, " Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865. Introduction by Victoria Post Ranney," (Yosemite, CA: Yosemite Association, 1995 (1865)). Not coincidentally, Olmsted was also fascinated with solitude, and especially influenced by Zimmerman, whose book he ranked "next to the Bible and Prayer book in my Library - I think it is one of the best books ever written." Biographer Elizabeth Stevenson concludes a young Olmsted "shyly believed himself also to be of the select few who wandered in solitude and whom Zimmerman ranked as made of finer stuff." Elizabeth Stevenson, *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 27-8.

construction of wilderness as the sacred *place* of solitude. Here, I examine Thoreau and how his particular mix of *practices* solidified and spread as key norms of sacred solitude.

Thoreau and the Practices of Solitude

Henry David Thoreau was not initially recognized as a model of sacred solitude. William Rounseville Alger described him as “the ill-balanced and unsatisfied hermit of Concord,” an example of solitude practiced in error and exaggeration. Alger criticized him for being “unhealthy and unjust in all his thoughts on society,” and judged his separation from others “more bitter than sweet.” The redeeming aspect of Thoreau’s solitude was his connection with nature. Alger concluded, “As a student and lover of the material world he is a genuine apostle of solitude.”[39] This was consistent with most of Thoreau’s early reviewers, who praised him for his nature writing, his simple lifestyle, and his moral commitment, but concluded his greatness was tainted by his reclusiveness. Critic James Russell Lowell, for example, proclaimed Thoreau’s withdrawal to Walden excessively egotistical, withdrawn from Concord, but close enough to “feel the impression he makes there.” Lowell compared him to a Stylite hermit perched on a pillar, “a seclusion which keeps him in the public eye.” Still, he applauded Thoreau’s writing style: “his metaphors and images are always straight from the soil.” He also praised his economic priorities, which were a “rebuke of the waste and aimlessness of American luxury.”[40]

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[39] Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or the Loneliness of Human Life*, 336, 30, 29.
[40] Fritz Oehlschlaeger and George Hendrick, *Toward the Making of Thoreau's Modern Reputation: Selected Correspondence of S. A. Jones, A. W. Hosmer, H. S. Salt, H. G. O. Blake, and D. Ricketson* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 17-18; James Russell Lowell, *My Study Windows* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1871).

The initial disdain for Thoreau's solitude cut across religious lines. The Unitarian *Monthly Religious Magazine* asserted he exemplified "the great vice of the spiritual hermit." He heaped a "poisonous sleet of scorn" on the rest of humanity, while he was constantly "feeling himself, reflecting himself, fondling himself, reverberating himself, exalting himself, incapable of escaping or forgetting himself."[41] Isaac Hecker, writing in *The Catholic World*, was more sympathetic to solitude, but not Thoreau's version: "The only thing that sanctifies solitude is the Catholic faith; and even when the monastic idea sought to realize complete isolation from the world, the superiors were loathe to grant permission." He criticized English biographer A. H. Japp (who wrote under the pseudonym H. A. Page) for presenting Thoreau as a modern St. Francis of Assisi, communing with and caring for all creatures. Hecker encouraged readers to skip his "foolish theories about religion, friendship, society, ethics" and instead appreciate him for his love of trails, streams, and forests.[42]

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the harshest and most influential critic of Thoreau's solitude. In his eulogy for Thoreau, Emerson praised his skill at observing nature, which "seemed to indicate additional senses," his pursuit of "tender and absolute religion," and his "original thinking and living." Yet he labeled him a "hermit and stoic" with a "simple and hidden life" whose virtues "sometimes ran into extremes." Emerson lamented Thoreau's his intellectual gifts were wasted on picking huckleberries and pounding beans, alone.[43]

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[41] W. R. A., "The Hermit of Concord," *The Monthly Religious Magazine*, June 1866.
[42] Isaac Thomas Hecker, "Thoreau and New England Transcendentalism," *The Catholic World, A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science*, June 1878. For more on Hecker's complicated history with Thoreau and Transcendentalism, see Chapter 4.
[43] Emerson recited Thoreau's many "renunciations:" "He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh; he

Over time, this early criticism gave way to widespread praise. *Walden* became a key text in the canon of American literature, and Thoreau's solitude grew to be his most identifying quality, regardless of how alone he actually was.[44] Thoreau's publisher, Houghton Mifflin, posthumously promoted his writing, beginning in the 1880s. By the turn of the century, the press was using Thoreau to market newer authors of "out-of-door" literature, setting the stage for his legacy as a founding figure in the emerging genre that would eventually be called "nature writing."[45] Along with his publisher, a handful of Thoreau's friends and disciples promoted his writing and legacy, and increasingly, his solitude.

William Ellery Channing penned the first book-length biography of his friend in 1873, celebrating Thoreau as "Poet-Naturalist."[46] In 1902, just after Channing's death, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn published a revised edition intended to "correct the persistent error that the Concord naturalist was unsocial, misanthropic personage."[47] Like Sanborn's own 1882 biography of Thoreau, this one placed increasing accent on his "hermit life,"

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drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Eulogy for Henry David Thoreau," *Atlantic Monthly* 1862.

[44] Walden was only two miles from the town of Concord, and he made regular trips there to visit friends, and among other things, have his mother wash his clothes. The woods themselves were not pristine wilderness, but rather a working landscape, frequented by woodcutters and ice cutters, hunters and fishermen. Thoreau entertained visitors regularly throughout his experiment in solitude. Richard Roorda credits Thoreau with establishing a "narrative logic of retreat" that remains central in American nature writing. Examining multiple drafts of Thoreau's writing, Roorda shows the author's agency in dramatizing the solitude of his Walden experience and his climb of Ktaadn. Thoreau edited out evidence of his human companions, focusing instead on his individual experience of these places. See Kent Curtis, "Nature in the Margins: Biography, Geography, and History in Walden Woods," (2008); Randall Roorda, *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*, Suny Series, Literacy, Culture, and Learning (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Robert Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don't Know: What the Prophet of Environmentalism Really Meant*, 1st ed. (New York: Collins, 2009).

[45] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

[46] William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873).

[47] Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, "From the School of Greenacre," *Springfield Republican*, August 15, 1902. in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Trancendentalists in Transition: Popularization of Emerson, Thoreau, and the Concord School of Philosophy in the Greenacre Summer Conferences and the Monsalvat School (1894-1909): The Roles of Chalres Malloy and Franklin Benjamin Sanborn before the Triumph of the Baha'i Movement in Eliot, Maine* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1980).

raising the ire of some reviewers, but proving popular in the long run.[48] Both versions of the biography celebrated his religious devotion to “wildness” and “the integrity of the plant and animal,” but the updated ending reflected a shifting attitude toward Thoreau’s combination of religion, nature, and solitude. The closing lines of the newer biography added praise for his solitary “rule of life,” celebrating him as an “anchorite” and a “recluse,” and one “with the ability and courage to be a captain of men.”[49] Thoreau’s solitude, once a liability, was now laudable. It was not selfish, but a source of wisdom he eagerly shared, and an inspiring quality his friends and publishers promoted.[50]

In this same period, Henry S. Salt published what he considered a more balanced, critical study of Thoreau than these early accounts from friends. Salt was intent to counter the accusations that Thoreau was a misanthropic hermit, not by diminishing his Walden experiment, but redeeming its value, arguing his solitude served a higher purpose than escape from society. He painted a detailed picture of Thoreau’s “sylvan abode,” assuring readers it was secluded enough for him to “pursue his meditations undisturbed,”

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[48] "Sanborn's "Thoreau"," *The Independent*, May 11, 1882. See *Trancendental Log: Fresh Discoveries in Newspapers Concerning Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and Others of the American Literary Renaissance, Arranced Annually for Half a Century from 1832* (Trancendental Books, 1973). Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Charles Dudley Warner, American Men of Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892).

[49] Channing’s 1873 version remarked, “His faith in wildness was intrinsic.” He “held the Indian's creed, and believed that plant and animal were a religion unto themselves and unto him.” Channing closed by restating his framing image of Thoreau as “Poet-Naturalist.” The 1902 version, edited by Sanborn, modified this part of the ending slightly. Now Thoreau had a “love of wildness” and he “believed in the integrity of the plant and animal. This was a religion to him.” The major change was in the additional comments about solitude, noted above. Channing, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist*, 324-5. William Ellery Channing and Ed. F. B. Sanborn, *Thoreau, Poet-Naturalist* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902).

[50] Sanborn was an enthusiastic Thoreau promoter who had written his own 1882 biography and edited early collections of his writing. Sanborn claims his changes to Channing’s text were primarily based on earlier manuscripts, which Channing had been forced to cut by publishers in 1873. Channing was close with Sanborn, even living with him in his final years, and Sanborn had access to many manuscripts from both Channing and Thoreau. As an editor, though, he had a reputation for taking great liberties, “improving” more than just Thoreau’s spelling and punctuation. Whether the increasing praise for Thoreau’s solitude originated with Channing or Sanborn, the shifting attitude remains revealing. See Oehlschlaeger and Hendrick, *Toward the Making of Thoreau's Modern Reputation: Selected Correspondence of S. A. Jones, A. W. Hosmer, H. S. Salt, H. G. O. Blake, and D. Ricketson*, 10.

but not too remote to "pay a visit to his friends in the village." He stressed, "the solitude was usually as complete as the strictest anchorite could have desired," but Thoreau was "by no means the misanthropic anchorite that some have imagined him." Salt concluded, it was "an injustice" to identify Thoreau "too exclusively with Walden," but in the end, he positioned Walden at the center of Thoreau's life: "This was the time when his thoughts ripened, and his ethical creed assumed a definite form, and that his residence in the woods was not only the most striking, because the most picturesque, incident in his life, but also gave a determining direction to his later career."[51]

In 1891, Samuel Arthur Jones reviewed the growing chorus of Thoreau biographers, celebrating that they "continue to improve upon each other," and that "one after the other misrepresentations are being brought to judgement." Like Salt and Sanborn, he was especially pleased that the authors increasingly treated solitude as a virtue. "Thoreau is no longer considered a 'misanthrope,' nor is he deemed a 'hermit' who masqueraded at Walden Pond."[52] When Houghton Mifflin released a new edition of Walden in 1898, Jones' review staked out his position even more resolutely. He applauded the editors for bringing the man and his place to life by reproducing in the text "every picture of Thoreau that has become historical," Thoreau's map of Walden Pond, and photographs of his favorite "haunts." Jones hailed the "superb volumes," acknowledging *Walden* had already seen "some thirty editions within the forty-four years that it has been a significant integer in the world's literature." Thoreau and his place of solitude deserved such treatment, Jones concluded. He was a voice crying out in the

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[51] Henry Salt, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (London: Richard Bently, 1890), 67, 77, 84.
[52] Samuel Arthur Jones, "Thoreau and His Biographers," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 48(1891). Reproduced in Oehlschlaeger and Hendrick, *Toward the Making of Thoreau's Modern Reputation: Selected Correspondence of S. A. Jones, A. W. Hosmer, H. S. Salt, H. G. O. Blake, and D. Ricketson*.

wilderness, the Luther of Transcendentalism, "fervid in the intensity of his convictions, but refusing alike the surplice and the creed… He had learned that the Soul is solitary, and to him its privacy was sacred."[53]

As Thoreau's legacy grew, his solitude at Walden was no longer a problem but a model for others seeking to live alone and write about their experience. These early critics cemented the link between solitude and a particular set of practices: simple living, contemplation of nature and self, writing, and moral integrity. These had been linked with solitude throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but *Walden* solidified their place as enduring features of sacred solitude.

Practices of Simple Living

In the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau described the "economy" of his solitude. He carefully recorded the details of his experiment, listing the costs and benefits associated with his clothing, shelter, food, furniture, and more. He included charts showing the cost of each nail and screw used to build his house. He listed every item of his first eight months of food, down to the three cents worth of salt. These were more than mundane minutia. They constituted Thoreau's answer to the classic catechetical question: What is "the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life?" He believed everyday practices of simple living were key to freeing "the mass of men" from their "lives of quiet desperation."[54]

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[53] Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, or a Life in the Woods with an Introduction by Bradford Torrey. Illustrated with Photograpvures*, 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Moughton Mifflin & Company, 1897); Samuel Arthur Jones, "Vox Clamantis in Deserto," *Inlander* 8, no. 6 (1898).
[54]Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"* (New York: Signet Classics, 1942), 10.Thoreau was quite familiar with traditions of simple living in America, having written his senior thesis on the subject at Harvard. For a more recent survey of simple living in

Thoreau's house is the most iconic symbol of his simplicity. He chose its image for the frontispiece of the book, and he proudly described building the 10 by 15 foot structure himself, with recycled materials, including nails and boards from a nearby shanty and bricks from a 1790s chimney.[55] He had long dreamed of building his own place, a practice he described this as the most "simple and natural" occupation.[56]

Thoreau drew inspiration for his design from many sources, which show the breadth of this thinking about simplicity. He was fascinated with the huts, tents, and caves "in which the first men dwelt."[57] He also looked to other creatures for model dwellings, including birds' nests, woodchuck burrows, and hollow trees. He hoped to emulate "the most unpretending, humble log huts and cottages of the poor." Thoreau also engaged with the contemporary architectural movement to construct "villas" in pastoral American and British suburbs. His design echoed many of its conventions, but demonstrated a simpler and less expensive approach, free of unnecessary ornamentation and costly decoration.[58] Like the villa architects, he also resonated with the English

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America, see David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[55] Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 162.See also W. Barksdale Maynard, "Thoreau's House at Walden," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999): 306.

[56] Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 36.

[57] In 1843, he wrote that the ideal house was "as simple and sincere in its essentia[l]s" as the earliest cave dwellings. See Maynard, "Thoreau's House at Walden," 313. In *Walden,* he praised "the very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages," when man was "still but a sojourner in nature," dwelling in tents or standing "under a tree for shelter." Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 30.

[58] Thoreau hoped to model a simple life in the wild, but he was also engaged with these contemporaries in envisioning the possibilities of simplicity and connection to nature in the suburbs. *Walden* shares many features with popular books of house patterns, like those by Andrew Jackson Downing, which had architectural drawings for pastoral, suburban villa houses. See Maynard, "Thoreau's House at Walden; Jean Carwile Masteller and Richard N. Masteller, "Rural Architecture in Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry David Thoreau: Pattern Book Parody in Walden," *New England Quarterly* 57(1984); Maura D'Amore, "Thoreau's Unreal Estate: Playing House at Walden Pond," *The New England Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2009). Robert Gross insists that by the time Thoreau built his house at Walden Pond in 1845, Concord was very much a suburb of Boston, a one hour train ride away. Robert A. Gross, "Transcendentalism and Urbanism: Concord, Boston, and the Wider World," *Journal of American Studies* 18(1984); W. Barksdale Maynard, *Walden Pond: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

garden hermitage as a model structure for solitary retreat.[59] Thoreau blended these ideas and presented a model for others seeking solitude and simplicity.

Thoreau also simplified his daily practices in the house. Cecelia Tichi argues he embodied a “primitive domesticity,” which for him meant “essential, utilitarian, simple, and identified with a previous ‘golden age’ marked by ‘enduring materials’ and spatial openness.”[60] He contrasted this with the mainstream domesticity of his day, which was extravagant, wasteful, and increasingly consumerist. The typical household economy made men and women their own “slave-drivers,” prisoners to their unending work in and out of the home.

Thoreau was disciplined in simplifying his domestic practices. He “made a study of the ancient and indispensable art of bread-making, consulting such authorities as offered, going back to the primitive days and first invention of the unleavened kind.” He experimented with different grains and eventually decided to bake without yeast, happily eliminating “the trivialness of carrying a bottleful in my pocket, which would sometimes pop and discharge its contents to my discomfiture.”[61] He stripped away all that was

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[59] Those with land, money, and the leisure to enjoy them often built large gardens with hermitages. Some of these were solitary retreats for their affluent owners. Others employed an “ornamental hermit” to live in the garden and serve as resident solitary, philosopher, or at least conversation piece. Many of Thoreau’s contemporaries embraced the practice, including the same architects busy designing working class suburban villas. Andrew Jackson Downing built a hermitage in his own garden in Newburgh, New York. Lawyer Daniel Ricketson erected a “shanty” between his house and barn, where he could retreat from work and family to pursue “sweet solitude,” “primeval wisdom,” “study and meditation.” After reading *Walden,* Ricketson corresponded with Thoreau, who eventually visited. Bronson Alcott described his friend Thoreau’s place as “his hermitage on Walden,” and the two later built a similar structure for Emerson, which Alcott called a “sylvan.” Thoreau sometimes embraced and sometimes resisted identifying himself as a hermit, but he clearly resonated with the hermitage as an architectural model. See "Thoreau's House at Walden," 314-8.

[60] Cecelia Tichi, "Domesticity on Walden Pond," in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William E. Cain (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 97, 105. On the rise of primitivism in American culture, see also T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimoderism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Arthur O. Lovejoy et al., *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins press, 1935).

[61] Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 47.

unnecessary, modeling a primitive domestic space that was liberating, set apart from the marketplace and the industrial "advances" transforming men's and women's work.[62]

Thoreau's practice of simple living was fundamental to his whole project of solitary self-improvement, allowing him to go deeper into himself and his environment. Sherman Paul argues simplification was Thoreau's core ascetic practice, "the severe discipline by which he hoped to concentrate his forces and purify the channels of perception."[63] As Maura D'Amore writes, less cooking and cleaning meant more "looking and listening," for Thoreau thought it "better to dust the mind than the home."[64] He wrote, "Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation." He could then seek beauty "out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper."[65] Solitary simplicity was the most natural means for transformation: "You think that I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or *chrysalis,* and nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society. By simplicity, commonly called poverty, my

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[62] He claimed his solitary experiment made him an authority on the subject, since, unlike most men, he had been responsible for the full range of domestic duties. "Having been my own butcher and scullion and cook, as well as the gentleman for whom the dishes were served up, I can speak from an unusually complete experience." *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 145. Many of his proposals echoed the treatises by female domestic reformers such as Catharine Beecher and Lydia Maria Child, though he does not reference them directly. Some recent scholars have interpreted *Walden* as potentially liberating for women readers, with this vision of housekeeping as "necessary and beautiful," though others stress this model is only suited for a solitary individual. His experiment was "definitely the product of a single man's mind—he [did] not have to contemplate the effects of his actions on a wife or children, and many of his basic needs [were] met by friends and family members." D'Amore, "Thoreau's Unreal Estate: Playing House at Walden Pond," 76-7; Tichi, "Domesticity on Walden Pond; Laura Dassow Walls, "*Walden* as Feminist Manifesto," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 1(1993). Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 105.

[63] As Paul also notes, Thoreau often described his simplicity as voluntary poverty, linking the practice with monastic vows. Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), 304.

[64] D'Amore, "Thoreau's Unreal Estate: Playing House at Walden Pond," 77.

[65] Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 31.

life is concentrated and so becomes organized, or a κοςμος, which before was inorganic and lumpish."[66] Thoreau sought simplicity in solitude, and he also engaged with public conversations about the changing shape of domestic life. He lectured and wrote about these practices, and they reached an even wider audience as *Walden* rose in stature.[67]

Contemplative Practices

Simplicity and solitude provided a context for Thoreau's contemplative practices, which included a daily routine of walking and long hours silent and motionless, observing nature. He was convinced that patient, sustained attention was the key to understanding his environment. "You must be conversant with things for a long time to know much about them–like the moss which has hung from the spruce–and as the partridge & the rabbit are acquainted with the thickets & at length have acquired the color of the places they frequent."[68] He attuned his senses to the sights and sounds of his place, and reflected in his journal about how these observations transformed his relationship to nature and his sense of self.

Disciplined as he was in this, Thoreau resisted settling into overly scientific, systematic ways of knowing nature. He immersed himself in his surroundings not as a researcher collecting data but as a contemplative seeking to live "in the bloom of the present moment."

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[66] Henry David Thoreau, Bradford Torrey, and Francis H. Allen, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 14 vols., His Writings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 9:246-7.
[67] Walden is the most prominent articulation of what Lawrence Buell calls the "epic of voluntary simplicity," establishing the key practices of the genre: "reduced material wants, rustic habitation, self-sufficiency at every level, the cultivation of self-improvement through a disciplined life led largely in solitude Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, 145.
[68] "Ecological Contemplation as Spiritual Practice: The Case of Henry David Thoreau," in *Buddhist Ecology and Environmental Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School Center for the Study of World Religions, 2005), 17.

> Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise til noon, rapt in revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than the work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.[69]

Though this appeared as "sheer idleness" to others, Thoreau framed it as "contemplation and the forsaking of works," in the mode of "the Orientals." [70] Thoreau was fascinated with Asian religious traditions as alternatives to the ethic of work and the striving for self-improvement. He practiced a contemplative detachment. Patiently focusing attention on the world around him, and reflecting on this perceptual process, he hoped to become more fully part of this ecological web.[71]

Thoreau cultivated this same spirit of contemplation on his regular "saunters" around Concord.[72] In his essay, "Walking," he reflected on these forest rambles as his sacred practice. He traced the word "saunter" to medieval wanderers to the holy land, the "Sainte Terre." He wrote, "Every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this holy land from the hands of the Infidels." He also linked the word "saunter" to those who were "sans terre,… without land or a home…

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[69] Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 79.
[70] Ibid. How did neighbors perceive his contemplative idleness? One recalled seeing "that darned fool" beside a "little old mud pond… doin' nothin' but just standin' there–lookin' at that pond… standin'--the livelong day--a-studyin'--the habits--of the bull-frog!" Quoted in Mrs. Daniel Chester French, Memories of a Sculptor's Wife, 1928. See Walter Harding, *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries* (Nw York: Dover Books, 1989).
[71] Buell, "Ecological Contemplation as Spiritual Practice: The Case of Henry David Thoreau," 8, 12. See also Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[72] Thoreau took regular walks during his time at Walden, and became even more consistent in this practice in the years that followed. Sauntering served as an ongoing context for being away from other humans, and a way to deepen his connection with his non-human neighbors. In December, 1956, he wrote, "I often visited a particular plant four or five miles distant, half a dozen times within a fortnight, that I might know exactly when it opened, beside attending to a great many others in different directions and some of them equally distant at the same time." Thoreau, Torrey, and Allen, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 9:157-8.

having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere."[73] He thought of himself not as a pilgrim to a faraway holy land so much as a local wanderer cultivating a sense of place, in the only way possible, immersed in the subtleties of the landscape over many years.

More than just a style of walking, sauntering was a central metaphor Thoreau used to describe his whole practice of contemplating nature and self. He exhorted himself to "walk with more free senses," sauntering not only with his feet but also his eyes. "I must let my senses wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking… the more you look the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest… Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you… What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye."[74] Thoreau was intrigued with the process of perception, and with the possibility that his contemplative practice of observing the environment could transcend the conventional modes of cataloging and conceptualizing nature.

In his later years, Thoreau was increasingly apophatic in his approach to contemplating nature. In 1959, he wrote, "It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. I do not get nearer by a hair's breadth to any natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man. To conceive of it with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange."[75] Thoreau was committed to what Lawrence Buell calls an "aesthetics of

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[73] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Excursions: The Writings of Henry D Thoreau*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 561.
[74] Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing : Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 52.
[75] Thoreau, Torrey, and Allen, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 12:371. Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 293.

relinquishment." Through his journal reflections and contemplative practice of both literal and metaphorical sauntering, he sought to relinquish control of his relationship to nature, letting his encounters grow more wild and wandering. Buell notes that Thoreau exemplifies the paradox of nature writing, and by extension, the paradox of contemplative solitude. Often, both are at once "intractably I-centered" but also "intractably dedicated to the overcoming of an I-centered mentality, and beyond this to the overcoming of an anthropocentric view of the natural world."[76]

Writing

Writing was another practice that defined Thoreau's solitude. He set aside regular time in the mornings for journaling. Emerson encouraged him to start keeping a journal in 1837, shortly after Thoreau graduated from Harvard. Many in the circle of Concord Transcendentalists used a journal to capture ideas as they emerged. They occasionally shared these private reflections with one another and published excerpts.[77] Thoreau kept detailed notes of his nature observations, experimenting with how writing could deepen his intimacy with his environment. He asserted a fundamental link between language and landscape: "The roots of letters are things", and the writer must seek words that are "genuine and indigenous and have their roots in our natures." He criticized the "spurious

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[76] Buell, "Ecological Contemplation as Spiritual Practice: The Case of Henry David Thoreau," 8.Other critics describe this contemplative perceptual practice in a variety of ways. Alan Hodder writes that Thoreau cultivated "disinterested, nonconceptual, and nonpropositional attention to the object." Scott Slovic argues Thoreau sought "an elevated, involuntary mode of perceiving the world… a mixture of active movement through natural settings and passive reception of sensory impressions." Lawrence Buell situates this as part of Thoreau's "aesthetics of relinquishment," which included his practices of simplicity and contemplation. Buell says Thoreau's contemplative disposition was "the suspension of all active striving in order to achieve and sustain a prolonged state of "revery," during which one's mind/body becomes as unselfconscious as the surrounding natural world and in that sense at one with it." See Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 291; Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing : Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*, 53.

[77] H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in a Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 39-40.

and artificial" words of the scholar "who does not stand on solid ground, and instead aimed to write as a poet, to "bring to Nature the smooth mirror in which she is to be reflected."[78]

Thoreau used writing to observe himself with the same discipline he did nature. He was convinced that to see the world clearly, he must be a cleanly polished mirror. "The poet must be continually watching the moods of his mind as the astronomer watches the aspects of the heavens." He described his reflections as "a meteorological journal of the mind," a written record of his shifting inner moods and with the shifting atmosphere around him.[79]

Writing was also a public practice for Thoreau. His journal was not simply a mirror reflecting his observations of nature and self, and his writing was not simply a private outlet. He used the journal to craft his experiences, carefully constructing a narrative representation of himself in his environment. His journals from the time Walden Pond were the starting point for *Walden*, but he worked on the published text for many years and drafts. In 1906, Houghton Mifflin published decades of journals as part of his collected works, making him the first American to have his journals in print. These gave readers a glimpse at his practice of writing, and together with Walden established his particular style of writing as integral to the practice of solitude.[80]

Thoreau produced only one text, from start to finish, while at Walden, the essay, "Ktaadn," later published in The Maine Woods. Literary scholar Randall Roorda

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[78] quoted in Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing : Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*, 30. See also Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 232.
[79] *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 295-6.
[80] Perry Miller argues the journal became so important to Thoreau that by the end of his life, he treated it not only as a place for first drafts for later publication, but as "a deliberately constructed work of art." Perry Miller, *Consciousness in Concord; the Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal," 1840-1841* (Boston,: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 4.

analyzes the final essay and earlier drafts to show just how much Thoreau crafted the story into what he calls a "narrative of retreat." Thoreau's writing dramatizes his solitude. In its final form, the narrative follows him as he leaves his traveling companions to reach a solitary climactic encounter with the wild summit of the mountain. Roorda rightly stresses the need to interpret "nature writing" not as straightforward narration of first person experience, but as the "conversion" of that experience into narrative.[81] At least since Thoreau, nature writing privileges the narrative of solitary retreat as paradigmatic.

Moral Integrity

Thoreau's contemporaries criticized his solitude as overly self-absorbed and individualistic. Walden was a utopia of one, in contrast to the many communal experiments established in his day. He was convinced individual ethical commitment was more effective than collective action, which was too slow and gradual. "The true reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring our doors. It calls no convention. I can do two thirds the reform of the world myself . . . When an individual takes a sincere step, then all the gods attend, and his single deed is sweet."[82] He changed what he could individually, and railed against the rest in his writings and lectures.

Largely because of his essay, "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau developed a reputation as someone committed to changing society and not just withdrawing from it. The essay defended his decision to stop paying the poll tax, a decision that in 1846, earned him a night away from Walden and in the Concord jail. He refused to collaborate with a government that engaged in slavery and the Mexican War, but he also distanced

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[81] Roorda, *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*.
[82] Henry David Thoreau et al., *Journal*, The Writings of Henry D Thoreau (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 1:299.

himself from anarchists who wanted no government, calling instead for "at once a better government." In reality, Thoreau first refused the tax in 1842, four years before the annexation of Texas and the outbreak of the Mexican War. When he composed his first lecture on the topic in 1848, Thoreau added this objection to his earlier position against slavery. Literary scholar Lawrence Rosenwald questions even this logic, since the tax Thoreau refused to pay was not a federal tax but a composite of taxes for state, county, and town governments, which did not condone slavery. His argument was more about the principle than the particular policy. He wrote, "I do not care to trace the course of my dollar if I could, till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot with."[83]

Thoreau articulated a commitment to individual integrity, helping establish a link between solitude and practices of personal moral purity. This primarily entailed acts of omission. He simplified his life and eliminated as much as possible the aspects that were morally messy, regardless of the broader impact of these renunciations. In his writings and lectures, Thoreau did publicize his moral commitment to simple living, contemplative solitude and civil disobedience, a combination that influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and generations of solitary individuals.

Thoreau's Legacy

Henry David Thoreau admonished his *Walden* readers not to imitate his solitary experiment: "I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account; for, besides that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would be very

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[83] Lawrence A. Rosenwald, "The Theory, Practice, and Influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience," in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William E. Cain (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163. Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 236.

careful to have each one find out and pursue his own way." In the years that followed, many ignored this request and adopted his solitary mode, reinforcing its sacred norms, even as each adapted these in "his own way."[84]

In 1869, divinity student Edmond Stuart Hotham built a shanty of his own just a hundred yards from the site of Thoreau's house. Though he denied copying Thoreau, Hotham adopted many practices that reflected Thoreau's model of solitude and observers consistently linked the two. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, one of Thoreau's most ardent promoters, visited Hotham in January 1869, and penned an editorial for the *Springfield Daily Republican* titled, "Shall We Turn Hermit?," detailing their mutual commitment to simple living and "self-dependence." Hotham built an even more economical home, around half the size and cost of his predecessor. Neighbors speculated he used scraps from Thoreau's then decaying structure. Hotham ate a simple, vegetarian diet, at first consisting only of "Graham biscuit and the clean water of Walden," and later mostly corn and wheat mush. Sanborn speculated that Hotham lacked Thoreau's "higher reasons for turning hermit," but he still endorsed Hotham's "economical and sanitary considerations." "In the crowded, feverish life of American cities there are hundreds and thousands of young men, poor and rich, who would profit in body, mind, and estate by taking the advice of the Walden hermit."[85]

Other Concord journalists followed, praising Hotham's simplicity and solitude, and also his bond with the hallowed natural landscape of Walden Pond. Intrigued to understand his motivation, one reporter explained he needed space to do work he could

[84] *Walden, or, Life in the Woods; and, "on the Duty of Civil Disobedience"*, 53.
[85] Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, "Shall We Turn Hermit?," *Springfield Daily Republican*, January 25, 1869. See Maynard, *Walden Pond: A History*, 165-70; Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Thoreau's Disciple at Walden: Edmond S. Hotham," *The Emerson Society Quarterly* 26(1962); Sanborn, "Shall We Turn Hermit?."

only accomplish "alone with nature." In addition to divinity, he "studied the woods and the banks of the pond," and became enthralled with the birds and other creatures in the woods. He sought "absolute communion with nature," and hoped Walden would be an ideal place, with Concord residents accustomed to such an endeavor and capable of respecting his solitude.[86] Days later, another local correspondent reported rumored plans for a new hotel aimed at "pilgrims to this modern Mecca," where they would enjoy Walden water, wild apples, and acorns, and sleep on "beds made of Thoreau's pine boughs." Guides would lead scheduled tours to see sacred sites and local luminaries – Channing at sunset, Emerson on his afternoon walk, and "the new Hermit will grind his meal at noon."[87]

Word about the "New Hermit at Walden Pond" soon spread beyond Concord, bringing attention to both Hotham and Thoreau, and further establishing their practices as defining features of sacred solitude. A New York Times reporter pretended to stumble onto Hotham while asking directions to Thoreau's hut. The widely reproduced story described him as an "imitative successor" and "disciple of Thoreau," but noted his frustration with the newfound attention. Hotham complained, "some jackass saw fit to publish me," and he criticized the Concord townspeople for gossiping about trivial details concerning their "new Hermit."[88] Tired of being an attraction for pilgrims visiting "Concord and its Celebrities," after a year, he decided to relocate, and wrote to Emerson to report he was "camped" again, this time in an "earth-cabin" enjoying the "wilder tang"

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[86] E. K., "Rambles in Concord," *Springfield Republican*, May 1, 1869. in Cameron, "Thoreau's Disciple at Walden: Edmond S. Hotham."
[87] Tribulation Periwinkle, "Latest News from Concord," *Springfield Republican*, Man 4, 1869. Reproduced in Cameron, "Thoreau's Disciple at Walden: Edmond S. Hotham."
[88] "Concord," *New York Times*, April 18, 1869; "Concord and Its Celebrities. The Haunts of Thoreau and Hawthorne--the Experiences of Hermit Life," *The Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, April 29 1869.

of the Adirondack region of New York, where he spent the winter refreshingly "inconsequent" and "unmolested."[89]

Within a decade of Thoreau's death, Walden had become a tourist destination and a "shrine" for pilgrims paying tribute. In 1872, naturalist Wilson Flagg explained that the spot was "made sacred by the two years' solitary residence of Henry D. Thoreau… and by his hermit life."[90] "Devout Pilgrims" established common rituals: strolling in the Walden woods, sitting on the shore of the pond, visiting the signposted site of his cabin, and placing a stone on a cairn near the spot.[91] Locals capitalized on the boom in Thoreau tourism, selling relics for visitors to carry home, including manuscript letters, hatpins made of nuts he had planted, and even timbers supposedly from his Walden cabin.[92] As thousands journeyed to Walden, making their own brief retreat from modern life, the memory and mythology surrounding Thoreau the solitary person became increasingly transposed onto Walden the place of solitude.

As Lawrence Buell argues, this Thoreauvian pilgrimage was focused on the site of Thoreau's solitary sojourn, but it was simultaneously decentralized, with pilgrims constructing their own Walden retreats near woods and waters far from Concord. Theirs was a "more 'protestant' approach to pilgrimage," not just inspired to journey to Thoreau's place, but to discover their own, to find "whatever s/he can achieve in her own

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[89] "Thoreau's Disciple at Walden: Edmond S. Hotham."
[90] Wilson Flagg, *The Woods and by-Ways of New England* (Boston: Osgood, 1872), 392.
[91] See Cameron, *Trancendental Log: Fresh Discoveries in Newspapers Concerning Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and Others of the American Literary Renaissance, Arranced Annually for Half a Century from 1832*, 315. The image of the cairn circulated widely, thanks to a photograph by Arthur Winslow Hosmer, which was featured Houghton Mifflin's 1897 edition of *Walden*. Thoreau, *Walden, or a Life in the Woods with an Introduction by Bradford Torrey. Illustrated with Photograpvures*. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, 324-5. Several prominent figures made the pilgrimage, including John Burroughs and John Muir, who said he could imagine living at the tranquil spot "two hundred years or two thousand." Muir went on to seek solitude in the mountains of California, and to advocate protecting wilderness as sacred space.
[92] *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, 322.

life by way of parallel."[93] Many were inspired to emulate Thoreau's solitude, and to write about their adventures. In the process, they faithfully adopted and creatively adapted his practices, which would continue to define solitude as sacred. The chapters that follow trace the long afterlife of Thoreau in American culture, examining the stories of those who pursued their own adventures alone in nature, sustaining a long-established tradition and feeding the public's ongoing hunger for tales of solitude.

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[93] "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage: The Structure of an American Cult," *American Literature* 61, no. 2 (1989): 186.

Chapter 2. Solitude and the Sublime Landscape: Forever Wild

When Edmond Hotham left Walden in 1870, to escape the media's attention, it was no coincidence he moved west to New York's Adirondacks. The region's mountains and lakes were home to many well-known hermits whose lore linked the Adirondacks with solitude, even more than Thoreau's Walden Pond. There was a growing romance with the Adirondacks as America's quintessential wilderness landscape and the ideal place for solitary retreat from society. Artists, philosophers, preachers, tourists and conservationists flocked to the area, enthralled with its natural beauty, and also its culture of solitude.

During the late nineteenth century, wilderness and solitude evolved together as mutually reinforcing symbols of the sacred, and the Adirondack region was a crucial context for this, providing a clear example of the sanctification of wilderness as sacred space. The Adirondacks were imagined as free from the profane pressures of modern urban life, the most authentic place for those seeking solitude. In 1892, the state of New York declared the forests of the Adirondacks would remain "forever wild," making this one of the first legally protected landscapes. Long recognized as a key site in development of American environmentalism, this place was also a key site in the establishment of a distinctive form of religious culture, one that envisioned wilderness as sacred space for solitude. The Adirondacks were not, as wilderness is sometimes conceived, purely absent of people, but in fact home to a distinctive character of person and a distinctive way of being alone. The landscape and its hermits were consistently represented as sacred. In the language of the times, they were sublime, at once inspiring and mysterious.

Solitude and the Sublime: Artists and Philosophers in the Adirondacks

Nineteenth century artists and philosophers praised the solitude of the sublime Adirondack wilderness. Famed landscape painter Thomas Cole visited the Adirondacks in 1837 and wrote of the region's "quietness—solitude—the untamed—the unchanged aspect of nature."[1] His painting, *Schoon Mountain, Adirondacks*, exemplified his emerging style for representing wilderness. At the center of Cole's composition is a lone peak, cloaked in light, but clouds loom at the edges. This is a classic expression of the aesthetics of the sublime. Nature is at once inspiring and haunting, sacred in its capacity to reveal the divine, and its capacity to evoke fear. [2]

In one of the most influential articulations of this aesthetic, Edmund Burke defined the sublime as that which excited the strongest emotion, through a sense of terror, pain and danger. Sublime nature had the power to cause astonishment, "that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."[3] Such sublime experience was amplified in solitude, which Burke called a "great and positive pain."[4] Cole and landscape artists of his day sought out sublime places and developed a style of painting meant to reproduce the sense of terror encountered alone in the wild. [5]

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[1] Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, 3 ed. (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Company, 1856), 239.

[2] Thomas Cole, *Schroon Mountain, Adirondacks, Essex County, New York, after a Storm*, 1838, Cleveland Museum of Art.

[3] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1757), 40.

[4] *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1757), 31.

[5] For Cole, the solitary encounter with sublime nature was an age-old source of religious experience, and one still available in wild places like the Adirondacks. In his 1836 "Essay on American Scenery," he wrote,

> Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration of heaven. It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire; and heard the "still small voice"--that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert;--the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God. The solitary Anchorites of Syria and Egypt, though ignorant that the busy world is man's

In 1858, another leading painter, William James Stillman, ventured into the Adirondacks, seeking to rediscover the "spiritual" inspiration he experienced as a child drawn to "nature worship." He hoped "going into the 'desert' might quicken the spiritual faculties," and he hoped to find "new subjects for art, spiritual freedom, and a closer contact with the spiritual world." He was convinced such inspiration depended on "isolation from the rest of humanity."[6]

During his first season in the wilderness, Stillman discovered solitude was not always pure and pious. The backwoods seemed to attract more alcoholics than spiritual seekers. He did become fascinated with one reclusive hunter who "had come into the woods with a motive in some degree like mine — impatience of the restraints and burdens of civilization, and pure love of solitude." Stillman especially praised the man's primitive closeness to nature. He had become like and animal, but "with his higher intellect inert… He had built himself a cabin in the depth of the woods, and there he lived in the most complete isolation from human society he could attain… He cared nothing for

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> noblest sphere of usefulness, well knew how congenial to religious musings are the pathless solitudes.

Cole's essay linked the American wilderness to this sacred topography of solitude. What the young nation lacked in cultural history, it made up for in its wilderness, distinctive for its "primitive features" and its "scenes of solitude." Cole outlined how one should cultivate a "taste for scenery," in particular the "stern sublimity of the wild," which reveals the "undefiled works" of God, the "pure creations of the Almighty." He asserted that cultivating this taste for wilderness opened a direct window to the divine and also taught the solitary viewer the "principles on which nature works." Cole lamented the "ravages of the axe," which threatened the solitude of these pristine places. See Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *The American Monthly Magazine*, January 1836.

This taste for solitude and the sublime was characteristic of romanticism in American art and culture. By the time Cole painted Schoon Mountain in 1837, American writers and artists were embracing the values of romanticism, influenced by ideas from Europe, where Cole traveled extensively. These figures turned away from Enlightenment values like reason and order, instead embracing emotion, experience, and wild nature as sources of inspiration. Roderick Nash acknowledges that "romanticism resists definition," but for the purposes of understanding its place in the cultural history of wilderness concludes, he defines it by its "enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary and mysterious." See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 47.

[6] William James Stillman, *The Autobiography of a Journalist, William James Stillman* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and company, 1901), 198.

books, but enjoyed nature, and only hunted in order to live, respecting the lives of his fellow-creatures within that limit.[7]

Alone in the Adirondacks, Stillman developed what he described as a "morbid passion for solitude," a desire to paint and write without interruption, save the sights and sounds of birds overhead and the subtle voices within. He felt an increasing sensitivity to the world around him, and an increasing ability to hear voices within. Though not as pure as he expected, Stillman deemed the experiment a great success. He returned the following summer, this time with a remarkable group, calling itself the Adirondack Club, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, naturalist Louis Agassiz, and other prominent figures.[8] Emerson composed a poetic journal of the trip, one that shared Stillman's romantic fascination with the solitary, primitive hunters and guides of the Adirondacks:

> Your rank is all reversed; let men of cloth
> Bow to the stalwart churls in overalls:
> *They* are the doctors of the wilderness,
> And we the low-prized laymen.
> In sooth, red flannel is a saucy test
> Which few can put on with impunity.[9]

The party spent a month together at a rustic retreat they dubbed "The Philosophers' Camp" on Follansby Pond, itself named for a "primitive philosopher and hermit," a well-educated Englishman who retired to the wilderness.[10]

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[7] *The Autobiography of a Journalist, William James Stillman* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and company, 1901), 200.
[8] See his painting of the group: William James Stillman. *The Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks*, 1858. Concord Free Public Library
[9] Emerson's "The Adirondacs" (1958), reproduced in Alfred L. Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 2* (Port Washington, NY: I.J. Friedman, 1963 [1921]), 274.
[10] It is unclear whether Stillman and the others were aware of this history of solitude at Follasby Pond. *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 1* (Port Washington, NY: I.J. Friedman, 1963 [1921]), 178.

Preaching the wilderness gospel

The romantic allure of the wilderness reached a broader audience thanks in large part to Reverend William Henry Harrison Murray and his bestselling 1869 travel guide, *Adventures in the Wilderness: or, Camp-life in the Adirondacks*. Murray was pastor of Boston's prominent Park Street Church. He promoted the Adirondacks as a place where, in the stillness of solitude, the masses could encounter the divine personally and directly:

> In the silence of the woods the soul apprehends [God] instinctively. He is everywhere. In the fir and pine, which, like the tree of life, shed their leaves every month, and are forever green; in the water at your feet, which no paddle has ever vexed and no taint polluted, rivaling that which is as "pure as crystal"; in the mountains, which, in every literature, have been associated with the Deity, you see Him who of old time was conceived of as a "Dweller among the hills." With such symbols and manifestations of God around, you need not go to the lettered page to learn of him.[11]

Murray especially endorsed the Adirondack wilderness as vital for clergy:

> If every church would make up a purse, and pack its worn and weary pastor off to the North Woods for a four weeks' jaunt, in the hot months of July and August, it would do a very sensible as well as pleasant act. For when the good dominie came back swarth and tough as an Indian, elasticity in his step, fire in his eye, depth and clearness in his reinvigorated voice, wouldn't there be some preaching! And what texts he would have from which to talk to the little folks in the Sabbath school! How their bright eyes would open and enlarge as he narrated his adventures, and told them how the good Father feeds the fish that swim, and clothes the mink and beaver with their warm and sheeny fur. The preacher sees God in the original there, and often translates him better from his unwritten works than from his written word.[12]

Murray echoed earlier Adirondack promoter Reverend Joel Taylor Headley, who had touted the spiritual and physical healing powers of the place in his 1849 *The Adirondack: or Life in the Woods*. After what he described as "an attack on the brain," Headley

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[11]William H. H. Murray, *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & co., 1869), 194.

[12] *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & co., 1869), 23-4.

followed his physician's advice and spent two summers in the wilderness. He claimed the healing power of the wilderness was its authenticity, a remedy for the artificiality of the city: "In the woods, the mask that society compels one to wear is cast aside, and the restraints which the thousand eyes and reckless tongues about him fasten on the heart, are thrown off, and the soul rejoices in its liberty and again becomes a child in action."[13]

Murray and Headley preached a new kind of gospel and called for a new kind of conversion experience; not just any sort of therapeutic vacation, but solitary adventure in the wild. In this era of Muscular Christianity, they promoted not only quiet contemplation but also vigorous sporting activities like hunting, fishing, and mountain climbing as vital to spiritual and physical health.[14] Murray and Headley represented the Adirondacks as the ideal destination, and their books included maps and tips to guide eager urban pilgrims. Readers responded in droves. In 1870, in the summer after *Adventures in the Wilderness* was published, crowds flocked to the Adirondacks seeking the solitude of the place, Murray's book in hand. *Harper's Monthly Magazine* reported on the phenomenon, with a story and a series of cartoons caricaturing the throng of travelers as "Murray's rush."[15]

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[13] Joel Tyler Headley, *The Adirondack: Or Life in the Woods* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), iii. Preaching this gospel of renewal in the wilderness, Headley and Murray joined other liberal Protestant ministers who were increasingly concerned with the health of body and soul, and increasingly looked to nature as a source of spiritual and physical healing. In *Star Papers* (1854) and *Norwood* (1867), prominent Congregationalist minister Henry Ward Beecher encouraged city dwellers to escape the pressures of urban life with vacations in the country. By the late nineteenth century, labor and leisure were increasingly segregated into separate times and places. Salvation was no longer tightly associated with work, but with the emerging therapeutic, consumer culture, and liberal clergy encouraged the newfound enthusiasm for leisure. They advocated for physically and morally wholesome amusements, supporting institutions like the Y.M.C.A. and the development of city parks.[13] They promoted tourism, now more accessible and popular, thanks to restructuring of work, improved infrastructure, and this culture of leisure.[13] See David Strauss, "Toward a Consumer Culture: "Adirondack Murray" and the Wilderness Vacation," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1987). John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[14] Strauss, "Toward a Consumer Culture: "Adirondack Murray" and the Wilderness Vacation; Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[15] Charles Hallock, "The Raquette Club," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1870.

They were also labeled “Murray’s fools,” since many were outraged to find so few hotels and amenities, and so many blackflies and mosquitoes.[16]

Hermit guides as mythic figures

As the Adirondacks grew in popularity, so did its solitary hermits, hunters, and guides. Murray promoted the Adirondack’s sublime landscape, but he also publicized its mysterious and solitary backwoodsmen. After the success of *Adventures in the Wilderness*, he began his own newspaper, *The Golden Rule,* primarily as a forum for his *Adirondack Tales.* The series of stories celebrated colorful backwoods characters, including “The Legend of Follansbee’s Pond” and “Crazy John, The Hermit of Long Lake.”[17] Urban readers hungrily consumed Murray’s tales and scores of similar stories. New York intellectual Kate Hillard celebrated the Adirondacks’ natural wonders and assured readers, “the inhabitants of this secluded spot are no less worthy of study than their mountains and streams.”[18]

In the popular imagination, the Adirondack wilderness was teeming with hermits. “Every neck of the woods had its French Louie,” proclaimed historian Harvey Dunham, in his profile of “the Hermit of Long Lake.” Dunham explained the phenomenon:

> Originally trappers, they settled in the forest on state lands or on the lands of lumber companies; as squatters they built their cabins and lived off the country. They hunted and fished; they trapped and picked spruce gum and

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[16] For more on Murray, see Warder H. Cadbury’s introduction to the 1970 reprint: W. H. H. Murray, *Adventures in the Wilderness* (Syracuse, NY: Adirondack Museum, 1970). See also Harry V. Radford, *Adirondack Murray, a Biographical Appreciation* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1905).
[17] See especially W. H. H. Murray, *Adirondack Tales, Vol. 2: The Story That the Keg Told Me, and the Story of the Man Who Didn't Know Much* (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, 1889).
[18] see Richard Plunz, "City: Culture: Nature: The New York Wilderness and the Urban Sublime," in *The Urban Lifeworld: Formation, Perception, Representation*, ed. Peter Madsen and Richard Plunz (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

> made maple syrup, trading the furs and these other products at the settlements for supplies. They sought seclusion, but hunters and fishermen from the outside world found them out…[19]

Other writers imagined loftier motivations for solitude. These mysterious men may have had the skills to make a living off the land, but surely they weren't alone in the wilderness just to hunt, trap, and make syrup. In1877, historian Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester imagined why a hermit would live alone in the Adirondack wilds:

> Whether he became disgusted with the trials and vexations always incident in this poor life of ours, with the perfidy of man or the frailty of woman, or whether he sought in the retirement and seclusion of the wilderness the opportunity for that meditation on things spiritual and eternal which he deemed necessary for his soul's repose, or whether he was an ardent student of nature, and loved to gaze upon the brightness of silver waters, the loveliness of the wild flower, or upon the grandeur of forest scenery... must be left to conjecture."[20]

His speculation is telling. Solitude came to be imagined as a particular way of being alone, driven by a desire escape society and commune with nature and "things spiritual and eternal."

More than anyone, famed guide Orson "Old Mountain" Phelps came to embody this distinctive combination of wilderness skill, love of nature, and spiritual wisdom. At least, that was the story spread by Charles Dudley Warner, whose 1878 *Atlantic Monthly* article presented Phelps as the paradigmatic primitive man. He described Phelps' rough appearance: matted hair and a thick red beard, and the look of someone Warner said "had just come out of the ground" and put his clothes on "once and for all, like the bark of a tree." Inside this rough exterior was a contemplative and philosophical man, with a wisdom cultivated through "years of solitary communing with the forest." Warner called

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[19] Harvey Leslie Dunham, *Adirondack French Louie* (Utica, NY: Thomas J. Griffiths Sons, 1952), v.

[20] Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *Historical Sketches of Northern New York and the Adirondac Wilderness* (Troy, NY: W. H. Young, 1877), 193.

him a “true citizen of the wilderness,” more true than Thoreau. “If Old Phelps had seen Thoreau he would probably have said to him, "Why on airth, Mr. Thoreau, don’t you live accordin’ to your preachin’?” According to Warner’s story, Phelps was not just concerned with his own authentic love of the wild, but also those he guided. He was reluctant to share the Adirondacks with “those who had neither ideality nor love for the woods,” whose “presence was a profanation amid the scenery he loved.”[21]

Phelps had long been legendary among regular vacationers, but after the *Atlantic* article, his story spread and his mystique mushroomed.[22] Years after Warner “discovered” this “unwashed Thoreau of guidedom,” one chronicler concluded, “Thereafter, [Phelps] devoted himself, too obviously at times, to living up to the literary halo in which he had been unexpectedly lassoed.”[23] Married, with six children, Phelps’ life was hardly one of sustained solitude, but he enjoyed the attention and did his best to live up to the hype. He happily sold autographed photographs of himself, along with his own line of trail maps and guidebooks, and even an “Old Mountain Phelps” model

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[21] Charles Dudley Warner, "The Adirondacks Verified, V.: A Character Study," *The Atlantic Monthly* 41, no. 247 (1878). Warner was a nationally known writer, the co-author of *The Gilded Age,* together with his neighbor and friend Mark Twain. He edited Houghton Mifflin’s *American Men of Letters* series, which included multiple Franklin Benjamin Sanborn’s 1892 biography, *Henry D. Thoreau*.

[22] Phelps lived in Keene Valley, an area that developed into a hub for visiting artists and intellectuals. Beginning in 1868, theologian Horace Bushnell spent summers in the valley, where he “enjoyed the ruminations and piquancies of ‘Old Phelps,’ and all the meandering walks and talks they had together.” Bushnell introduced Keene Valley to a host of other prominent pastors from New York, Hartford, and Boston, and these “climbing clerics” routinely chose Phelps to guide their tramps in the surrounding High Peaks. Mary A. Bushnell Cheney, *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell* (New York,: C. Scribner's sons, 1903), 497. Also see Plunz, "City: Culture: Nature: The New York Wilderness and the Urban Sublime," 55-8, n37; Mark Tucker, "Ives in the Adirondacks," in *Charles Ives and His World*, ed. J. Peter Burkholder (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 167. In addition to Bushnell, this group included Hartford clergy Joseph H. Twichell and Noah Porter, president of Yale. Plunz includes a more extensive list, a virtual who’s who of progressive pastors and prominent churches. Plunz’s list includes a subsequent generation of ministers, through Union Seminary President Henry Sloan Coffin.

[23] Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 2*, 54.

fishing rod.[24] Many “disappointed pilgrims” left “his shrine” feeling duped as much by Warner as Phelps.[25]

Phelps was just one of many Adirondack characters who themselves became tourist attractions. “Old Bill” Smith, the “Giant Hermit of the Adirondacks,” was notable enough that the New York Times ran an obituary for him in 1895. He lived alone in a secluded hut for over 45 years, welcoming visitors who came to see his legendary stature, his enormous white beard, and the ragged Bible he studied daily. The story notes that many felt compelled to give him “a small sum of money” in appreciation.[26]

Conserving Adirondack spaces of solitude

Before long, the increasing numbers of tourists, along with the growth of mining and logging, led many to express concern for the future of the Adirondack wilderness. Promoted as pristine and unchanging, the sacred space of solitude was now in danger. In response, concerned citizens organized to protect the place, and in the process, they furthered the connection of wilderness conservation and sacred solitude.

Surveyor Verplanck Colvin spearheaded the long process securing legal protection of the Adirondack wilderness. His initial enthusiasm was inspired by his 1870 ascent of Mount Seward. Colvin, credited as the first to reach the summit, described it as distinctive among Adirondack high peaks “in that no clearings were visible; wilderness

[24] Paul Schneider, *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness*, 1st ed. (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1997), 171.
[25] Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 2*, 54.
[26] Warner, "The Adirondacks Verified, V.: A Character Study."

everywhere; lake on lake, river on river, mountain on mountain, numberless."[27] He was struck by the vastness of the Adirondack wilderness, its seemingly endless spaces of solitude. Colvin was stunned to later learn that lumber companies had ambitious plans to "strip the forests from the slopes and ridges of Mt. Seward."[28] His survey of the peak included a bold proposal: "These forests should be preserved, and for posterity should be set aside, this Adirondack region as a Park for New York, as is the Yosemite for California and the Pacific States."[29]

Colvin defended the Adirondacks as a place of solitude, and like others, this vision reflected his encounters with its hermit guides. Colvin did not climb Mount Seward alone, but with Alvah Dunning, the well-known "Hermit Guide of Raquette Lake." The son of a famous backwoodsman, the reclusive Dunning spent his whole life in the Adirondack forests. He was the most sought after guide of his generation, introducing the wilderness to prominent visitors including Reverend Murray, J.P. Morgan, and Grover Cleveland.

By the turn of the century, Dunning was the face of the Adirondacks, thanks in large part to photographer Seneca Ray Stoddard. Stoddard created a multimedia lecture to advocate for conservation, with over 200 hand-tinted lantern slides projected onto canvas

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[27] Verplanck Colvin, "Ascent of Mount Seward and Its Barometrical Measurement (1871)," in *Adirondack Explorations: Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin*, ed. Paul Schaefer (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 94.

[28] quoted in Philip G. Terrie, "Verplanck Colvin, Adirondack Surveyor: Response to Wilderness," *Environmental Review* 7, no. 3 (1983): 284.

[29] Colvin, "Ascent of Mount Seward and Its Barometrical Measurement (1871)," 97. Colvin continued to explore and survey the region, driven by a desire for better technical, scientific information to support its protection, but Colvin was also driven by a thirst for encounters with places never before visited and mapped. His survey reports were sprinkled with romantic descriptions of his new discoveries, places of beauty and seclusion where "men feel what words cannot convey - the wildest men are quieted and hushed - a grand and beautiful solemnity and peace makes its way into the soul, for human strife and discord seem here to have passed away forever." Colvin was quite pragmatic as well, arguing for the value of these forests in sustaining the headwaters of the Hudson, key to the state's commerce and its clean drinking water. He even proposed a tax on "sportsmen, artists and tourists visiting the region" to fund the law's enforcement. Quoted in Terrie, "Verplanck Colvin, Adirondack Surveyor: Response to Wilderness," 282.

for audiences around the state. He celebrated the region's sublime scenery and its tourist destinations. He led audiences on a journey beginning at "Tear of the Clouds," the Adirondack headwaters of the Hudson River, and following its route to the Atlantic. Stoddard's lecture opened with the first words of Genesis, and throughout the lecture he sprinkled biblical quotes and references to the divine. He also featured slides of Alvah Dunning and "Old Mountain" Phelps, and shared stories of these already famous solitary characters.[30] On Feburary 25, 1892, Stoddard gave his illustrated lecture to the New York State Legislature, securing their support for the Adirondack Park Bill, which they passed shortly after. Stoddard's images cemented the association between the religion, wilderness and solitude, binding these themes for political and popular audiences, including many who never visited the Adirondacks. [31]

Dunning later complained about the increasing popularity of the region and his popularity as a guide, saying "They pay me well enough, but I'd rather they'd stay out o' my woods."[32] However reluctant he was, Dunning helped shape the emerging culture of outdoor recreation and the emerging movement to preserve wilderness. He died in 1902, not in the solitude of the Adirondacks, but en route to the New York Sportsman's Show at Madison Square Garden, where he was to be a featured guest.

Dunning exemplified the contradictory way solitary characters came to be viewed. Historian Alfred Donaldson described him as "the real Adirondack prototype of

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[30] A. N. Cheney, "Alvah Dunning," *Forest and Stream; A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, Shooting*, January 27 1894.
[31] Stoddard was among the most important promoters of the region, publishing illustrated Adirondack guidebooks, maps, and magazines beginning in the 1870s, and selling his photography in tourist hotels. Stoddard also served as official photographer for the New York State Survey of the Adirondacks. The sole illustration in the final 1892 State Forest Commission Report, authored by Verplanck Colvin, was Stoddard's image of hermit Alvah Dunning. Jeffrey L. Horrell, *Seneca Ray Stoddard: Transforming the Adirondack Wilderness in Text and Image*, 1st ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 66.
[32] Quoted in Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 2*, 110.

the primitive man."[33] Such individuals represented to visitors the freedom of the wild. They were inspiring, sustaining a simple life close to nature. This primitivism was also a bit unsettling. Donaldson writes that Alvah Dunning had "troglodytic dislike of neighbors, a primal tendency to warfare with them, and a savage streak of cruelty." He is remembered for exploring the Adirondacks' uncharted peaks, and helping inspire its protection. He is also remembered for killing the region's last moose and for disregarding newly instituted hunting laws.[34]

"Forever Wild:" Adirondack Solitude and American Wilderness Conservation

Nineteenth century artists, philosophers, preachers, and conservationists were instrumental in establishing the relationship of solitude and wilderness. They popularized this essential link through mythic tales of the Adirondack region and its hermits and guides, consistently representing the place and its people as sacred, at once inspiring and mysterious. Free from the profane pressures of modern urban life, the Adirondacks were the most authentic place for those seeking solitude. Wilderness was sacred space, not because of a purity born of the total absence of people, but because it was home to a distinctive character of person and a distinctive way of being alone. In 1892, The Adirondack Park Bill created a legal precedent for protecting wilderness, declaring the region's forests would remain "forever wild." The Adirondacks also established a cultural precedent for promoting wilderness and solitude as thoroughly entwined, mutually reinforcing symbols of the sacred.

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[33] *A History of the Adirondacks, Vol. 2*, 105.
[34] Ibid.

Conservationists proceeded to identify other public lands worthy of protection as wilderness, and like the Adirondacks, many of these places were already home to eccentric hermit characters. There were historic hermits in what are now Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain, and Grand Canyon National Parks. Trails and peaks in the parks still bear the memories of these characters. Reclusive prospector and tourist guide Louis Boucher, lived on the Grand Canyon's South Rim from 1891–1909. He became known as "the hermit," especially after the Santa Fe Land Development Company bought his land and used his eccentric reputation to promoted the destination to tourists on its railway. The company built "Hermit Trail," which led visitors into the canyon, where they could spend the night at "Hermit Camp," complete with tent cabins, showers, electricity, and telephone service.[35]

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Bob Marshall and Howard Zahniser, activists with Adirondack roots, were the most vocal advocates for federal legislation protecting wilderness, and they consistently appealed to the value of wilderness as space for solitude. Marshall grew up in New York City and spent summers at his family's Adirondack camp on Lower Saranac Lake. His father Louis Marshall was one of the authors of the 1892 "forever wild" clause that established the Adirondack Forest Preserve.[36] From a young age, Bob Marshall developed a passion for exploring the park, becoming the first, along with his brother, to climb all 46 peaks over 4,000 feet. He

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[35] See Michael F. Anderson, *Living at the Edge: Explorers, Exploiters, and Settlers of the Grand Canyon Region* (Grand Canyon, Ariz.: Grand Canyon Association, 1998).

[36] Marshall attended the Ethical Culture School, founded by Felix Adler's secular humanist movement. The school focused attention on urban issues, and encouraged sensitivity to inequalities of race, class, and ethnicity. Adler, like Marshall, came from a family prominent in New York's Reformed Jewish community. Adler was also one of the city's many religious and intellectual leaders who vacationed in the Adirondack's Keene Valley. See Plunz, "City: Culture: Nature: The New York Wilderness and the Urban Sublime." Plunz details the relationship between New York City and the Adirondacks, and the changing sensibilities of urban intellectuals toward wild and urban landscapes.

climbed his first summit, Ampersand Mountain, at age 14, an experience that linked solitude and wilderness. Ampersand was famous not only for its panoramic views but also its resident recluse, Walter Channing Rice, who lived in a stone hut on the summit and watched for forest fires. The year after this hike, Marshall wrote a high school essay entitled "Why I Want to Become a Forester in the Future." Marshall wrote, "I love the woods and solitude. I should hate to spend the greater part of my lifetime in a stuffy office or in a crowded city."[37] Even as Marshall relished the thrill of higher and more remote peaks, he often revisited his first summit, and the man known as "the hermit of Ampersand Mountain."[38]

Bob Marshall did grow up to work with the Forest Service, where he advocated for wilderness and the value of solitude. In 1935, together with a handful of fellow conservationists, he established the Wilderness Society. Over the next three decades, the organization, more than any other, was responsible for spreading the idea of wilderness preservation and building support for federal wilderness legislation. From its founding, the Wilderness Society embraced solitude as a core concern, inseparable from the way wilderness was defined and defended. Preserving "environments of solitude" was the first goal agreed upon by the Society's founding members, who argued solitude was "an

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[37] Robert Marshall, Phil Brown, and George Marshall, *Bob Marshall in the Adirondacks: Writings of a Pioneering Peak-Bagger, Pond-Hopper and Wilderness Preservationist* (Saranac Lake, N.Y.: Lost Pond Press, 2006), 171.

[38] For more on Walter Channing Rice, see Philip G. Terrie, *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks*, 2 ed. (Blue Mountain Lake & Syracuse, NY: Adirondack Museum & Syracuse University Press, 2008), 139; ibid. For Marshall's account of a later trip, including mention of Rice, see "Night Trip on Ampersand Mountain," in Marshall, Brown, and Marshall, *Bob Marshall in the Adirondacks: Writings of a Pioneering Peak-Bagger, Pond-Hopper and Wilderness Preservationist*. ibid.

increasingly scarce natural resource" that should be conserved for the benefit of all people.[39]

Even after Marshall's death at age 38, the Adirondack influence remained strong in the Wilderness Society, and so did the enthusiasm for solitude. Howard Zahniser led the Society from 1945–1964 and drafted the eventual federal legislation.[40] This son of a Methodist minister was a gifted writer who spread the gospel of wilderness and shepherded the wilderness bill through years of hearings and Congressional negotiations. Zahniser's formative experiences in the Adirondacks energized his writing and advocacy, and sustained his commitment to solitude as a defining feature of wilderness.[41] This link became enshrined in law in 1964. The act declared wilderness was to be "protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions," which included having "outstanding

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[39] See Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 242.

[40] From 1956-57, Zahniser also served as president of the Thoreau Society. Biographer Mark Harvey describes Thoreau as "not only his favorite nature writer but his guiding star in wilderness thinking," including his thinking about solitude. Addressing the Thoreau Society in 1957, Zahniser chose to read a passage from Thoreau's journal: "I wish to forget, a considerable part of every day, all mean, narrow, trivial men… and therefore I come out to these solitudes, where the problem of existence is simplified. I get away a mile or two from the town into the stillness and solitude of nature, with rocks, trees, weeds, snow about me." See Mark W. T. Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 144, 99.

[41] In 1946, he and his family traveled to the Adirondacks at the invitation Paul Schaefer, a leader in the wilderness movement and something of a historian of Adirondack wilderness preservation. Schaefer introduced Zahnie to Adirondack writers including Headley and Colvin. He spent many hours in Schaefer's library schooling himself in the poetics and politics that precipitated the Adirondack Forest Preserve. Schaefer took him on hikes to storied Adirondack peaks and they paddled its lakes. He also introduced Zahnie to his hermit neighbor Archie "Bobcat" Ranney. The summer in the Adirondacks was a turning point for Zahniser as he was just beginning his leadership of the Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. He soon bought a cabin and thirty acres within the Adirondack State Park, and he returned often in the midst of his advocacy work. For details on Zahniser's Adirondack formation, see See Howard Zahniser et al., *Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser* (Utica, N.Y.: North Country Books, 1992); Chad P. Dawson and Ed Zahniser, "The Influence of the Adirondacks on the Wilderness Preservation Contributions of Robert Marshall and Howard Zahniser," in *Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference, Volume 2: Wilderness Within the Context of Larger Systems*, ed. Forest Service United States Department of Agriculture, Rocky Mountain Research Station (Ogden, UT 2000); Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act*. For more on Schaefer, see Paul Grondahl, "Paul Schaefer: An Adirondack Original," *The Conservationist* (1998). When he was just fifteen, Schaefer began collecting the writings and surveys of Verplanck Colvin, which he later published: Verplanck Colvin and Paul Schaefer, *Adirondack Explorations: Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin*, 1st ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

opportunities for solitude."[42] The Adirondacks, with their historic link between wilderness and solitude would have a lasting legacy on the culture and politics of environmentalism in America, and wilderness has continued to be constructed as the quintessential place for solitude.

Revisiting William James: Sacred Solitude at the Turn of the Century

In 1901, William James located religion in "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude."[43] By focusing on direct, personal experience, he intended to isolate religion as a phenomenon that could be examined across cultures and throughout history, the object of an emerging "Science of Religions." He imagined solitude as a universal category, fundamental to the human experience and especially fundamental to the rise of religion.[44] These first two chapters have demonstrated the opposite. Cultural forces deeply shaped ideas about solitude in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, investing solitude with particular meaning and power. Stories of solitude, especially Thoreau's *Walden,* established a normative set of practices, and the Adirondacks helped cement wilderness as the normative place for solitude. These same cultural forces also influenced William James and the particular understanding of religion he articulated at the dawn of the twentieth century.

James was indebted to the legacy of Transcendentalism. His father, Henry James Sr., was a Swedenborgian theologian, well acquainted with Emerson and other reform-minded religious thinkers. Early on, Henry Sr. dreamed his boy would become a "naturalist-philosopher" in the mold of Thoreau, who visited the James family's Staten

[42] "Wilderness Act," in *Public Law 88-577*, ed. United States Congress (1964).
[43] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 31.
[44] *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 316.

Island home in 1843.[45] At sixteen, William himself wrote, "If I followed my taste and did what was most agreeable to me… I would get a microscope and go out into the country, into the dear old woods and fields and ponds."[46] At twenty-three, he joined an expedition to collect specimens in Brazil with naturalist Louis Agassiz, a regular at the Transcendentalist "Saturday Club" and one of Emerson's fellow Adirondack adventurers at the philosopher's camp.[47]

This tradition of solitary nature contemplation remained influential for James' thinking. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* he cited Thoreau as his first example of "saintliness," highlighting the kind of conversion experiences "we all have," "apart from anything acutely religious… in the woods or in the mountains." He chose a passage from *Walden,* in which Thoreau felt a moment of loneliness, soon washed away in the solitude of a gentle rain. "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sight and sound around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once, like an atmosphere, sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant."[48] Like Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalists, James prized individual experience above all else, and he was highly critical of truth filtered through the ritual and authority of religious institutions.[49]

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[45] Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 59.
[46] William James to Edgar Beach van Winkle, 1 March 1858, in William James and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols., vol. 4 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 11-15.
[47] Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, 92-6.
[48] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 274-5.
[49] James maintained his family's strong connections with Concord and Trancendentalism throughout his life. He presented and attended lectures at several summers' gatherings of the Concord School of Philosoph, which was hosted by Franklin Benjamin Sanborn and served as an important vessel for promoting Transcendental ideas, for commemorating Emerson and Thoreau, and for soaking up the sanctity

James was also inspired by his own experiences alone in the wild, particularly in the Adirondacks. In 1877, together with three friends, he purchased what came to be called "Putnam Camp," a collection of rustic buildings they hoped to would be a philosophers' camp for a new generation. The camp was at the southern end of Keene Valley, which over the next two decades became a key center for vacationing artists and intellectuals.[50] James spent regular time in the Adirondacks for the rest of his life. He honeymooned at Putnam Camp and hosted friends and fellow scholars at his mountain retreat, most famously Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, in 1909.[51] He also made regular trips to enjoy the Adirondacks in solitude, to read, write, hike, and recover from the demands of academic life. James relished feeling "no responsibility whatsoever" in his visits to Putnam Camp, and having the chance "to both read and to commune with nature."[52]

Like other late nineteenth century visitors to the Adirondacks, James was enamored with the stunning landscape and also its culture of solitude. He wrote fondly of his long hikes alone, seeking out "nooks and summits" where "one can really 'recline on one's divine composure,' and… enjoy one's birth-right of freedom and relief from every fever and falsity." His regular retreats in the mountains fulfilled "a certain organic need for simplification and solitude."[53] He cherished this quality all the more because it was so rare among the vacation spots of the era's elite. On a trip to Martha's Vineyard, James

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of Concord and its history. See Frederick J. Down Scott, "William James and the Concord School of Philosophy," *San Jose Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983).
[50] Plunz, "City: Culture: Nature: The New York Wilderness and the Urban Sublime."
[51] See George Prochnik, *Putnam Camp: Sigmund Freud, James Jackson Putnam, and the Purpose of American Psychology* (New York: Other Press, 2006).
[52] v. 3, 17 – to HJ, Aug. 30, 1897
[53] William James to Sarah Wyman Whitman, Springfield Centre NY, 16 June 1895, in William James and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols., vol. 8 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 41.

was disgusted at the "sea of asphalt" and hundreds of houses, evidence that "very few people have been taught to care a jot for Nature… and the evil of evils for them is solitude."[54]

William James maintained a busy schedule, traveling often to teach and lecture, but since his earliest visits to the Adirondacks, he fantasized about a radically different life, one of solitude in the wild. In 1876, James wrote, "I had a delicious month in the Keene Valley in the Adirondacks, and never before (at least not in many years) so deeply and thoroughly enjoyed Nature. I actually feel as if I should like to buy some land there and become a sort of hermit, winter and summer, leading a natural animal life & throwing all the vanities of learning to the dogs."[55] As biographer Linda Simon writes, "In the Adirondacks, he felt an authenticity of being that eluded him elsewhere; here, he could celebrate himself as a rugged participant in the strenuous life."[56] James described passing through the "portals of that Adirondack wilderness," and being filled with "the breath of which I have sighed for years." This authenticity and simplicity were a welcome shift from his typical world, where he was "just filled with satiety with all the simpering conventions and vacuous excitements of so-called civilization, hungering for their opposite, the smell of spruce, the feel of the moss, the sound of the cataract, the bath of its waters, the divine outlook from the cliff or hill top over the unbroken forest… I aspire downwards, and really *am* nothing." Though he did not fulfill his hermit fantasy of

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[54] William James to Catherine Elizabeth Havens Cambridge, 13 July 1876, in ibid., 4: 539.
[55] William James to Catherine Elizabeth Havens, Cambridge, 25 December 1876, in *The Correspondence of William James*, 4, 550.
[56] Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, xix.

total solitude, James continued to enjoy Keene Valley and the surrounding wilderness as a place of "simplification and solidification and purification and sanctification."[57]

James cited the Adirondacks as a key influence on his religious thinking, and specifically traced inspiration for the 1901 Gifford Lectures to the Adirondack wilderness. He reflected on a particularly profound experience he had while camping there in 1898. After his companions had all gone to sleep, James sat alone, gazing at the fire, the moon and stars, which got him "into a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description." He walked in the moonlit woods, pondering the Edinburgh lectures and his life as a whole. At six in the morning, he hiked alone to the summit of Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the Adirondacks. James reflected on the scene later, feeling compelled to record his memories, but also incapable of "a single word for all that significance." He noted "the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense appeal of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; its utter Americanism." All he could articulate was "a mere boulder of impression," yet he knew immediately this solitary night in the wild had reshaped his understanding of religion. "Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it."[58]

This solitary night in the Adirondacks was a religious experience for James. Josephine Goldmark, whose sister Pauline was camped with the group that night, described James' love of such moments, alone in the Adirondacks. There was for him, "something which comes from life in the wilderness, sleeping upon the ground, close to nature and all earth forces; from the joy of senses in sun and shade, water and wind, smell

[57] William James to Sarah Wyman Whitman, Springfield Centre, NY, June 16, 1895 in James and Skrupskelis, *The Correspondence of William James*, 8, 41.
[58] William James to Alice Howe Gibbens James, Keene Heights, NY 9 July 1898, in *The Correspondence of William James*, 8, 391.

of wood smoke and forest air; a return to more primitive reactions and responses of our human nature." Moments like these were "upwellings from the great Unconscious of which our lives are based."[59]

James was convinced solitude was the necessary context for such experiences, and solitude in the wild was especially powerful, but in this mystical moment, he did not report feeling isolated and alone, but rather profoundly connected. After an exhausting hike back to Keene Valley, he shared the experience in a letter to his wife, Alice Howe Gibbens James. This was "one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence," but also made him aware, "my relation to you part and parcel of it all." He was conscious of many connections: "The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people around me, especially the good Pauline, the thought of you and the children, dear Harry on the wave, the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, all fermented within me."[60]

For James, solitary religious experience was not ultimately isolated or isolating. James's oft-cited definition of religion stressed the "feelings, acts, and experiences of men *in their solitude*," but only "so far as they apprehend themselves to stand *in relation* to whatever they may consider the divine." Near the conclusion of his Gifford Kectures, he emphasized, "the conscious person is continuous with a wider self."[61] The self, even in solitude, indeed especially in solitude, was an "open self," conscious of its fundamental relatedness to something "more," to a "wider self," to a "cosmic consciousness," or to "God."

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[59] Josephine Clara Goldmark, "An Adirondack Friendship," *The Atlantic Monthly* 1934. in Linda Simon, *William James Remembered* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 178.
[60] William James to Alice Howe Gibbens James, Keene Heights, NY 9 July 1898, in James and Skrupskelis, *The Correspondence of William James*, 8, 391.
[61] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 373.

In the decade following the Gifford Lectures, James elaborated this relational understanding of the solitary self, developing a panpsychic metaphysics to explain the link individuals between individuals and the "pluralistic universe" of which we are a part.[62] In this later philosophical and psychological writing, he continued to rely on remarkably earthy, mystical language drawing from his own experience:

> Out of my experience, such as it is (and it is limited enough) one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges, and that is this, that we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's fog-horns. But the trees commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our minds plunge as a mother-sea or reservoir. Our "normal" consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connexion.[63]

The experience of solitude had the power to open one to a world of connections beyond the threshold of "normal" consciousness. James' own experiences of solitude in the wild were periodic, but profound enough to form the basis for his thinking about religion. His thinking about solitude developed *in relation*, not only to "whatever he may consider divine," but also to the particular natural and cultural landscape of the Adirondacks in the

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[62] James' notion of selfhood also reflected his political and social vision, which combined individual autonomy with solidarity and cooperation. Francesca Bordogna argues this was James' way of articulating place of the individual citizen in a pluralistic, democratic society. Bordogna identifies connections between this social vision and the panpsychic metaphysics James elaborated late in life. She identifies British anarchist/socialist poet Edward Carpenter as one key influence on James. Carpenter, drawing on Hindu tradition, asserted the individual self dissolved into a universal, cosmic Self, and this oneness was the basis for a socialist "brotherhood of workers." Bologna also highlights James' interest in New Thought author Ralph Waldo Trine, who declared the individual self illusory and called for a cooperative, socialist society grounded in the "infinite spirit" pervading everything. See Francesca Bordogna, "Selves and Communities in the Work of William James," *Streams of William James* 6, no. 3 (2004).

[63] William James, "Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher'," in *Essays in Psychical Research* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, [1909] 1986).

late nineteenth century, a context where wilderness, solitude, and religion "commingled their roots" and grew particularly entangled.

The historical cases in these first two chapters complicate James' understanding of religion, demonstrating solitude in America has been much more than a private matter. Solitude is not a timeless, universal category for analyzing individual experience, but rather a socially constructed representation of the sacred, a reflection of collective religious ideals and anxieties. James tapped into a cultural "reservoir" of stories, images, and ideas about solitude, one that had been filling for quite some time. From the earliest colonial hermits to the turn of the century, solitude was shaped to fit a narrow stereotype. Individuals crafted their individual stories of living alone, but these were simultaneously shaped by publishers and news media, who had a stake in how solitude was represented and consumed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these collective norms were constructed and circulated through published hermit tales and visual representations including paintings, photographs, slide shows and wax figures.

These images and stories developed a recognizable set of narrative patterns and stylistic conventions, and their main characters came to share many common features. Historic accounts confirm a diverse range of individuals lived alone in a variety of ways, yet even these cases were compared against a well-established stereotype. Solitaries were typically bearded white men. They lived simply, often surviving off the land and dwelling in primitive structures built by hand. They lived in the wilderness, where they could contemplate nature and self. Even the most reclusive were often depicted as having profound wisdom to share with the broader world, often through their journals and

writings. Solitary characters separated from society and cultivated lives of moral integrity, often embodying a challenge to the laxity of mainstream culture.

In these popular representations and in elite texts, solitude was consistently represented as sacred, in a polar sense, an inspiring ideal but also a dangerous oddity. Solitude fostered individual creativity and innovation. Individuals living alone pioneered new ways to combine religious contemplation, moral concern, and connection to nature. They developed a common repertoire of practices and a common connection to place. These sacred norms also served to set limits on what kinds of solitude were admirable and what was deemed too eccentric and antisocial. In the chapters ahead, I trace the ways this narrow stereotype of sacred solitude continues to inspire innovation and to set limits on what counts as the most authentic expressions of solitary religion. Practices and place continue to be focal points as individuals negotiate how to live alone in new contexts, sometimes embracing this historic tradition of solitude in America, while sometimes consciously and unconsciously subverting its sacred norms.

Chapter 3. Solitude in the Wild: Mediating, Managing, and Transforming Tradition

In 1970, the United States Forest Service issued a glossy pamphlet entitled "Search for Solitude: Our Wilderness Heritage." The publication celebrated the Wilderness Act of 1964 with photographs and descriptions of the nation's newly protected wilderness areas, proclaiming them symbols of America's core values. Wilderness was "part of the American heritage" and "part and parcel of democracy." As a sanctuary of solitude, America's wilderness was also its national sacred space, "part of the eternal search for truth that involves man's desire to know himself and his Creator."[1]

The pamphlet narrated a historic link between America's wilderness and it's love of solitude. Along with photographs of snow-capped peaks and lonesome desert landscapes, the document featured quotes from Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and others who ventured forth alone. The nation's wildlands provided opportunities to experience the "complete freedom" of early pioneers and Mountain Men like Jim Bridger and "Kit" Carson. The pamphlet announced this historic link remained vital in the twentieth century. The first page featured a tranquil forest scene with a quote: "For me, and for thousands with similar inclinations, the most important passion of life is the overpowering desire to escape periodically from the clutches of a mechanistic civilization. To us the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness. – Bob Marshall (1901-1939)"[2]

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[1] United States Forest Service, "Search for Solitude: Our Wilderness Heritage," ed. Department of Agriculture United States Forest Service (Washington, D.C.1970), 11,3,4.
[2] The quote is from Robert Marshall, "Wilderness as a Minority Right," *United States Forest Service Bulletin* 12(1928).

The American passion for solitude was alive and well in the twentieth century, and wilderness was increasingly popular as a place for recreation and personal renewal. For most, like Bob Marshall, this was a temporary escape from the everyday, but there continued to be some who made solitude in the wild a more permanent way of life. For these hardy backcountry homesteaders and for the world-weary part-time pilgrims, wilderness solitude represented the promise of a direct, unmediated encounter with an authentically natural world "undefiled" by the "mechanistic civilization" obsessed with media and technology.

This chapter probes the tradition of wilderness solitude, revealing a more complex story. Even in the most out of the way wilderness contexts, solitary individuals were entangled in a web of historical and cultural influences that mediated the meanings of solitude. These individuals inherited a well-established tradition that shaped how they, like other Americans, imagined both wilderness and authentic solitude. In the twentieth century, new generations did not venture into the wild totally alone, but with the helpful, if sometimes haunting presence of the past. Like the solitary characters that came before them, they also discovered that withdrawing to the wild provoked a range of responses from their contemporaries. Tourists visited solitary characters and the places they called home. Popular media sought out stories of solitude, spreading news of each new Thoreau and eccentric hermit in print and on screen. By the end of the century, new media technologies gave the public opportunities to broadcast their own opinions online, as fans or critics of solitary characters. As the Forest Service pamphlet suggests, the state also had a stake in the meaning and practice of solitude, and public officials actively promoted wilderness as a space for solitary, secular spirituality. Rather than a private escape from

the complexities of contemporary culture, wilderness solitude reproduced the competing priorities of the broader public. It was mediated, managed, and commodified. Its meanings were continuously contested and its norms re-negotiated.

Through a series of historical cases, this chapter examines three particular areas of tension within the tradition of wilderness solitude in America. First, I focus on Joseph Knowles, whose wild, primitive lifestyle reveals the alluring yet elusive attempt to reconnect with a more authentic past. Dressed in animal skins and living off the land, he became a symbolic link to a mythic era of rugged frontiersmen simultaneously caring for and conquering the wilderness. Second, I examine the story of Anne LaBastille. Calling herself "Woodswoman," she reimagined solitude beyond the mystique of the bearded wild man, in hopes of inspiring other women to venture alone into the wild. Third, I turn to tension surrounding the appropriate moral authority of the solitary environmental activist, focusing on tree-sitter Julia "Butterfly" Hill and "Unabomber" Theodore Kaczynski.

These stories highlight the continuities and tensions within this wilderness tradition as it evolved through the twentieth century. They show the power and persistence of established norms, including the ongoing influence of the Adirondacks and Thoreau, along with the sometimes subtle and sometimes glaring influence of the media and the state. The cases highlight the creative ways individuals adapted earlier models and imagined new styles of solitude in the wild. These individuals wrenched commodification their way, asserting their own agency in reshaping the tradition of wilderness solitude, and in the process reshaping the sacred norms solitude had come to embody.

Reviving a Primitive Past

On August 4, 1913, Joseph Knowles stripped naked and walked into the Maine woods. With a small crowd of reporters and supporters looking on, he began two months of solitude, intended to show "the man of the present day could leave all his luxury behind him and go back into the wilderness and live on what nature intended him to have."[3] Knowles was fed up with the artificiality of urban life, which had made Americans "slaves to the automobile" and "modern conveniences" like the electric light and the telephone.[4] He had grown up in rural Maine and worked there for a time as a wilderness guide, but now, like so many of his contemporaries, he had moved to the city. Working part-time as a newspaper artist in Boston, he was among those concerned a life of office work made men soft. Knowles entered the forest determined to demonstrate that a potent dose of wilderness solitude was the best antidote for the modern, urban malaise.

From the outset, this solitary experiment was also a publicity stunt. Using coal and birch bark, Knowles scratched drawings and reports of his adventures and left them in a designated spot, so they could be printed in the *Boston Post,* and reprinted in papers across the country. By the end of his adventure, Knowles had attracted quite a following. Fans clamored to see him, organizing parades and banquets along his trip back to Boston. By some estimates, as many as two hundred thousand gathered to welcome him into the city.[5] Joseph Knowles was a celebrity, now known by his nicknames: "Nature Man,"

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[3] Joseph Knowles, *Alone in the Wilderness* (Boston, MA: Small, 1913), 4.
[4] "(Suggestion for Introduction)," (Ilwaco, WA: Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum Archives).
[5] Gerald Carson, "Yankee Tarzan," *American Heritage Magazine*, April/May 1981. Carson adds, "Even the World Series had to take second place to the wilderness hero." Two hundred thousand is likely exaggerated, since it would have constituted almost a third of Boston's population. Even exaggeration

"Yankee Tarzan," and "the Naked Thoreau." He quickly penned what would be a best-selling book, *Alone in the Wilderness,* and began a weekly newspaper column.

Knowles' instant popularity proved that Americans in the early twentieth century were as fascinated as ever with solitude, especially solitude this wild, primitive style. Knowles experiment was part of a broad culture of antimodernism, fueled by nostalgia for a past imagined as simple, natural and authentic.[6] Americans romanticized "primitive" cultures and indigenous peoples, from the distant past and from exotic contemporary contexts.[7] Progressive Era urbanites decorated their homes with an "Indian corner," displaying baskets, blankets, and masks, and portraits of isolated Indians in traditional dress.[8] In their fraternal orders and scouting groups, men and boys dressed as Native Americans and invented indigenous rituals.[9] Knowles, the Nature Man, was the perfect embodiment of this primitive, natural ideal, able to survive alone in the wilderness with just his woodcraft skill and his bare body, "without the slightest contact

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demonstrates the level of hype surrounding Knowles. See Jim Motavalli, *Naked in the Woods: Joseph Knowles and the Legacy of Frontier Fakery* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 56.

[6] Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimoderism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*.

[7] Intellectual historians Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas develop a typology for classifying different forms of primitivism, differentiating between *chronological primitivism*, which idealizes an ancient past, and *cultural primitivism*, which idealizes "simpler and less sophisticated" peoples, exotic cultures not only in the distant past, but in every period of human history. They argue nostalgia for the primitive is a key theme throughout history and a primary way cultures negotiate what is original, natural and therefore normative. Lovejoy et al., *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, 11-15.

[8] Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915*, Objects/Histories : Critical Perspectives on Art, Material Culture, and Representation (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

[9] Philip Deloria argues that such "playing Indian" was a sign of America's anxiety with rapid changes. There was, during this era, a growing "intuition that America had experienced a radical break with its history… Many intellectuals and critics perceived and characterized this radical break in terms of an older authenticity and a contemporary sense of inauthenticity." Authenticity was projected onto "the figure of an Other," coded not only in terms of time (nostalgia or archaism), but also place (small town), and culture (Indianness). Indians came to a contradictory place in American culture, a place rife with sacred polarity: insiders and outsiders, American and other, noble and savage. Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 100.

or aid from the outside world." In his bestselling book Knowles boasted, "I was, in truth, a primitive man. I had gone back from the land of civilization to the forest of antiquity."[10]

Knowles stressed the transformational power of his wilderness solitude. For once in life, he had time to sit and think. He could see and hear more clearly, as his senses gradually attuned to his surroundings. He began to feel "part of nature," and able to "portray nature more truthfully" in his painting.[11] Knowles proclaimed that through wilderness solitude, he was "literally born again," and he called others to the religion of nature.[12] "My god is in the wilderness. The great open book of nature is my religion. My church is the church of the forest. I am convinced that he who lives closer to the teachings of nature lives closer to the God of creation than those of the civilized life who wrangle over the different doctrines handed down from one people to another… Nature is a religion where all people can meet on common ground."[13]

One Boston clergyman called Knowles' experiment a "wonderful sermon two months long" and praised him as a "prophet of the simple life," but others labeled him a false prophet of primitive solitude.[14] Even before he completed his two-month wilderness conversion, skeptics began to challenge the authenticity of his story. The *Boston American*, the Hearst-owned rival to the *Post*, published a series of articles claiming he spent the most of his time in a hunting lodge with buddies, and perhaps even with the company of a woman, during the nights they left him "alone."[15] Whether he was faking it or not, what Knowles's case made clear was just how thin the line had grown between

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[10] Knowles, *Alone in the Wilderness*, 144.
[11] *Alone in the Wilderness*, 260.
[12] *Alone in the Wilderness*, 227.
[13] *Alone in the Wilderness*, 225.
[14] *Alone in the Wilderness*, 237.
[15] Herbert Adams, "The Saga of the Nature Man," *Yankee Magazine*, October 1988, 167.

laudable solitude and laughable fakery. When this solitary Nature Man emerged from the woods dressed in rancid bearskin, he was at once an embodiment of primitive authenticity and living proof that reconnecting with this imagined past was preposterous.

Over the next two years, Knowles attempted to prove himself, repeating his solitary feat in other wilderness areas across the country. Newspaper editors sent reporters to observe him from a distance and confirm he maintained his solitude. In California, Knowles enlisted anthropologists Alfred L. Kroeber and Thomas Talbot Waterman to assess his primitive skills by comparing him with "Ishi," the lone survivor of the Yahi Indian tribe. Ishi had lived his whole life isolated from modern civilization, including three years alone in the wilds of Northern California after the remaining few members of his tribe were killed. In August, 1911, the starving Ishi was "discovered" stealing meat at the outskirts of Oroville, California, and he quickly became a scholarly and popular sensation. At the time of Knowles' experiment, Ishi was living in the University of California Museum of Anthropology, where anthropologists and tourists could observe him. As Knowles repeated his performances in the wild, he also starred in two Hollywood films and performed a series of Vaudeville shows flaunting his survival skills, including one show together with Ishi.[16] The Nature Man proved he could make fire and find food in the wild, but he proved even more skillful at self-promotion. Even though many remained skeptical of Knowles' authenticity, he convinced reporters,

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[16] Motavalli, *Naked in the Woods: Joseph Knowles and the Legacy of Frontier Fakery*. For more on Ishi, see Karl Kroeber and Clifton B. Kroeber, *Ishi in Three Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Jed Riffe et al., *Ishi the Last Yahi*, videorecording :, 1 videocassette (60 min.) : sd., col. with b&w sequences ; 1/2 in; Richard Tomkins and CRM Films., *Ishi in Two Worlds*, (Carlsbad, Calif.: CRM Films,, 1991), videorecording, 1 videocassette (ca. 19 min.) : sd., col. ; 1/2 in; Robert F. Heizer and Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi the Last Yahi : A Documentary History* (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1979); Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Wild Men: Ishi and Kroeber in the Wilderness of Modern America*, New Narratives in American History (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

scholars, and entertainers to circulate his story of renewed connection to the past and his message of the transforming power of primitive solitude.

Knowles blurred the line between reality and fantasy, authenticity and entrepreneurial embellishment. He saw real value in older traditions of subsistence in the wild and also saw opportunities to cash in on his primitive persona. He pushed the limits of authenticity, and for this he was celebrated as an embodiment of America's pure, wild, primitive past. Knowles was also scorned for taking his primitivism too far, destabilizing the mythology of America's past, and profaning the authenticity of wilderness solitude. The sacred stereotype, taken to its extreme, looked suspiciously artificial.

Writing Nature, Writing Gender

Wilderness solitude aroused nostalgia for America's imagined past and for a potent vision of American manhood. Solitude was a gendered practice, and its wilderness tradition promoted a particularly strong stereotype of authentic manliness. It was no accident that Joseph Knowles described solitary wilderness survival as, "a chance to show that you are a man." When a Harvard physician examined the Nature Man after his experiment, he compared his strength to famous bodybuilder Eugene Sandow.[17]

Like many of his time, Knowles was concerned that manhood was endangered by the mundane realities of industrial, urban life. Instead of developing woodcraft skills and testing their manhood in the wild, modern men were stuck in cities, destined for stifling desk jobs and factory work. Knowles worried that young boys no longer had opportunities for "getting back to nature," and he used his own newfound fame to

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[17] Knowles, *Alone in the Wilderness*, 83.

promote the Boy Scouts, then in its infancy as part of an early twentieth century American "cult of masculinity."[18] Sports like boxing and football surged in popularity, fraternal orders flourished, and Muscular Christianity exploded as an alternative to feminized religious culture, signaling a national "urge to be young, masculine, and adventurous."[19]

Wilderness solitude held the promise of transforming American men, challenging them to recover a lost model of manhood, but solitude also opened up possibilities for new, seemingly contradictory expressions of gender. In the surrounding social world, manhood was defined in part by its engagement with the public sphere of politics and business, but alone in the wild, men like Knowles focused their energies on survival, and thus on domestic duties like cooking and sewing clothes.

Men weren't the only ones who experimented with new expressions of gender. The wilderness presented women with opportunities to test their survival skills and their capacity for self-sufficiency. In the process, women tested the established stereotypes and imagined new models of wilderness solitude. For forty years after Knowles, Anne LaBastille explored these tensions and contradictions, adopting the name

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[18] *Alone in the Wilderness*, 246. In his private journals, Knowles described a recurring dream, in which he was alone in the wild and incapable of starting a fire, which he interprets as a sign of the dangers of American men losing touch with the primitive past. "Journal," (Ilwaco, WA: Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum Archives).

[19] A number of historians describe the late 19th and early 20th centuries as characterized by a "crisis of masculinity," especially among white, middle-class men. John Higham argues that beginning in the 1890s, there was a growing anxiety about men's virility, sapped by "the frustrations, the routine, and the sheer dullness of an urban-industrial culture." John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in *Writing American History; Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), 79. Many have elaborated this narrative, for example E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993); Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996). A number of scholars have challenged the claim that there was a widespread "crisis of masculinity," arguing that this anxiety was most pronounced among affluent white men, in part as a reaction to the increasingly diverse expressions of Victorian-era manliness. See, for example Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

"Woodswoman" to describe her hybrid identity. She published a series of books about her experience living alone in the Adirondack wilderness. Sharing her story, LaBastille gained some small measure of fame, and like many before her, she soon found herself defining and defending how she fit into existing models of authentic solitude.

In 1965, LaBastille built her first cabin, "West of the Wind," on the shore of a remote Adirondack lake, situating her life of wilderness solitude in the heart of the established American tradition. She was well versed in the history of reclusive wilderness guides in the region, and over the years she visited the former homes of several hermits, including Adirondack French Louie and Noah John Rondeau. She was even more inspired by the legacy of Henry David Thoreau and emulated his practices of domestic simplicity, contemplation, writing, and environmental concern.

For her first ten years, LaBastille combined life in the cabin with a remarkably active career beyond the Adirondacks. She completed a PhD at Cornell, traveling to Guatemala for ecology field research. For eight months, she tried living in Washington, D.C. to work with a large conservation organization. More and more, though, she felt drawn to deeper solitude. After her first book, *Woodswoman,* LaBastille had a steady stream of visitors interrupting the peace and privacy of her cabin. She also grew frustrated with the increasing noise and pollution, as more people built homes on the small lake. She considered leaving the Adirondacks altogether, seeking solitude in some faraway wilderness she imagined as more pristine: "New Zealand, Alaska, the Amazon Basin, or Iceland."[20] Instead, she decided to build a second, smaller cabin, on an even more secluded parcel of Adirondack land. She called the cabin "Thoreau II," signifying her increasing identification with her solitary forerunner.

[20] Anne LaBastille, *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake* (New York: Norton, 1988), 107.

In her second book, *Woodswoman II: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, LaBastille devoted a chapter to her "Copycat Walden," complete with photographs comparing her cabin to Thoreau's, or at least to the replica now standing at Walden Pond. Like Thoreau, she carefully tracked her construction costs and living expenses, proud to have furnished her "tiny dwelling in the woods" for $130.75, only four times what it cost him 140 years earlier, and much less than the $3,000 it cost the Thoreau Society to build their replica. "Good neighbors, willing friends, native ingenuity, and shrewd Yankee scrounging are still alive and well in the Northeast." Like Thoreau, her desire for simplicity was about more than saving money. She moved farther into a life of wilderness solitude, "because the world around me seems to be so complex and materialistic. It's my small rebellion to keep myself in pioneerlike fitness, to promote creativity, and to maintain a sense of adventure in life. It's also my desire to exist in tune with sound ecological and ethical principles–that is 'small is beautiful,' and 'simplicity is best.'"[21]

LaBastille's solitude and simplicity were motivated by her desire to connect more fully with the wilderness world around her. Free from the buzz of civilization, she developed a contemplative practice of getting "in tune" with her natural surroundings, and especially with the trees, her "close and constant companions." She described particular red spruces around her cabin, calling them the "Four Sisters" and imagining all they had witnessed in that place over 300 years. She detailed the subtle differences spruces and pines made in the wind. She recalled the "restorative odor" of balsams, "like giant sticks of incense" on hot, dry summer days. She developed an especially strong bond with an enormous white pine she passed on "trips back and forth to the outhouse." LaBastille described on particularly profound experience with the great tree:

[21] *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake* (New York: Norton, 1988), 232.

> One morning, with my arms wrapped around the trunk, I began to feel a sense of peace and well-being. I held on for over fifteen minutes, chasing extraneous thoughts from my mind. The rough bark pressed hard against my skin. It was as though the tree was pouring its life-force into my body. When I stepped away from the white pine, I had the definite feeling that we had exchanged some sort of energy.

She felt a "communion," a "strange attunement," which pointed to "the presence of a pervading life-force," one she "miraculously tuned into by getting to know the trees at my cabin."[22]

LaBastille settled in to the contemplative space of solitude and the companionship of nature, but her cabin life also inspired her to stay connected with the politics and problems of the broader world. In 1993, she wrote, "Along with my individual freedom came growing responsibilities to the environment and to others," and she announced two primary public priorities for her writing and advocacy: her concern for the environment and for women's liberation. She cared deeply for the natural world, and was especially invested in preserving the Adirondack Park as wilderness. In the book, her aim was, "to show–with local, concrete examples–how the destruction of our environment has speeded up, and how fast we are loosing natural resources, clean air and water, even silence."[23] She collected and reported data on acid rain, and protested a proposal for storing nuclear waste in the park. She monitored the local impacts of climate change, which by 2003 had altered the formation of winter ice, making it too dangerous to cross the lake to gather supplies, as she had done for decades.[24]

LaBastille wrote voluminously about environmental problems. In addition to her

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[22] *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, 43-56.
[23] *Woodswoman 3: Book Three of the Woodswoman's Adventures* (Westport, NY: West of the Wind Publications, 1997), 13.
[24] *Woodswoman 4: Book Four of the Woodswoman's Adventures* (Westport, NY: West of the Wind Publications, 2003), 215.

Woodswoman memoirs, she published scientific journal articles about her ongoing conservation research in Guatemala, popular essays in *National Geographic* and other magazines, and a monthly column in *Adirondack Life*. She wrote a series of *Ranger Rick* children's books and worked as a free-lance nature photographer. As her story and her public voice spread, LaBastille began to do newspaper and television interviews, and even accepted invitations to "a rare party or two." "Not exactly the life of an Adirondack recluse," she acknowledged, but she was able to manage the demands of work and the social intrusions thanks to her "little retreat."[25]

LaBastille did more than write about environmental issues. From 1975–1993, she served as a commissioner of the Adirondack Park Agency, which oversaw management of the six million acres of protected public and private land. LaBastille was uncompromising in her commitment to the region's wilderness legacy, and pushed for decisions driven by science rather than political bargaining. This did not always make her popular among those who resented the A.P.A. and its rules intruding on their property. It was one thing to live alone in the wild and speak up for nature in her writing, but quite another to wield her authority as scientist and solitary tree-hugger in such a public arena. Some Adirondack neighbors thought she had crossed a line, and sent her a message to get out of politics. In 1993, just before she stepped down, an arsonist burned a barn on her property.[26]

LaBastille's other public mission was to "inspire women," especially "older women–those of my generation who did not grow up with women's liberation–to act with

[25] *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, 236.
[26] see Paul Grondahl, "Anne Labastille, 1933-2011," *Adirondack Explorer*, November 12 2011.

more independence and self-reliance."[27] She did this through her memoirs, and she also led workshops and Adirondack backpacking trips for women.[28] In 1980, LaBastille published *Women and Wilderness,* profiling twenty women who embodied the increasing opportunities in wilderness careers: "forest technicians, park rangers, marine and wildlife biologists, speleologists, ethologists, herpetologists, conservation officers, professional environmentalists, wilderness guides, survival and firearms experts, hunters, fisherwomen, sportswomen, and just plain backwoods women."[29] She presented her solitary life alongside these others as an example for ordinary women, but readers repeatedly treated LaBastille anything but normal. Imagining her as a hybrid, female version of the primitive mountain man, they were amazed to learn she was petite, pig-tailed blonde. She reports one typical comment: "Why I thought you'd be an Amazon–six feet two inches, a hundred seventy-five pounds, and bulging muscles."[30]

This mythic Woodswoman was provocative for men too. One local journalist remembers, "Smitten men drove long hours to see her, bearing trophy fish they had caught and wrapped in newspaper or wooden handicrafts they had carved. Some asked for LaBastille's hand in marriage. She was, after all, a skinny-dipping, pink-lipsticked babe in Daisy Dukes who drove an old pickup truck and knew how to gut a brook trout, pitch a tent, and cook over an open fire… She was every outdoorsman's fantasy."[31] While many found her attractive, others found her wild woman persona unsettling. The gendered stereotype of wilderness solitude was strong, and she represented a destabilizing exception to the norm. "The more competent I became, the more insecure

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[27] LaBastille, *Woodswoman 3: Book Three of the Woodswoman's Adventures*, 13.
[28] *Women and Wilderness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), 291.
[29] *Women and Wilderness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980).
[30] *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, 236.
[31] See Grondahl, "Anne Labastille, 1933-2011."

certain men acted, or the more aggressive others behaved toward me. It was as if their inferiority complexes were showing, as if they couldn't stand to have a female be better at anything than them." She was consistently faced with a choice: "To go ahead and act competently and independently... or to act like a 'dumb blonde' or 'helpless female.'"[32]

Anne LaBastille's experience showed just how difficult it was for readers to imagine a woman in the tradition of wilderness solitude. Regardless of how closely she emulated Thoreau, as a woman, she did not fit comfortably into the established category. Other women drawn to solitude in the wild struggled with this same dilemma. Before publishing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard "began toying with the manuscript" and "imagined adopting the voice of a male narrator."[33] There was little literary precedent for the story of a woman alone in the wild. Scholars of nature writing recognize several standard narratives for those writing about their wilderness solitude, including the "essay on backcountry living,"[34] "the retreat narrative,"[35] and the "epic of voluntary simplicity."[36] None of these provided a model for a woman as lead character, but Annie Dillard ultimately did choose to write in a woman's voice, and this proved quite compelling. With *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* Dillard won a Pulitzer Prize and along with Anne LaBastille and other authors, helped write a new chapter in the cultural imagination, the story of a woman alone in nature, a contemplative pilgrim exploring the wild within and around her.

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[32] Anne LaBastille, *Woodswoman* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 258-9.
[33] Scott Slovic, "Taking Care: Toward an Ecomasculinist Literary Criticism?," in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*, ed. Mark Christopher Allister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 66.
[34] Thomas J. Lyon, *This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 4-5.
[35] Roorda, *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*, 6-11.
[36] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, 145.

Like Annie Dillard's pilgrim, Anne LaBastille's Woodswoman persona was a carefully crafted literary character. As a writer, alone in the wild, she shaped her identity to fit within an established tradition, even as she transformed that tradition. Those who knew LaBastille recognized she was far more complex than the character in her *Woodswoman* books. When she died July 1, 2011, newspapers and websites across the country posted glowing remembrances. The *New York Times* obituary remembered her "hermitlike existence," but the local *Adirondack Explorer* magazine published a more nuanced portrait of LaBastille.[37] To outsiders, her life may have seemed "austere and simple," but her friends and neighbors also witnessed a woman who was "a bundle of contradictions:"

> With a rock star's charisma, a movie star's allure, and an environmental advocate's passion, Anne LaBastille was a larger-than-life figure who tramped across the wild and wooly narrative of the Adirondacks with gusto. She stood just 5-foot-1 and weighed barely a hundred pounds, but she packed a wallop in the public imagination as a fearless woman who in some ways out-Thoreaued Thoreau.

LaBastille was a tireless self-promoter. She craved solitude, but scheduled countless book-signings, public readings, lectures, and workshops, attracting hoards of fans who "all wanted to touch the hem of her garment." She skillfully built the "Woodswoman brand." At a workshop for aspiring Adirondack writers, she role-played with students her strategy for book signing chit-chat, and she explained how "she never went out in public without her dogs and a red-and-black flannel shirt."[38]

Friends knew the challenges that came with this public image. Over the years, "the 'Woodswoman' role she played to the hilt had come to seem more like incarceration

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[37] Dennis Hevesi, "Anne Labastille, 75, Advocate, Author and 'Woodswoman' of Adirondacks," *The New York Times*, July 10 2011; Grondahl, "Anne Labastille, 1933-2011."
[38] "Anne Labastille, 1933-2011."

than freedom." She crafted a persona that "ended up typecasting her in its folksy backwoods idiom" and often had a hard time "just being Anne." Ellie Horwitz, who had known LaBastille since their days at Cornell in 1967, remarked, "The irony is that she taught so many of her readers how to conquer their fears, but she couldn't come to grips with her own. It's too bad more people didn't know the real Anne." Others were less concerned with the apparent contradictions. Fellow Adirondack writer and guide Elizabeth Lee, who visited with LaBastille in her final days, countered, "I was never interested in whether she embellished the facts or not. It's part of a good guide's job to spin a tale, after all. So what difference does it make?"[39]

In the end, it is impossible to reconstruct the "real Anne LaBastille" apart from the Woodswoman. Her story was inseparable from the complex cultural and natural history of the Adirondacks, a relationship she described in her 1992 essay, "The Park of Sacred Spaces."[40] LaBastille characterized herself as a contemplative whose life depended on the silence and solitude of the wilderness, comparing herself to Trappist monk Thomas Merton and "park ranger and ecological guru" Edward Abbey. The Adirondack Park was key to her contemplative, "isolated life-style." After decades living in the region and working to protect its wilderness, she recognized this enduring sacred landscape was not an accident of nature, but a public resource that required vigilance, including active management. "The state has made it easy and free to find the sacred spaces," she remarked, protecting wilderness areas, building public boat launches and beaches, constructing backcountry lean-tos and trails, and marking them with yellow and brown signs to point the way. The Adirondack Park provided LaBastille a refuge of

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Anne LaBastille, "The Park of Sacred Spaces," *Conservationist* 46, no. 6 (1992).

silence "to get away from the crowds and cacophony," and also a sense of security, "thanks to its granite-hard legal protection forged 100 years ago and before. This security comes from knowing that I can rest easy at night because the wilderness outside my loft cannot be turned into an amusement park, a race track or a condo complex."[41]

The Woodswoman and the Adirondacks exist at the confluence of seeming contradictions that characterize sacred wilderness solitude: at once private and public, natural and requiring constant management, authentic and carefully constructed. LaBastille was honest that her solitude demanded a delicate balance of work and withdrawal. Echoing *Walden*, she declared, "I shall live deliberately in my beloved Adirondacks. It's the best possible place for me. Here is West of the Wind, from which I'll fight environmental battles, and Thoreau II, to which I'll retreat for solace."[42] LaBastille boldly articulated a new model that captured more authentically her own identity and practice. "'Are you a hermit?' readers of my books often ask. Apparently they envision a female recluse living in a crude cabin month-in, month-out, seeing no one. Only German shepherds. My answer is simple. 'I'm half- a-hermit.'" Rather than feel phony, she invited readers to seek their own "pockets of peace" in the silence and solitude of wilderness. "Rather than city churches and counselors' couches, come seek sanctuary in this park. Untie the tensions and loosen the stresses of your life. Learn to be half-a-hermit. The sacred spaces will soothe and gentle your soul, nourish and toughen

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[41] Ibid. She expressed a similar sentiment elsewhere, with an even stronger endorsement of the Adirondack Park Agency. After struggling with the agency over zoning regulations for Thoreau II, she ultimately concedes, "Without a 'Big Brother' watching over the Adirondacks and its backountry areas, anyone could throw up a marina or a hot dog stand beside a wild lake, put in a condo or retirement village atop a forested mountain." *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, 115.
[42] *Woodswoman 2: Beyond Black Bear Lake*, 250-1.

your body, clarify your mind and empower your life."[43]

Wilderness, Solitude, and Radical Politics

Julia "Butterfly" Hill was another attractive young woman who challenged the stereotype of wilderness solitude, as well as the macho culture of radical environmental activism. For 738 days, from 1997–99, Hill lived on a small wooden platform, erected 180 feet up in "Luna," a giant redwood tree near Stafford, California. "Tree-sitting" was an increasingly important form of civil disobedience for activists fighting logging in California and the Pacific Northwest. As her marathon stint in Luna dragged on, Hill became the face of the movement, and in the process, a focal point for debate about the moral authority of the solitary activist living in the wild.

Hill articulated a holistic, spiritual motivation for her activism. Her father was an itinerant preacher from Jonesboro, Arkansas, and as a child, her home was a small camping trailer. As a young adult, Hill seized the opportunity to travel and explore her own eclectic spiritual path, culminating in a wilderness conversion experience she recorded in her bestselling book, *The Legacy of Luna*. During a short hike in the midst of a long road trip, she witnessed redwoods for the first time:

> The energy hit me in a wave. Gripped by the spirit of the forest, I dropped to my knees and began to sob. I sank my fingers into the layer of duff, which smelled so sweet and so rich and so full of layers of life, then lay my face down and breathed it in. Surrounded by these huge, ancient giants, I felt the film covering my senses from the imbalance of our fast-paced, technologically dependent society melt away. I could feel my whole being bursting forth into new life in this majestic cathedral. I sat and cried for a long time. Finally, the tears turned into joy and the joy turned into mirth, and I sat and laughed at the beauty of it all… These

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[43] "The Park of Sacred Spaces."

> majestic ancient places, which are the holiest of temples, housing more spirituality than any church, were being turned into clear-cuts and mud slides. I had to do something. I didn't know what that something was, but I knew I couldn't turn my back and walk away. I walked out of the forest a different woman. I certainly felt a calling…[44]

Hill remained in Northern California and joined the movement. When she began her residence in the ancient giant, she continued to deepen her spiritual connection to the redwoods and her connections to the wild treetop environment. She learned to climb by feel rather than sight, her bare feet, sticky with sap, able to "feel Luna's life force" and guide her to sturdy branches.[45] She developed relationships with the many animals that shared the tree with her, especially with butterflies, which had visited her in times of need since her childhood. She adopted the nickname "Butterfly" and adapted to the demands of a simple life, restricted to a small platform with meager supplies delivered by supporters on the ground.

Hill critiqued modern civilization for its failure to protect these ancient trees, but also for its failure to protect the surrounding human communities. She opened her book with the story of a 1996 landslide that brought mud, rocks, and tree stumps down onto the town of Stafford, California. Seven homes were destroyed, though all the residents fled to safety. Pacific Lumber Company had clear-cut the steep slope above the town but called the disaster an "act of God." Despite objections from scientists and activists, the corporation was moving ahead with plans to log the adjacent section of the slope, where Luna stood. Even as Hill confronted the loggers sent to intimidate her, she resisted the

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[44] Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 8-9. Hill's spirituality reflects the "countercultural bricolage" Bron Taylor demonstrates as characteristic of radical environmentalism, combining many religious and cultural streams into a potent blend. See Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism," *Religion* 31, no. 3 (2001): 179.

[45] Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods*, 95, 123.

rhetoric of "trees versus jobs," and instead expressed her compassion for the local people who worked for the company and lived in the communities threatened by its logging.

Hill's tree-sit grabbed the attention of the mainstream media, who were inspired by her commitment to non-violent civil disobedience and were intrigued by her strange lifestyle high in the tree. She was profiled in *People* magazine and was named one of the "Most Admired Women of the Year" in *Good Housekeeping*. Hill's protest elevated her to something of a celebrity, in part through her new connections with celebrity activists who spoke out in her support.[46] Again and again in these interviews, she tried to deflect attention away from herself and the human-interest story, instead hoping to focus attention on "the issues." Reporters were especially interested in the mundane details of her primitive life on the platform— how she went to the bathroom or showered, what she ate, and whether she was afraid of falling. They were also interested in any hints of hypocrisy in her practice of protest, such as how she could be so devoted to a simple natural life but also utilized high tech devices like the solar-powered phone she used to conduct interviews. Hill herself only reluctantly utilized her various gadgets to document her experience and to talk with media and activists on the ground, hopeful this would help prevent a more lasting intrusion by the machinery of corporate logging.

Interviewers also repeatedly asked her about the challenge of living in solitude, intrigued by the image of a rugged, attractive young woman alone in the wild, standing up to powerful and often quite macho opponents. She acknowledged she first thought of the tree as a place of "solace and solitude," like the trees she climbed as a little kid, and

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[46] Among them were actor Woody Harrelson, who spent a night visiting her platform in the tree, and Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, who played for her from below.

that originally, she "went to the tree to be alone."[47] But over time, her sense of solitude shifted. She spent most of her time alone, and went for long stretches without human contact, but she explained to reporters that she no longer felt alone. Hill had connected with the tree, but she was also constantly on the phone with journalists and fellow activists, and completely reliant on a community of supporters on the ground.[48]

Despite her objections, Hill came to be defined by her wild woman persona, her earthy spirituality, and her solitude. Mainstream news stories played up her isolation, and writers interested in solitude were equally enthusiastic to claim her. In a survey of hermits throughout history, Isabel Colgate compared Julia "Butterfly" Hill to the fifth-century CE "Stylites," Syrian Christian ascetics who lived atop pillars (or in some cases atop trees, and known as "Dendrites").[49] Meng-hu, the pseudonymous blogger at Hermitary.com, made this same comparison.[50] Both authors stressed that like the Stylites, Julia "Butterfly" Hill used her solitary, elevated position to show her cause was urgent and her commitment authentic.

Hill's non-violent protest generated widespread support for preserving Luna and infused the radical environmental movement with new energy. Pacific Lumber agreed to preserve Luna and the three surrounding acres, and Hill descended from the tree in December 1999, greeted by a throng of supporters and journalists. Over the next several years, she published *Legacy of Luna* and an environmentalist handbook, *One Makes a*

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[47] Virginia Lee, "Making a Difference: One Woman, One Tree and One World," *Common Ground*, Summer 2002.
[48] See, for example her May 2002 interview with the magazine *Satya:* http://www.satyamag.com/may02/butterfly_hill.html
[49] Isabel Colegate, *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries and Recluses* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 72.
[50] See http://www.hermitary.com/thatch/?p=281.=

Difference.[51] She was the subject of a feature-length documentary, *Tree Sit: The Art of Resistance.*[52] She established a charitable foundation and traveled the world giving interviews and inspirational speeches. Some radical environmentalists criticized her for "selling out," worried her personal fame and "the specter of Julia 'Butterfly' Hill, Inc." overshadowed the goals of the movement.[53] But to her many fans and supporters, she was and is a symbol of the impact of selfless, individual action whose "all-natural aura shines like a sunbeam." Audiences line up after her talks to get hugs and photos, and they walk away "beaming with beatific smiles."[54]

If Julia "Butterfly" Hill represents the ideal of the non-violent, solitary wilderness activist, Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski exemplifies the frightening if fascinating opposite extreme — the solitary lone-wolf terrorist. Over an 18-year period, the reclusive Kaczynski carried out a campaign of bombings that resulted in three deaths and 23 injuries. He designed and built the bombs himself, in his remote wilderness cabin, specifically targeting university researchers and others he believed were promoting technologies that threatened the environment. During his 1995 arrest and trial, the public was captivated by this seeming "true believer," devoted not only to a violent assault on technological civilization but also to a radical lifestyle of simplicity and solitude.

In 1969, at the age of 26, Kaczynski resigned from his position as an assistant professor of mathematics at the University of California Berkeley. Two years later, he moved to Lincoln, Montana where he hand-built a ten-by-twelve-foot shack, with

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[51] Julia Butterfly Hill, *One Makes a Difference: Inspiring Actions That Change Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2002).
[52] James Ficklin, "Tree Sit: The Art of Resistance," (Earth Films, 2001).
[53] See Alex Burns, "julia 'butterfly' hill, inc," January 21, 2002 at http://www.disinfo.com/archive/pages/dossier/id400/pg1/index.html
[54] See Don Oldenburg, "Julia Butterfly Hill, from Treetop to Grass Roots," *The Washington Post*, September 22 2004. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A40230-2004Sep21.html

salvaged lumber. It was a near replica of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, with no electricity or running water, and surrounded by several garden plots. Over the next 25 years, Kaczynski lived largely off the land, hunting and harvesting just enough to survive. He was quiet and reclusive, making only occasional trips into town.

Before he mailed his first bomb, Kaczynski was already taking action against the machinery of industrial civilization and defending the sanctity of the wilderness near his home. He vandalized mining and logging trucks, a sawmill, and nearby vacation cabins. Already, he was also experimenting with violent tactics that threatened human life. He strung wires between trees, intending to "clothesline" off-road motorcyclists. In 1979, he contemplated ambushing and shooting "trail-bikers and other mechanized desecrators of the forest," but reconsidered, and planned instead for "revenge on a bigger scale." He explained his reasoning in his journal: "Considering technological civilization as a monstrous octopus, the motorcyclists, jeep-riders, and other intruders into the forest are only the tips of the tentacles. I was not really satisfied with these. My other plan would let me strike perhaps not at the head, but at least much further up along the tentacles."[55] Less than a month after this passage was written, he shipped one of his bombs in the cargo hold of an American Airlines flight. The bomb failed to explode, but the smoking package forced an emergency landing, caused minor injuries to the passengers from smoke inhalation, and intensified the efforts of federal investigators.

In 1995, writing under the pseudonym of F.C. (later said to stand for Freedom Club), Kaczynski promised to "permanently desist from terrorism" if the *New York Times*

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[55] Theodore Kaczynski, Journal entry, October 23, 1979, quoted in Chris Waits and Dave Shors, *Unabomber: The Secret Life of Ted Kaczynski* (Helena, MT: Helena Independent Record: Montana Magazine, 1999).

and *Washington Post* would print his essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future," which came to be known as the "Unabomber Manifesto." Attorney General Janet Reno persuaded the newspapers to publish the document, hoping that someone would recognize its author. Kaczynski's brother, David, read the manifesto and noticed its similarity to an essay Theodore had written in 1971. David's tip led the FBI to the Unabomber's Montana cabin, where they found ample evidence linking Kazcynski to the bombings.[56] Throughout his trial, Theodore Kazcynski resisted efforts to portray him as a madman suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. In the end, the judge denied his request to represent himself, and Kaczynski accepted a plea agreement in which he admitted to 16 bombings, for which he will remain in prison for the rest of his life.

In the manifesto, Kaczynski traced the problems of modern industrial society to "excessive density of population, isolation of man from nature, excessive rapidity of social change and the break-down of natural small-scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe."[57] He called for a revolution, not "necessarily" violent or political, but focused on technology and economics.[58] Only when the present system is destroyed through the "elimination of modern technology" would "primitive individuals and small groups" have real power and freedom.[59]

The Unabomber Manifesto was not only a critique, but also a statement of Kaczynski's alternative vision and values, again reflecting his zeal for wild nature:

> The positive ideal that we [F.C.] propose is Nature. That is, WILD nature: those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and

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[56] For a concise summary of these events, see Douglas Long, *Ecoterrorism*, Library in a Book (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2004), 49-56.
[57] Theodore John Kaczynski, "Industrial Society and Its Future," *Washington Post*, Sept. 22 1995, 46.
[58] "Industrial Society and Its Future," *Washington Post*, Sept. 22 1995, 193.
[59] "Industrial Society and Its Future," 198-9.

> control. And with wild nature we include human nature, by which we mean those aspects of the functioning of the human individual that are not subject to regulation by organized society but are products of chance, or free will, or God (depending on your religious or philosophical opinions).[60]

As is clear from his early local acts of resistance, Kaczynski was outraged at the "desecration" of the wild forests near his cabin. In a 1971 journal entry, he separated himself from "the cult of nature-worshipers and wilderness-worshipers," saying "I believe in nothing." However, he clearly believed something was special, if not sacred about wild nature. In the same journal entry, he drew a distinction between the pristine wilderness and other parts of the woods, the "logged-over areas" and "places much frequented by people" where one could throw empty cans guilt-free. Whether or not he identified himself as a "true believer," Kaczynski clearly held a romantic view of the wilderness as key to his vision of freedom, and the threat to the woods around him was a source of his motivation to radical action.

Despite the ambiguity of his own beliefs, Kaczynski was keenly aware of the strategic advantage of framing the "revolution" in religious terms, as a sacred struggle in defense of nature.

> A further advantage of nature as a counter-ideal to technology is that, in many people, nature inspires the kind of reverence that is associated with religion, so that nature could perhaps be idealized on a religious basis. It is true that in many societies religion has served as a support and justification for the established order, but it is also true that religion has often provided a basis for rebellion. Thus it may be useful to introduce a religious element into the rebellion against technology, the more so because Western society today has no strong religious foundation. Religion, nowadays either is used as cheap and transparent support for narrow, shortsighted selfishness (some conservatives use it this way), or even is cynically exploited to make easy money (by many evangelists), or has degenerated into crude irrationalism (fundamentalist protestant sects, "cults"), or is simply stagnant (Catholicism, main-line Protestantism). The

[60] "Industrial Society and Its Future," 183.

> nearest thing to a strong, widespread, dynamic religion that the West has seen in recent times has been the quasi-religion of leftism, but leftism today is fragmented and has no clear, unified, inspiring goal. Thus there is a religious vacuum in our society that could perhaps be filled by a religion focused on nature in opposition to technology.[61]

Kaczynski recognized that religion was a powerful and contested cultural terrain, that contemporary American religion lacked a stable center, and thus could be manipulated for a variety of purposes. He made a convincing case that "religion focused on nature in opposition to technology" had the potential to compete for the support not just of extremists but also of a broader public disillusioned by environmental problems and the perceived failings of mainstream religion.

In the mainstream media, Kaczynski's religious vision and reverence for nature were ultimately overwhelmed by the attention focused on his violent tactics and ideological critique of technological society. There was a flurry of partisan punditry accusing political opponents of fostering such extremism. Right-wing commentators were quick to link the Unabomber's ideology not only with radical environmentalists like the members of EarthFirst!,[62] but also with moderate, mainstream environmentalists like Al Gore.[63] Voices from the left pointed out Kaczynski's endorsement of conservative libertarian values such as individual freedom. These commentators distanced themselves from Kaczynski politically, just as others in the media searched for evidence that would distance Kaczynski psychologically from mainstream America.[64]

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[61] "Industrial Society and Its Future," n.30.

[62] For an account of the media's sensational speculations linking Kaczynski and EarthFirst!, see Alexander Cockburn, "Earthfirst!, the Press and the Unabomber," *The Nation*, May 6 1996.

[63] Ralph Reiland makes this accusation based on the FBI's discovery of a "page-worn and well-underlined" copy of Gore's *Earth in the Balance*. See Ralph Reiland, "Inspiring the Unabomber," *The American Enterprise*, May/June 1998.

[64] David Chidester describes similar political and psychological distancing in response to the radical politics and religious rhetoric of Jim Jones. David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,, 1991).

Others insisted that Kaczynski was not so different from the rest of us, and should not be dismissed by the left or the right. *Sojourners* writer Danny Duncan Collum argued Kaczynski was too alienated from human society to affiliate with any group or ideology, but was motivated by the "radical individualism" that "cuts across all the make-believe lines of our politics." Kaczynski "lived out an outsized and melodramatic version of a cultural strategy that has defined American men for centuries… the hero of his own frontier epic."[65] Biographer Alston Chase echoed this view, concluding that the Unabomber Manifesto was ignored "not because its ideas were so foreign, but because they were so familiar." Except for the call to violence, it is reminiscent of "every environmental best-seller for more than a generation. It was nothing less than the contemporary American creed."[66]

The Unabomber's story indeed resonated with many people, and especially his embodiment of the stereotype of wilderness solitude. With all the media attention, Kaczynski quickly became a pop-culture hero. There was an online campaign promoting the "Unabomber for President" along with websites and Usenet groups of devoted fans, some declaring their "Luddite Love" for him.[67] These fans consistently highlighted their fascination with Kaczynski's simple, solitary lifestyle — his rustic cabin, his hunter-gatherer existence, his separation from society, his renunciation of academic life, and his critique of technology.

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[65] Danny Duncan Collum, "On Edge with the Unabomber," *Sojourners*, July-August 1996.

[66] Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), 89.

[67] See William Glaberson, " A Star on Your Computer Screen," *The New York Times*, Dec. 27.;"They Call It Luddite Love," ibid., Sept. 15. Many of these fans recognized the irony of their online Luddite subculture, yet articulated a rationale that individual computer users could use technology to undermine industrial civilization. See "The Web's Unlikely Hero," *Time*, April 22.

Years after he was incarcerated, Kaczynski continued to evoke fascination for his simple, solitary lifestyle. In 2008, the F.B.I. decided to display the Unabomber's cabin in an exhibition at Washington D.C.'s Newseum featuring the top news stories from agency's first hundred years. The cabin was transported "from the F.B.I. vault" and erected in the museum, complete with artifacts agents discovered when they arrested the reclusive suspect: cans of food, hand tools, books, a typewriter, and more. The Newseum also created an interactive online exhibition, inviting visitors to "Probe the Unabomber Cabin: Explore a mad hermit's life" through videos, images, and quotes from the manifesto.[68] From prison, Kaczynski tried to block the display of his cabin, after seeing a "full-page, full-color advertisement that features my cabin," in the *Washington Post*. He wrote a hand-written letter to the U.S. Court of Appeals, objecting that public exhibition of the iconic cabin would be offensive to his victims, who had claimed to be traumatized by the immense publicity surrounding his case.[69]

Kaczynski, the F.B.I., and the Newseum understood that the cabin was more than an artifact, and the items inside were more than crime scene evidence. The cabin was a powerful and provocative symbol of the Unabomber's confounding status in the cultural imagination. The cabin was a tangible manifestation of the simple, solitary life in the wilderness, physical proof that the Thoreauvian vision was still alive. The iconic cabin was also a stark reminder that solitude could go terribly wrong, that the wilderness could harbor a "mad hermit" and inspire murder. As an embodiment of this sacred tension, the cabin was alluring to the public. Visitors flocked to the museum; journalists and bloggers

[68] http://www.newseum.org/exhibits_th/fbi_feat/video.aspx?item=unabomber_int&style=k
[69] Jaqueline Trescott, "Unabomber Objects to Newseum's Exhibit," *The Washington Post*, August 13 2008.

alike picked up on the story; all confirming what the museum marketing director had anticipated: the cabin was “a definite media hook.”[70]

The cases of Julia “Butterfly” Hill and “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski demonstrate the power of solitude as a source of radical political activism, ranging from peaceful civil disobedience to violence and terror. Their stories highlight the public fascination with wilderness solitude as a form of moral purity and moral authority, but also a potential source of pathological, immoral ideology. The tree and the cabin they once called home continue to serve as monuments to their sacred place in the collective imagination. Hill’s solitary tree-sit propelled her into a career as a writer, activist, and inspirational speaker. Meanwhile, Kaczynski lives a quite different sort of solitary life in a Colorado supermax prison.

Wilderness Solitude, Secular Spirituality, and the State

The stories in this chapter demonstrate the creativity and agency of individuals who reshaped the inherited tradition of wilderness solitude to negotiate particular tensions and advance their own agendas. But those living alone in the wild were not the only ones responsible for advancing and adapting this tradition. Through the twentieth century, government officials increasingly asserted the state’s responsibility to manage public lands as places for solitude, and to promote solitude as a quintessentially American secular spiritual tradition.

The 1970 U.S. Forest Service pamphlet from the beginning of this chapter is a revealing example of the government’s role as manager and promoter of wilderness

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[70] Ibid.

solitude, and as interpreter of the inherited tradition. The pamphlet celebrated the 1964 Wilderness Act, which declared wilderness would be “protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions,” which by the law’s definition, included having “outstanding opportunities for solitude.”[71] The brochure detailed the history and purpose of the legislation, but also recognized the ongoing challenge of defining and managing wilderness, and sustaining Americans’ “search for solitude” and the nation’s “wilderness heritage.” The brochure conceded the wilderness act was “subject to diverse interpretations and conflicts,” because it was the “offspring of the democratic process,” rather than the vision of “a single-minded, uncompromising individual.” Acknowledging that wilderness is “both a condition of physical geography and a state of mind,” the pamphlet sought to shape the public state of mind regarding wilderness, asserting the essential link between national identity and wilderness solitude, and the value of wildlands as sacred spaces for retreat alone.

In the decades since the 1964 legislation, wilderness advocates and federal wilderness managers have engaged in ongoing discussion of how to interpret its definition of wilderness and specifically the mandate to provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude.” This debate has made it increasingly clear that wilderness is not simply an ecological reality, but a “combination of biophysical, experiential, and symbolic ideals.”[72] Management professionals realize the potential polarities of wilderness, and they grapple with many of the same tensions as the individuals in the preceding cases. Wilderness is at once an embodiment of public ideals and a “sanctuary

[71] "Wilderness Act."
[72] Peter Landres, "Developing Indicators to Monitor the “Outstanding Opportunities” Quality of Wilderness Character," *International Journal of Wilderness* 10, no. 3 (2004): 8.

and refuge from society."[73] They assert that wilderness is a space to encounter "nature as our ancestors might have found it and to feel part of the past ," enjoying a "primitive and unconfined experience."[74] Wilderness invites visitors to reconnect with a mythic past, and also to creatively imagine and embody a new, liberating present and future. Wilderness holds promise as a space for women and sexual minorities "to *resist* hetero-patriarchy" and a space for creative expression of gender, through the experience of wild qualities including "unpredictability, boundlessness, potentiality, exploration, lawlessness, and unpatrollability."[75] Indeed, wilderness is legally protected, publicly managed countercultural space. Drawing on the history of wilderness solitude, William E. Hammitt asserts, "Each wilderness area designation and visit can be seen as an act of

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[73] William T. Borrie, Angela M. Meyer, and Ian M. Foster, "Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society," in *Wilderness Visitor Experiences: Progress in Research and Management; 2011 April 4-7; Missoula, Mt. Proc. Rmrs-P-66*, ed. David N. Cole (Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, comp. 2012).

[74] William T. Borrie and Joseph W. Roggenbuck, "The Dynamic, Emergent, and Multi-Phasic Nature of on-Site Wilderness Experiences," *Journal of Leisure Research* 33, no. 2 (2001): 210. "Wilderness Act." Wilderness is officially managed as a reproduction of a particular past, a mythic "primitive" period that valorized "the simple, close-to-nature lifestyle of indigenous peoples—the "noble savages"; and the virtuous character traits of early European settlers—the "virile pioneers." Bill Borrie, "Why Primitive Experiences in Wilderness?," *International Journal of Wilderness* 10, no. 3 (2004): 18; Marvin Henberg, "Wilderness, Myth, and American Character," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

National Park Service policy was even more explicit about this management of the wilderness illusion. In 1963, while the Wilderness Act was making its way through Congress, the National Park Service published its own policy for managing wilderness ecosystems and visitors' experiences. The "Leopold Report," named for its principal author, conservationist Starker Leopold, eldest son of noted author and ecologist Aldo Leopold, recommended, "the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man." This historical moment was chosen as the norm for what was most natural, most worthy of preservation. A National Park then, should be a reproduction of this past. In the words of the report, a park should "represent a vignette of primitive America." The ultimate aim was to convince visitors they were traveling back in time, to a pristine wilderness free of human influence. If the goal of complete restoration was impossible, "A reasonable illusion of primitive America could be recreated, using the utmost in skill, judgment, and ecologic sensitivity." S.A. Cain A.S. Leopold (Chairman), C.M. Cottam, I.N. Gabrielson, T.L. Kimball, "Wildlife Management in the National Parks: The Leopold Report," (1963).

Cultural critic Richard Grusin argues that National Parks are then, like photography and landscape painting, "technologies for reproducing nature according to a particular moment." Like these, parks reproduce particular scientific, technological, and cultural logics. As noted in the previous chapter, solitude was a key piece of this "reasonable illusion of primitive America," as parks capitalized on the historic legacy of hermits and solitary pioneers. Richard A. Grusin, *Culture, Technology, and the Creation of America's National Parks* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161.

[75] Borrie, Meyer, and Foster, "Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society," 72-3.

disobedience against the restraint and authority of an increasing population, expanding settlement, and the growing mechanization and technological burden that accompanies urbanization."[76]

These professionals advocate provocative meanings for wilderness, but in practice, forest service managers are limited in just how they promote such visions. Though its meanings are mediated, wilderness is not a machine, "capable of efficiently producing predictable outcomes given the input of preferred conditions."[77] The Wilderness Act directs managers to focus on shaping visitor's visual experience of the environment. The law requires that wilderness "generally *appears* to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially *unnoticeable*."[78] This illusion requires officials to actively maintain and manage wilderness while simultaneously concealing the evidence of their efforts.

As religion scholar Kerry Mitchell notes, this visual and ecological management attempts to eliminate "artificial" contamination of the landscape, creating a "purified environment," one especially suited for solitude and for an experience of the sublime. This management strategy provides visitors "an opportunity to encounter the public space of the park in a highly charged, personal, and private way."[79] Mitchell outlines a series of "techniques" public officials employ to "manage" the spirituality of visitors, and one of the primary strategies is creating opportunities for solitary, sublime experience. In effect, the state promotes a particular kind of spirituality, a "private, individualistic nature

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[76] William E. Hammitt, "Naturalness, Privacy, and Restorative Experiences in Wilderness: An Integrative Model," ibid., 62.
[77] William T. Borrie, Angela M. Meyer, and Ian M. Foster, "Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society," ibid., 75.
[78] "Wilderness Act."
[79] Kerry Mitchell, "Managing Spirituality: Public Religion and National Parks," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2007): 435.

spirituality," which "appears highly natural" and comes to function as a kind of de facto "public religion."[80]

After decades of research and writing, federal wilderness managers and university-based forest management researchers have reached a consensus that providing the "outstanding opportunities for solitude" requires more than purifying visitors' visual experience. Early studies focused on managing the density of visitors in wilderness areas, promoting solitude by minimizing encounters with others.[81] Subsequent research demonstrated there was actually a weak correlation between the density of visitors and experiences of solitude, at least the quality of experiences wilderness managers intended to promote.[82] These later studies argued that solitude was better understood as an "intrapersonal capacity," with a hierarchy of "physical, emotional volitional, intellectual, and spiritual" benefits, and that as such, solitude was a "learned behavior."[83] Interviews revealed that even traveling in groups, individuals could have profound, spiritual experiences of solitude, often facilitated by rituals they "learned from mentors," such as "rising early in the morning and seeking solitude and silence a little ways from camp."[84]

The challenge for officials tasked with managing wilderness was twofold: "First, to manage the natural resource to ensure the necessary condition of aloneness, and second, but no less important, to educate, nurture, and promote the intrapersonal capacity

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[80] "Managing Spirituality: Public Religion and National Parks," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2007): 431.
[81] See, for example, W.; Brown Hammitt, G. . , "Functions of Privacy in Wilderness Environments," *Leisure Sciences* 6(1984).
[82] see Chad P. Dawson, "Monitoring Outstanding Oportunities for Solitude," *International Journal of Wilderness* 10, no. 3 (2004): 12.
[83] Steve Hollenhorst, III Ernest Frank, and Alan Watson, "The Capacity to Be Alone: Wilderness Solitude and the Growth of the Self," in *International Wilderness Allocation, Management, and Research*, ed. John C. Hendee and Vance G. Martin (Ft. Collins, CO: International Wilderness Leadership (WILD) Foundation, 1994), 237.
[84] Borrie, Meyer, and Foster, "Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society," 74.

for solitude in the wilderness user."[85] The state, according to these studies, should do more than restore wilderness ecosystems, build trails, and publish maps; it should manage the meanings of solitude and promote particular kinds of spiritual experiences for those alone in the wild. Wilderness professional and academic Roger Kaye addressed this task in a 2006 article in the *International Journal of Wilderness:* "The Spiritual Dimensions of Wilderness: A Secular Approach for Resource Agencies." Recognizing that natural resource managers are not only ill-prepared for this task but also frequently "squeamish" about spirituality, especially anything "mystical," Kaye offered a framework for management professionals. He called for "wilderness stewards" to "understand the spiritual orientation toward wilderness, and protect the conditions conducive it, "without reference to anything supernatural or paranormal."[86] State and federal officials should feel comfortable promoting solitude, which does not necessarily involve anything mystical, supernatural, or paranormal, but instead, "reflects the unmet needs of our urban, utilitarian, commodity-driven culture."[87] Kaye argued public managers should not feel squeamish about wilderness solitude, but should understand this as a rich tradition of "private, individualistic nature spirituality" that reflects the shared secular values of the state.[88]

Wilderness managers understand that solitude continues to mediate sacred American values, and they exercise their own agency in shaping these values through their research, writing, and administrative practices. The state has particular legal

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[85] Steve Hollenhorst, Ernest Frank, and Watson, "The Capacity to Be Alone: Wilderness Solitude and the Growth of the Self," 239.
[86] Roger Kaye, "The Spiritual Dimension of Wilderness: A Secular Approach for Resource Agencies," *International Journal of Wilderness* 12, no. 3 (2006): 4.
[87] "The Spiritual Dimension of Wilderness: A Secular Approach for Resource Agencies," *International Journal of Wilderness* 12, no. 3 (2006): 7.
[88] Mitchell, "Managing Spirituality: Public Religion and National Parks," 431.

authority over wilderness areas, but is still one mediating force among many. Mass media, inherited tradition, gender norms, and even federal law enforcement constrain the meaning and practice of wilderness solitude, and the cases in this chapter demonstrate the complex and creative ways individuals navigate this cultural landscape and shape the norms of sacred solitude. They craft their sense of identity alone, but also in dynamic relationship with the world around them. These individuals recognize the power and persistence of historic models of wilderness solitude. Practices of simple living, contemplation, writing, and moral integrity continue to exemplify the most authentic expressions of solitude, and wilderness continues to be its preeminent place. Solitary individuals and state wilderness managers blend these ingredients in creative new combinations, navigating new polarities and tensions, and testing the limits of sacred solitude.

Chapter 4. Charles Brandt and the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist: Restoring the Wilderness Tradition

In 1960, after almost two decades at the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, and after almost as many years of persistent pleading with his superiors, Thomas Merton got permission to build a small hermitage in the woods north of the monastery. At first, he visited for occasional afternoon prayer and writing, and in the fall of 1964, Merton spent his first nights there, alone. His essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” captured the joy of his newfound solitude and his expanding connection with his natural surroundings. Sitting “absolutely alone, in the forest, at night,” he listened to the rain falling on his roof, filling the woods with its “immense and confused sound.” Relaxing toward sleep, Merton reflected, “Here I am not alien. The trees I know, the night I know, the rain I know. I close my eyes and instantly sink into the whole rainy world of which I am a part.”[1]

In the essay, Merton pondered his new life as a hermit by invoking two seemingly disparate solitaries. First, he identified with the countercultural simplicity of Thoreau: “Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed.” Lying in the dark, Merton listened to the rain, but also the sound of bombers from nearby Fort Knox, flying overhead, with their nuclear payloads. Even in the woods of Kentucky, the technology of war was not so distant, which only clarified his conviction that solitude was a kind of silent protest against the injustice, violence and pollution of American progress.

Merton then invoked the sixth century Syrian hermit, Philoxenos, who insisted solitude was essential to true identity, but solitude was not a way to simply escape the sin

[1] Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 10.

and suffering of the world. The Christian hermit, "far from enclosing himself in himself," faces the "loneliness, the temptation, and the hunger of every man." Grounded in contemplative solitude, the hermit was profoundly engaged with the world, attuned to the rhythms of nature, to the word of God, and also to the deepest and most urgent human struggles.

Merton positioned himself within both these traditions of solitude, one ecological and one religious, one American and one ancient, but he simultaneously resisted the stereotypes associated with both. "I am accused of living in the woods like Thoreau instead of living in the desert like St. John the Baptist. All I can answer is that I am not living 'like anybody.' Or 'unlike anybody.'"[2] Thanks to the success of his 1948 autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain,* Merton was the most famous monk in America, and readers were fascinated to understand his new identity as a hermit. He embraced this public voice and continued to publish widely even as he settled into his hermitage full-time, but he also constantly pushed back against the expectations the public projected onto him. In 1965, he wrote, "The last thing in the world I want is to 'be a hermit.' The image of the bearded man half-blind with tears, living in a cave, is not enough…"[3] The purpose of the hermit's solitude was contemplation, but not "contemplation of himself as solitary."[4] Merton studied and wrote about historic traditions of solitude, but he was intent on escaping the burden of the past and its stereotypes of solitude.

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[2] *Day of a Stranger*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), 32-3.
[3] *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 335.
[4] "Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1960), 184.

Instead of the nature-loving or world-denying caricatures, Thomas Merton insisted the hermit was a subversive figure who upset the conventions of religion and culture. “In the eyes of our conformist society, the hermit is nothing but a failure. He has to be a failure–we have absolutely no use for him, no place for him. He is outside all our projects, plans, assemblies, movements. We can countenance him as long as he remains only a fiction, or a dream. As soon as he becomes real, we are revolted by his insignificance, his poverty, his shabbiness, his total lack of status.”[5] Refusing to conform, the hermit should expect to be treated as a “traitor.” In the eyes of the world, “there is no explanation and no justification for the solitary life, since it is without law. To be a contemplative is therefor to be an outlaw. As Christ was. As Paul was.”[6] Living in the wilderness, on the margins, the hermit’s very life served as a critique of the centers of power, a critique Merton saw as essential throughout history. “There are always a few people who are in the woods at night, in the rain (because if there were not the world would have ended), and I am one of them.”[7]

Thomas Merton lived as a full-time hermit for less than three years, until his tragic death in 1968, but his legacy profoundly influenced attitudes toward solitude within the Catholic Church and to a much wider audience. He helped imagine new and challenging ways of combining Christian traditions of solitude with Asian and American ones, insisting that solitude maintain its provocative polarities, especially its cross-cultural expansiveness and its counter-cultural edge. Thanks to his own prolific writing and the ever-expanding scholarly fascination with him, Merton’s place in the history of solitude is well established, as a convert who explored the creative tensions at the

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[5] "Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1960), 185.
[6] "Rain and the Rhinoceros," 14.
[7] "Rain and the Rhinoceros," 13.

boundary of Catholic spirituality and American culture, but Merton was not the first to travel this terrain.

This chapter examines the broader story of solitude among American Catholics, beginning with a return to the nineteenth century. In the same era wilderness hermits wandered the Adirondacks and Thoreau lived alone at Walden Pond, Catholic converts Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker contemplated the connections between Christian solitary traditions and American religious cultures. Brownson and Hecker were active in Transcendentalist circles and friends with Thoreau, and they shared his enthusiasm for countercultural simplicity and solitary spirituality. As converts, they distanced themselves from their Transcendental pasts and articulated distinctively Catholic attitudes on solitude. In the process, they exposed creative tensions between Christian and American traditions, laying the foundation for the sort of dynamic combination Merton embodied a century later.

Even in his own time, Merton was not the first and he was far from the lone champion of Catholic eremitic life. Following this nineteenth century backstory, I trace the less-publicized story of a broader twentieth century reawakening of solitude among Roman Catholics. This chapter focuses on the Hermits of St. John the Baptist and in particular Charles Brandt, the last of the hermits living in British Columbia. The following chapter focuses on the Spiritual Life Institute, now centered in Colorado. Both groups trace their beginnings to the 1960s, and like Merton, these hermits simultaneously rooted their solitude in two historic traditions, reviving early Christian models of monasticism, and American traditions of solitude in nature. These chapters draw on oral history interviews with current and former members of the groups, who generously

shared their stories and invited me into their hermitages. Their individual stories reveal the enduring influence of particular practices of solitude, including simple living, contemplation, moral integrity, and writing. The hermits also expressed a remarkable sense of place, their individual and collective identities shaped by decades of communing with and caring for the wilderness environments they call home. These chapters underscore two key features of this historic revival of Catholic solitude.

First, the resurgence of solitude was remarkable for the *collaboration* among individuals. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a small but growing number of pioneering Roman Catholics were instrumental in restoring the practice of solitude, and they did so not as individuals in isolation, but in contact. Individuals worked in and through established Catholic networks, even as they sought space for solitude and individual freedom. Those who felt the call to solitude reached out to one another through webs of monastic connections. Years before Merton moved into his own hermitage, he corresponded with others already living alone, including members of these two groups, some who continue to live as hermits today. This new generation of hermits revived old models of solitude and experimented with new structures within the Church to support those called to live alone. Like Merton, they sought solitude not as an escape, but a distinctive and often subversive form of engagement with the Church and the world.

The renewal of Catholic eremitic life was also marked by its openness to religious and cultural *combination*, weaving together historic traditions and creating new ones. Deeply rooted in monastic tradition, these hermits did not treat solitude as an unchanging relic of a purer past, but instead, like Merton, they learned from diverse traditions of solitude, from Eastern Christianity to East Asia, and from the desert landscapes of the

Holy Land to the deserts of the American Southwest. This combining of traditions often raised suspicions, within the Church and beyond, revealing enduring stereotypes of what counted as authentic solitude. Were these new hermits living in the woods like Thoreau and the generations of Americans who followed his example? Were they living in the desert like John the Baptist and centuries of Catholic solitaries? Could they be faithful to any one tradition while incorporating elements of others? Twentieth century Catholic hermits navigated these questions and the tensions between traditions, individually, and in conversation with one another and American culture more broadly. In doing so, they embodied a distinctively Catholic and distinctively American expression of sacred solitude, authentically rooted in the past and engaged with the present.

This Roman Catholic renewal of solitude erupted in the late 1950s and early1960s, and reveals the growing enthusiasm for monastic reform in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council and the decades that followed. The Council encouraged Catholics to engage with the cultural worlds of which they were part and specifically addressed the need for "adaptation and renewal of religious life." The 1965 document *Perfectae Caritatis* invited monastic communities to "return to the sources of Christian life" and their "founders' spirit and special aim" while also adapting to "the changed conditions of our time."[8] The hermits profiled in these two chapters did just that, working together to recover the long dormant Catholic tradition of solitude and simultaneously learning from diverse traditions in their American context. Long overlooked and undocumented, their stories add to the rich and growing body of research on twentieth

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[8] Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life: Perfectae Caritatis. Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965.

century American Catholic history, and the broader history of religion and spirituality in America.

Nineteenth Century Catholic Converts and the American Romance with Solitude

A century before Merton, two other equally influential converts and prolific writers, Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker, debated the relationship of Catholicism with the broader landscape of American religion, especially the individualist impulse embodied in Transcendentalism. In the late 1830s, Brownson was one of the most active voices in the emerging Transcendentalist religious and intellectual circles in Boston, where he was a Unitarian minister to the poor working class. He was an early mentor to Henry David Thoreau, who spent six weeks of his junior year at Harvard living with Brownson, teaching his children, studying German together, and staying up into the night discussing Brownson's philosophical writing, which focused on reconciling spiritualism and materialism. Later that year, Brownson published his *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church,* which articulated a utopian vision of this reconciliation: "Slavery will cease… Wars will fail… All will love one another… The church will be on the side of progress… The earth itself and the animals which inhabit it will be counted sacred. We shall study in them the manifestation of God's goodness, wisdom, and power, and we will be careful that we make of them none but a holy use."[9] Brownson's son Henry went so far as to claim it was his father who "roused Thoreau's enthusiasm for external nature," and though this oversimplifies Thoreau's influences, Brownson indeed planted seeds that Thoreau continued to cultivate throughout his life. This vision of

[9] Orestes Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836), 101.

spiritual-material integration provided an important counter to the mysticism Thoreau found equally compelling when he encountered Emerson's *Nature* a year later, back at Harvard.[10]

By the 1940s, Brownson had become increasingly drawn to the Catholicism, searching for an alternative to the American culture of individualism and "no-churchism." He argued the fragmented landscape of American Protestantism, ever dividing into new sects reflecting individual tastes and theologies, was ultimately a landscape that rejected the very essence of the Church as a shared source of tradition, continuity, and authority. [11] Brownson converted in 1844, during a period of nativist Anti-Catholicism, but also a moment of romantic fascination with Catholicism.

Brownson developed a deep respect for Catholic traditions of contemplation and solitude. In 1853, he reviewed the American publication of *The Lives of the Fathers of the Eastern Deserts,* lifting up the ancient hermits and anchorites as a much-needed antidote for "out material and luxurious age, which adores Mammon as God, and counts sensual pleasure as heaven." Their silence and simplicity were shockingly foreign in a world where "we make the winds our servants and the lightnings our messengers, and annihilate time and distance by our inventions."[12] Brownson revisited these themes throughout his life, advocating to his American readers the value of solitude, grounded in

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[10] Henry Francis Brownson, *Orestes A. Brownson's Early Life, from 1803 to 1844* (Detroit: H. F. Brownson, 1898), 204; David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12-15.

[11] Orestes Brownson, "Sparks on Episcopacy," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1844); "The Church against No-Church," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1845). Brownson was one of many religious leaders who weighed in on the "church question" in the 1840s, ranging from Unitarian William Henry Channing to Reformed, Mercersburg theologians John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff. In different ways, each was grasping for newfound unity within the Christian church, and even reconciliation with Catholicism. As Sydney Ahlstrom writes, "even the non-liturgical churches showed a strong, often very romantic fascination for things Catholic." Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967).

[12] Orestes Brownson, "The Fathers of the Desert," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1853): 383, 87-8.

Roman Catholic tradition, invoking historic hermits as sacred figures who were both inspiring and countercultural. Looking at the history of the church, he stressed the call to solitude erupts whenever the church stifles freedom and becomes an "accomplice to despotism." In such times, the "desire to be free, to live in free and open communion with God" drives hermits and anchorites to the desert.[13] Brownson acknowledged that this sort of countercultural contemplation was not for everyone, and he was not proposing Catholics should imitate all the practices of the "Oriental Saints, with their contemplations, their austerities, their mortifications, their fasts, and their macerations of body for the sake of the soul."[14] To many, the hermits appeared to be examples of "extravagance, exaggeration, or sublime folly," yet he warned, what is "wise in the sight of God," often appears "foolish in the sight of the world." These ancient Christian models of countercultural solitude had much to offer contemporary culture. "Perhaps," he wrote, "if our deserts were filled with holy hermits and devout anchorites, whose life is one unremitting prayer, the world would not be overrun with infidelity and irreligion."[15]

Isaac Hecker heard Brownson lecture in New York in 1841, and was inspired by his utopian vision of social reform and spiritual transformation. On Brownson's advice, Hecker moved to the Brook Farm commune in 1843, and immersed himself in the lectures and discussions, meeting the leading lights of New England Transcendentalism. After seven months, the enthusiastic young spiritual seeker concluded Brook Farm community life was not demanding enough, not self-denying or self-sacrificing enough, and "not Christlike enough." He decided to visit the more ascetic Fruitlands community,

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[13] "Lacordaire and Catholic Progress," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1862): 256.
[14] "The Fathers of the Desert," 385.
[15] "Vincenzo Gioberti," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (1850): 125.

a place he hoped he could "purify the soul and body by the discipline of restraint."[16] Hecker and Brownson maintained a lively correspondence and continued to meet as both searched for something more than the liberal religion of Transcendentalism. In the spring of 1844, Hecker left the community and went home to New York, where he was baptized Catholic on August 2, just weeks before his mentor.

Between his communal experiment and his Catholic conversion, Hecker spent several weeks boarding at Thoreau's house in Concord, where he shared walks and talks with the trusted friend he had met at Brook Farm. In their subsequent correspondence, Hecker recalls he felt drawn together, "the consequence of a higher affinity that inclined us to commune with each other." Each man was in his early twenties, deliberating his true religious calling and plotting his next adventure. Both felt mysteriously led along pioneering paths, "passive or cooperative instruments of profounder principles."[17]

Hecker also remembers this time with Thoreau in Concord as one of solitude and submission to the Spirit of God, as he pondered his decision to become Catholic. The day before his baptism, he wrote to Thoreau from New York to invite him on a pilgrimage, "to walk, work, and beg" their way across Europe, with "the heavens… our vaulted roof and the green Earth beneath our bed." Thoreau declined the offer, having just returned from his own "pedestrian excursion" in the Catskill mountains, "subsisting mainly on bread and berries and slumbering on mountaintops." He assured Hecker he was tempted by the offer, but first needed to explore his "Brahminical Artesian, Inner Temple." "I cannot so decidedly postpone exploring the *Farther Indies*, which are to be reached by

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[16] David J. O'Brien, *Isaac Hecker: An American Catholic* (1992), 52; Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 120.
[17] Hecker to Thoreau, July 31, 1844. See Walter Harding and Carl Bode, ed. *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1958), 154-6.

other routes and other methods of travel."[18] A year later, less than a month after Thoreau began his Walden experiment, Hecker did depart for Europe, entering a Redemptorist monastery in Belgium. He continued to reach out to Thoreau, in 1849 writing, "I would like marvelously to free your soul by placing it in the light of catholicity… Ah my dear brother, could I induce you to bend your knees once in solitude & silence before God."[19] Hecker felt increasingly clear that his life's calling was to return to America, "to convert a certain class of persons among whom I found myself before my own conversion," and for years he maintained the urge to convert Thoreau.[20]

Hecker returned to the United States in 1851 and in 1858, founded the Paulist Fathers, the first community of Roman Catholic priests formed in North America. He enthusiastically built up the order and maintained an active life of publishing, preaching, and mission to non-Catholics, but he also maintained a yearning for silence and solitude.[21] In 1873, struggling with illness, he left the United States to recuperate and travel through Europe, Egypt, and the Holy Land. Hecker's disciple and biographer Walter Elliott describes this trip as a pivotal spiritual pilgrimage. He read from Spanish and Italian mystics and visited their homes in Avila, Assisi, and Genoa. He traveled the Nile Valley, contemplating the "monks of the desert" and enjoying "silence, repose, and almost total solitude." Hecker described himself as "shut off from the world, and cut off from human activity… the best conditions to love God alone." Elliot concludes this two-

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[18] Hecker to Thoreau, July 31, 1844. See ibid.

[19] See Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*, Writers in Their Own Time (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), xxii.

[20] Quoted in Martin J. Kirk, *The Spirituality of Isaac Thomas Hecker: Reconciling the American Character and the Catholic Faith*, The Heritage of American Catholicism (1988), 91.

[21] Jenny Franchot examines this tension between "solitude and radical community" in Hecker's diary and published writing. See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 322.

year "absence" proved Hecker's fundamentally "contemplative nature." "He was born to be a hermit."[22]

Though Isaac Hecker was personally drawn to solitude, at least for periods of his life, he did not preach such withdrawal for the masses, instead preaching "perfection in the world" and celebrating the sanctity of one's everyday life and natural environment. Born to a family of German bakers, he believed in the spiritual value of hard work, and at Brook Farm, where he woke early to prepare bread for the whole community, he wrote, "My labor must be a sermon… My work must be devotional." Hecker proclaimed communion with God was not confined to particular spiritual exercises and Sacraments. Even the most mundane tasks were opportunities to realize "the habitual presence of God in the soul."[23] In his 1863 sermon, "The Saint for Our Day," he praised St. Joseph, the carpenter and family man, a saint for whom "solitary life in the desert was not necessary." "Our age," he insisted, was not an "age of hermits." Christian perfection must instead be cultivated and sanctity introduced, "in busy marts, in counting rooms, in workshops, in homes, and in the varied relations that form human society."[24] Hecker also commended those saints who sought communion with God in their everyday natural surroundings, including St. Francis, John Chrysostom, and John of the Cross. "The flowers, trees, stars, and sunsets," he wrote, "These are the work of God's own hands." Even as believers engaged in devotional work to redeem the world, they should embrace the beauty and goodness of creation, which already reflected God's redeeming grace.[25]

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[22] Walter Elliott, *The Life of Father Hecker* (New York: The Columbus Press, 1891), 377-82.
[23] Quoted in Kirk, *The Spirituality of Isaac Thomas Hecker: Reconciling the American Character and the Catholic Faith*, 138-41.
[24] David J. O'Brien, "An Evangelical Imperative: Isaac Hecker, Catholicism, and Modern Society," in *Hecker Studies: Essays on the Thought of Isaac Hecker*, ed. John Farina (1983), 113-14.
[25] Kirk, *The Spirituality of Isaac Thomas Hecker: Reconciling the American Character and the Catholic Faith*, 149-50.

Like Brownson, Hecker saw the value of solitary spirituality as one path to God's presence, but he argued this mystical communion was also possible in the practices of everyday life and the natural places in our midst. This conviction reflected his broader call for Catholics to engage with the modern world and in particular with American culture. Hecker did not treat the Roman Catholic Church as an unchanging and foreign relic of the Old World, but rather the most promising, most dynamic force shaping the future of America, and America, he argued, was the future of the Catholic Church. This radical assertion provoked indignation from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, in Europe and the United States. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII's *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* condemned aspects of "Americanism" as heresy, and detractors labeled Hecker "a dangerous innovator."[26] Today, Hecker's innovation is seen not as heresy but simply ahead of its time. His insistence on Catholicism as dynamic and engaged with its particular context anticipated the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. North American Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan argued in the 1970s that the Church had transitioned from a "classicist world-view to historical-mindedness." Human life and the search for meaning could no longer be understood as "fixed, static, immutable," but rather "shifting, developing, going astray, capable of redemption."[27] Hecker preached this same spirit of dynamism, calling the Church to creatively engage the modern age, and he creatively adapted the spirit of contemplative solitude to everyday American life.

Orestes Brownson and Thomas Hecker are key figures in the long story of American fascination with Catholicism, and its tradition of solitude. During the most

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[26] see William L. Portier, "Isaac Hecker and *Testem Benevolentiae:* A Study in Theological Pluralism," in *Hecker Studies: Essays on the Thought of Isaac Hecker*, ed. John Farina (1983), 11.
[27] Bernard Lonergan S.J., "A Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Mindedness," in *Law for Liberty: The Role of Law in the Church Today*, ed. James E. Beicher (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), 130.

anti-Catholic period in American history, they were public voices for Roman Catholicism, making its case in liberal intellectual and religious circles. They were among those who nurtured a fascination with Catholic hermits in North America, advocating simplicity and solitude as an ancient, countercultural tradition that posed a challenge to contemporary culture, but was also adaptable to the New World and a new age. With their distinctive commitment to social reform and contemplative spirituality, these zealous converts left their stamp on American religious culture and set the stage for Thomas Merton and his contemporaries who continued to hunger for solitary spirituality rooted in Catholic tradition and creatively engaged with their American context. Brownson and Hecker helped bridge the gap between Walden and the Catholic wilderness tradition, laying a foundation for the distinctively American revival of solitude that spread among Catholics beginning in the 1950s and 60s.[28]

"Looking for the real thing": solitude and collaboration, from the monastic grapevine to the Vatican council

For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church had frowned on eremitic life, but in the early 1960s, news travelled of a small group of Benedictine brothers living as hermits, first on the Caribbean island of Martinique, then in the Canadian forest on Vancouver Island. Father Charles Brandt remembers well the intrigue as word spread through monastic networks. "Everybody knew about the hermits. It was in the grapevine."[29] One by one, monks from abbeys across North America and Europe came together, to live

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[28] Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion : The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (2001), 58-87. Porterfield situates Brownson and Hecker, and later Merton, as key figures in explaining the "Catholicity" of the broad spiritual awakening that developed in late twentieth century America.
[29] Charles A.E. Brandt, interview with the author, October 7, 2009, Black Creek, BC.

alone. “The hermits,” officially the Hermits of St. John the Baptist, lived together on the island for less than a decade, but made an enduring impact on the status of solitude in the Catholic Church, helping ignite a wider revival of solitude and helping establish new structures of support for Catholic hermits.

At the time, Brandt was a Trappist monk at New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa. For years, he had longed for greater solitude and a more contemplative life, one that more authentically resembled the earliest models of monasticism.

> It was the time of Vatican II, and we were all looking for our roots… We were looking for the real thing… where did monks come from? And so we went back and we saw that the first monks were really hermits, in the fourth, fifth century. In Syria, all through the desert there, in Skete, Alexandria, and by 350, there was something like 5000 people living the hermit life.

In 1964, he left the monastery and eventually joined the others on Vancouver Island, where he continues to live, the last of the hermits still there. Brandt, now in his nineties, is a living link to this pivotal moment in the reawakening of solitude in the Catholic Church.

I visited Brandt in the fall of 2009, to hear his story firsthand and to see the place where this renewal took root. We talked in his hermitage, the same structure he built by hand in 1965, and walked through the forest where the original group lived. Brandt remembered the Spartan simplicity of the early years. “There was nothing out here really. We had to build it from nothing, from scratch.” The monks bought 100 acres of rugged land along the Tsolum River, thanks to a $10,000 gift from Miller Brewing heir Harry John.[30] They built simple structures scattered around the property, an abandoned logging

[30] From a young age, Harry John was fascinated with contemplative life, and particularly the austerity of the Trappists. In the early 1950s, he used $14 million in Miller Brewing stock to establish the De Rance Foundation, named for a seventeenth century French noble who gave his fortune to the La Trappe Abbey,

camp. They gardened to provide what food they could, fending off the deer. Brandt fished for much of his diet, catching steelhead, cutthroat trout, coho, and pink salmon that thrived in the area's creeks. When needed, the hermits walked or biked three miles to Merville general store. They shared a car for stocking up on supplies in Courtenay, fourteen miles away. Each brother had to find a way to make a living. Brandt recalled, "there wasn't a lot of cash around… but you didn't need a lot." The hermits were mostly on their own, with no real community life, just a small bunkhouse where they left messages and picked up mail. At its height, the group included a dozen hermits, men who had been formed in monastic communities and now relished the opportunity to spread out and live alone. Showing me around the land once home to the pioneering brothers, Brandt reflected, "The silence was the most important thing–the silence and solitude–and as you can see, the silence is almost perfect here."

Years before the group moved to Vancouver Island, they began assembling on the tiny French-speaking Caribbean island of Martinique, under the leadership of Dom Jacque Winandy. Winandy had been Abbot at New Clervaux Abbey in Luxembourg, and was known as one of the few monastic superiors who endorsed the renewal of hermit life.[31] Winandy came to Martinique in the fall of 1958 to help establish a new monastery.

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joined the monastery, and eventually became abbot. The foundation gave over $10 million a year in grants to a range of Catholic causes, especially those that aligned with his conservative theology and politics. John's vast resources were crucial for the Vancouver hermits, and he also bought land to establish the Camaldolese monastery for contemplative hermits at Big Sur, California. Charles Brandt stopped in Milwaukee to visit "Mr. John" in 1964, on his way to the Pacific Northwest, to request money for the Primitive Benedictines, another growing contemplative monastic movement. (Brandt interview) For more on Harry John, see Paul Wilkes, "Harry John Was Not Your Average American Catholic," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 17 1993.

[31] Dom Jean LeClercq, one of the monks at Clervaux, was a well-known scholar of the solitary tradition, and together with Winandy and Merton published several notable books and articles aimed at recovering the eremitic roots of monasticism. See, for example Jean Leclercq and Paolo Giustiniani, *Alone with God* (New York,: Farrar, 1961). Le Clercq corresponded regularly with Thomas Merton and visited him at Gethsemane, serving as an important link communicating news of emerging eremitic experiments worldwide.

The following day, a young Lionel Paré arrived as a novitiate, beginning a lifelong friendship based on a shared call to solitude. Born in Boston to a French-Canadian family, Paré felt a strong call to eremitic life, and in 1960, with Winandy's guidance and the blessing of the Bishop of Martinique, Paré was granted permission to leave the monastery and build a hermitage. A year and a half later, he built a second hermitage, this one for Winandy. Word of the island hermits spread, and soon other monks got permission to join them. Two young Trappists came from Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, where Merton was just building his hermitage. Others came from monasteries in North Carolina, New York, and California. By 1963, they needed more space and a clearer plan. Winandy received authorization from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, the Vatican body governing monastic life, to establish a "colony of hermits" in North America, so they began to look for land and a sympathetic Bishop.

After a short stay in San Angelo, Texas, they made their way to British Columbia, welcomed by Bishop Remi De Roo, who proved another key figure in building support for solitary vocations. Brandt remembers meeting the bishop, shortly after he arrived. "He was sort of avante garde," a young bishop, just back from Vatican II. He encouraged the hermits to come. "That was kind of a daring thing to do. Most bishops wouldn't do that. You know… what are hermits? Franciscans work in parishes. Dominicans are good preachers. What can hermits do? A lot of the bishops looked at it rather humorously, to have hermits in the dioceses, living out there." De Roo did more than just host the hermits. In 1966, he ordained Charles Brandt a priest, not assigned to work in a parish, but with the mandate to live as a hermit, "the first time in several centuries someone was ordained as a hermit priest."

Bishop Remi De Roo and Hermits of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1965[32]

In 1967, Bishop De Roo made an official *in scriptus* request to the Vatican to revise canon law and restore the hermit as a recognized vocation. He cited an "ever-growing renewal of the life of hermits" in the Latin Church as a sign of the "special influence of the Holy Spirit." He stressed the "sanctifying value of the hermit's life," proven throughout history, and he noted the ecumenical value of restoring a tradition still vital in the Eastern Orthodox Church. De Roo also articulated the prophetic role of the hermit for the Church and the world, particularly in the modern era. The hermit strives for "direct contemplation of God" and an "atmosphere of calm," countering the

[32] Photograph courtesy of The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Dom Jean LeClerq gave the photograph to Merton, who immediately noticed the beards, traditional for hermits but forbidden for brothers in monastic community.

increasingly fast-paced culture and the "noisy whirlwind of worldly activities."[33] De Roo was well aware that this countercultural role meant solitude was often met with suspicion rather than support. Modern day hermits faced "many prejudices and misunderstandings," especially from fellow Catholics. He called on the Council to recognize eremitic life as the real thing, both historic and new, "both legitimate and sanctifying." De Roo recommended a policy that was "simple and flexible" to allow individual freedom and accountability, but also to "protect the vocation of Hermits from arbitrary interference by religious superiors."[34]

The story of the Hermits of St. John the Baptist demonstrates the contributions of pioneering individuals like Remi De Roo and Jaques Winandy, but also the importance of existing and emerging Catholic networks supporting solitude. Monastic communities have long been inherently conservative, designed to maintain established traditions through their internal hierarchies, but monastic networks have also served to encourage change. As brothers corresponded with one another and visited communities across the world, they spread enthusiasm for eremitic life and shared strategies for achieving greater solitude. In July of 1965, after a visiting Abbot from New Zealand reported a growing "hermit problem" back home, Merton predicted that in the Roman Catholic monastic world, "everyone will have a 'hermit problem' soon."[35] Merton was an important hub for this communication, spreading the latest news on the growing group of hermits through

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[33] *Animadvertenda In Scriptus* facta a Remi J. De Roo, Episcopo Victoriensis, circa Schema Emendatum Propositionum, De Accommodata Renovatione Vitae Religiosae, 1967.
[34] *Animadvertenda In Scriptus* facta a Remi J. De Roo, Episcopo Victoriensis, circa Schema Emendatum Propositionum, De Accommodata Renovatione Vitae Religiosae, 1967.
[35] Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 5: 1963-1965*, 265.

his voluminous correspondence. He sent letters of support to Winandy and De Roo, and encouraged several young monks to consider joining them in solitude.

Charles Brandt's circuitous journey to Vancouver Island shows the role of multiple monastic networks. Even before he converted to Catholicism, Brandt had already explored opportunities for solitude. An ordained Episcopal priest, he visited Anglican contemplative communities in England and lived among a small group of Anglican hermits in Gaylordsville, Connecticut, while he served as assistant chaplain at a neighboring prep school. In his search for a place that would nurture contemplative spirituality, Brandt then spent time at Benedictine and Trappist communities in New Mexico, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, and he visited Gethsemani, in Kentucky before finally entering Iowa's New Melleray Abbey. Over time, he felt increasingly called to life as a hermit, and considered joining the Carthusians or Camoldolese, orders that allowed for greater solitude, but were both relatively new in the United States. After eight years in his Trappist monastery, Brandt, encouraged by correspondence with Merton, took leave to visit Peter Minard's community of Primitive Benedictines in North Carolina, another experiment in returning to the eremitic roots of monastic life. For nine months, Brandt lived alone in a trailer on an old tobacco plantation, but with the demands of running a farm, it was not a long-term fit, and he ultimately caught a bus to British Columbia.

Collaboration and networking enabled the Hermits of St. John the Baptist to acquire funding, land, and permission to live in solitude together, but the brothers were ultimately seeking solitude, and collaboration had its limits. "It was never envisioned as a community," Brandt stresses, but instead a place for those moving away from monastic community. "It was just a group of pretty well-formed monks from all over the world that

came to live here on Headquarters Creek under the leadership of a senior, Dom Winandy." Brandt describes the rigid order of community life. "When I entered New Melleray Abbey, another monk had entered–Michael–ten minutes before me. So I walked behind Michael for eight years. We did everything by the books. His desk was just on my left and in the refectory he sat on my left. There's just not a lot of solitude."

After a few years together on Vancouver Island, many of the brothers were hungry for even greater independence. Collectively managing property taxes, car repairs and other practicalities became too much of a distraction. Brandt still remembers Jacque Winandy complaining about the flow of foot traffic outside his hermitage, "In a week's time, ten hermits coming by," back and forth over a nearby bridge to pick up mail at the bunkhouse. In 1968, Winandy and De Roo agreed to give the colony "a more democratic character," supporting the hermits as they found their own places to live, spread throughout the diocese. By 1970, almost all had left the original site, many in search of even greater solitude. Individual hermits moved to other parts of Vancouver Island and to smaller islands nearby. Eventually, most moved farther away, building hermitages in the Canada, United States, and the Caribbean.

Even as the group dispersed, its impact continued. The hermit colony born through informal connections and correspondence eventually helped establish more institutionalized forms of support and accountability. Over time, the hermits' impact spread not only through the monastic grapevine, but throughout the Church. In the decades after the original hermits gathered in British Columbia, Remi De Roo's *in scriptus* worked its way through Vatican legal channels. In 1983, Canon 603 of the revised *Code of Canon Law* formally recognized the hermit as a form of consecrated life,

affirming those called to "a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude, and assiduous prayer and penance." In two concise sentences, the canon established broadly flexible parameters to govern this process and insure those practicing solitude were sufficiently connected to the Church. Hermits would make public vows, observe their own plan of life, and be under the direction of a bishop.[36] The vocation of solitude was, after years in the wilderness, again recognized as "the real thing," as a distinctive tradition within the Catholic Church.

Charles Brandt: Catholic solitude and the spirit of combination

Before he was formed by Christian monastic tradition, Charles Brandt was formed by the American tradition of solitude in nature. When I asked him to recall his first experience being alone, he shared a much earlier memory, from a Boy Scout Camp in the Missouri Ozarks. As an adolescent, he spent a "formative" 24 hours in the woods, in complete silence and solitude, before gathering as a group to take vows, "to God, mother, and country." He remembered reading Thoreau a year earlier, as a twelve-year-old. "I really was interested in going to the woods and seeing what life was all about." In high school, he was assigned to make a booklet of his vocational dreams. "My idea was to be a fire warden, you know to live in a little tower." He went on to study ornithology at Cornell University and worked in wildlife conservation in college, even as he began to explore religious life. By the time Brandt joined the Hermits of St. John the Baptist, he

[36] This lengthy process is not uncommon for Vatican legal revisions. Helen L. MacDonald offers an interpretation of the concise Canon 603, and gives some insight into the discussions and documents that shaped the final form of the law. De Roo's request was one of several calling for recognition of eremitic life. Helen L. MacDonald, "Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603," *Studia Canonica* 26 (1992). See also De Vita Eremitica, "Propositum Monasticum De Codice Iuris Canonici Recognoscendo," *The Jurist* 26(1966): 350-3.

was embedded in Christian monastic traditions and networks, but the American tradition of solitude in nature remained formative. As Brandt continued to weave these Catholic and American strands of solitude in his life as a hermit, his ongoing practices reflected the norms of sacred solitude established in the nineteenth century and embodied by Thoreau, including simple living, contemplation, moral integrity, and writing.

In the spring of 1965, Brandt built a rustic wooden hermitage beside Headwaters Creek, and his home has continued to anchor a life grounded in simplicity. The hermitage had just enough space for eating and sleeping, and for a small room that served as a chapel, where he daily mass and prayed the office throughout each day. Brandt was one of the only hermits to have electricity, which he needed for the bookbinding equipment he used to make a living. He also worked for the local Department of Fisheries and Oceans, helping build and staff an experimental pink salmon hatchery on Headquarters Creek. Brandt lived simply and by the time the group disperse, he had saved enough money to buy 30 acres of his own, just eight miles north, along the Oyster River. In 1969, he had his hermitage trucked to where it sits today. Over time, he added space for larger binding equipment, in a cedar addition with large windows looking out onto the moist forested landscape.

Contemplation is the heart of Brandt's life as a hermit. "That's really my life, meditation. Meditation is tough. There's a period where it's almost impossible to get through, but once you get through that initial really tough period, you come to realize that's your center." He also teaches meditation to a small group, welcoming them into his hermitage once a month. This practice of meditation is intimately linked to his contemplative connection with the natural world. Brandt says meditation "frees us" from

our ego and our "rational discursive mind," and it allows us to "enter into silence and stillness and solitude... so we can hear." It "opens us up to what is around us and helps us to enter into I would say communion with the natural world… and the whole universe."[37] In his book, *Meditations from the Wilderness,* Brandt celebrates those who embody this contemplative communion: the early *rishis* and Christian hermits, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Merton, Aldo Leopold, and Thomas Berry. He commends the practice of walking meditation taught by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh as a simple yet profound way to commune with wilderness. Brandt advocates these meditative practices as essential antidotes to the media driven consumer culture of North America that has drowned out our sense of the mystery and wonder that is nature.[38]

He has also cultivates this contemplative communion with the natural world through his practice of photography. As he drove me to see the original site of his hermitage, Brandt parked his Volkswagen van beside the Tsolum River bridge and paused to photograph the last of the season's pink salmon spawning. "I always keep a camera in the van," he explains. Over the years, he has become accomplished at capturing images of birds, fish, and other wildlife of Vancouver Island, including a fifteen-foot cougar that followed him through the woods, then napped just outside his sliding glass door.[39] Brandt says, "My life as a contemplative is about looking at things as they are." Photography is a way to hone this skill of seeing clearly, cultivating his attention to detail and the beauty of the surrounding world.

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[37] Charles Brandt, interview by Peter Downie, *Man Alive: Dream of the Earth,* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 12, 1993, transcript, http://www.allinonefilms.com/html_pages/brant1.htm
[38] Charles A. E. Brandt, *Meditations from the Wilderness* (HarperCollins Canada, 1997), xi-xvi.
[39] Scott Stanfield, "Father Charles Brandt Gets the Picture," *North Island Midweek*, March 22, 2011.

Brandt is also expert in the art of fly-fishing, what he describes using Izaak Walton's words as the "contemplative man's recreation."[40] He has an intimate knowledge of the Oyster River, the Tsolum and their tributaries, having fished there for nearly fifty years. Over time, he has seen the decline of annual fish populations, and observed the impacts of pollution, logging, and development, which have disrupted the pools and gravel bars essential for spawning salmon and steelhead. In response, Brandt has become not just a skillful fisherman, but also a skillful advocate for protecting and restoring these cherished ecosystems. In 1985, he volunteered to chair a committee of the local Steelhead Society calling for a major cleanup of the Tsolum River and environmental reclamation of the abandoned open pit copper mine on Mount Washington, at the stream's headwaters, which had for years been leaching copper, lethal to fish. What began with a letter writing campaign evolved into a decades long environmental struggle known across Canada. It was not until 2009 that a $4.5 million seal was finally installed over the mine to halt any future contamination.

Just before the final decision to cap the mine, Brandt wrote a letter to the local newspaper and its website reflecting on the 45 year "Saga of the Tsolum River," and celebrating the community's "sense of hope and genuine anticipation." The letter mourned, "We may never again see runs of 200,000 Pink Salmon in the Tsolum, just as we will never again see 300 square miles of old growth Douglas Fir that once existed between Courtney and Campbell River." But he also framed this moment as part of a broader transformation of a local community committed to changing its relationship to the natural world. Brandt concluded the letter by weaving together the words of two

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[40] Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler, or, the Contemplative Man's Recreation : Being a Discourse of Fish and Fishing, Not Unworthy the Perusal of Most Anglers* (London: Printed by T. Maxey for Rich. Marriot, in S. Dunstans Church-yard Fleetstreet, 1653).

writers who represent the Roman Catholic and naturalist traditions that have been formative for him. Invoking Thomas Berry, the former Passionist priest and self-described “Geologian,” Brandt called readers to “experience creation with a sense of wonder and delight, rather than a commodity for our own personal benefit.” This transformation is the heart of what Berry calls the “Great Work” of our time. Brandt then quoted the environmental ethic first articulated by conservationist Aldo Leopold. Transformed through communion with nature, the letter envisions a future when readers will “come to understand that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the beauty, integrity and stability of the whole biotic community.”[41]

Brandt remarked to me, “I seldom write a letter like that,” insisting that he typically downplays his hermit identity in public contexts, though he knows many in the area do think of him as a priest and hermit. His letter situated the long, slow work of environmental restoration in a broad perspective, grounded in silence and solitude, and that struck a nerve with readers. The editor told Brandt his letter had more online hits than any the paper had posted. “I think people were really moved. There was something there, and people were awakened by it.” Profiling his decades of advocacy, one journalist reported, “Using gentle persuasion, and a calm, peaceful approach, he has won the support of everyone from politicians to logging company executives.”[42] Another praised him for advocating “a ‘sacramental commons’ in which all living things, including humans, have their dignity and place.”[43] In his river restoration work, Brandt has earned

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[41] Charles Brandt, "The Saga of the Tsolem River," *Tide Change*, June 20, 2009.
[42] Mark Hume, "Father Charles Brandt's Universe," *A River Never Sleeps*, December 1, 2011. http://ariverneversleeps.com/father-charles-brandts/
[43] Stephen Hume, "A Tranquil Man Is Honoured for His Commitment and Contribution," *Vancouver Sun*, February 7, 2007.

widespread respect that reflects reverence for his solitary, contemplative lifestyle, and an ongoing fascination with the hermit as a moral authority and environmental advocate.

Brandt's blending of Catholic contemplative tradition and American nature tradition extends through his whole life, infusing not only his public environmental work but also his quiet, solitary work as a master book and paper conservator. He first took interest in bookbinding working on a Boy Scout merit badge, taking apart his scout manual and sewing it back together. He received more formal training during his years as a monk, inheriting a centuries old tradition of preserving hymnals, books, and manuscripts. The skill proved valuable when he joined the hermits, and it has continued to be his primary source of income. For Brandt, preserving and restoring an old book or work of art is also an expression of his contemplative, conservationist ethic. In a local newspaper interview, he describes these objects as "treasures" and "records of our civilization" that deserve our "greatest effort to preserve and restore them," and explains how fitting this work is for a hermit. "My life as a contemplative is about looking at things as they are; respecting them as they are." Brandt also takes the opportunity to invite others to practice this same ethic of contemplation and conservation, to extending it to the natural world. "We need a transformation in society. If we can learn to experience earth with a sense of wonder, look closely at things as they are and see the beauty, we will become less likely to be careless and more likely to become caretakers."[44]

[44] Annette Yourk, "Father Brandt Adds Expertise to Historic Piece of Artwork," *Courier Islander*, October 26, 2012.

Combination, Collaboration and the Historiography of Sacred Solitude

Brandt's practice of solitude clearly demonstrates the combined influence of Roman Catholicism along with American traditions of environmental contemplation and conservation. Rather than treating these as separate strands, he articulates a holistic combination of the two, a thoroughly integrated life at once set apart and thoroughly interconnected. In a 2009 essay published for fellow hermits and solitude-seekers, Brandt concluded by addressing the aim of his practices: "Where does contemplation lead one? Since it finds the Ground of Love in all reality, it leads to one's sisters and brothers; it creates a social consciousness; it leads to a deeper unity and love with and for the earth." Solitude does not culminate in isolated navel gazing, or the imagined purity of a singular spiritual tradition, its sacredness secured by remaining set apart. For Brandt, the life of the hermit and the practice of contemplation ultimately lead to collaboration and combination, to "communion with all beings on earth, living and nonliving," and the realization that "we are part of the earth and the earth is part of us." We are part of "a single sacred community."[45]

Moving from monastic community to the solitude and simplicity of Vancouver Island, Brandt has been able to cultivate a life more deeply contemplative and more deeply connected. Together with a pioneering cohort of monks, he helped revive Catholic eremitic tradition and lived to see it validated as "the real thing," at the heart of Christian monasticism. Through his own practices including meditation, writing, fishing, and photography, Brandt has developed his capacity to see "the real thing" all around, "looking at things as they are" and caring for the earth. In solitude, he has sought to

[45] Charles A. E. Brandt, "Thoughts in Solitude," *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 12, no. 2 (2009): 1,5.

discover "a deeper unity and love" and a sense of "communion with all beings." He has also demonstrated the deep unity between Catholic and American traditions of solitude, which have combined to shape his self-identity as a hermit, as well as the public's perceptions of him.

As historian Catherine Albanese has argued, this spirit of combination has been characteristic of American religion since the first colonial encounters between European settlers and Native Americans. Borrowing her terms, the twentieth century revival of solitude among Roman Catholics in America was, "additive" rather than "syncretistic."[46] Brandt, Merton, and other hermits experimented with new combinations of Catholic and American practices of solitude, adding to already rich traditions. They did not treat this as a corruption or contamination of "original and pure" religion, but as a faithful renewal and revival of a dynamic Christian practice. Their story demonstrates the possibility of deep engagement with both Roman Catholic and American traditions of solitude.

Albanese's work has traced this combinative trend within particular American traditions including "nature religion" and "metaphysical religion," but she has asserted, "religious combination is, in fact, pervasive," even among "the 'purest' stalwarts of American faith–Anglo-Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism." Increasingly, she argues, Americans have embraced spirituality that "connects received faiths and traditions from the inside out," with combination as "the natural result of its vision and commitments."[47] This chapter demonstrates the spirit of combination among a small

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[46] Catherine L. Albanese, "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 225.
[47] "The Culture of Religious Combining: Reflections for the New American Millennium," *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1-2 (2000): 16-22. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*; *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*.

group of Roman Catholic monks, surely one of the most stereotypically pure and stalwart groups in the American religious landscape. The stories of Orestes Brownson, Isaac Hecker, Thomas Merton, Charles Brandt, and the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist reveal a willingness to integrate diverse models of solitude, reviving the historic Catholic wilderness tradition and incorporating practices native to the American wilderness, with roots in the nineteenth century world of Transcendentalism. For them, solitude was sacred not because of its isolation from the world, and not because it authentically reproduced the purity of the ancient Christian past. These American Catholic hermits sought solitude as a path to deeper connection with the thoroughly interconnected world, and a means to more fully combine traditions of contemplation into an integrated whole.

Albanese argues this longstanding and growing pattern of combination necessitates a new way of narrating American religious history, an alternative to 1) the "historiography of consensus," focused on a dominant Anglo-Protestant ethos; 2) the "historiography of pluralism," with diverse traditions either tolerant and coexisting or in conflict, and 3) the "historiography of competition," interpreting America as a marketplace of religious options. Instead, Albanese proposes a "historiography of connection" that "privileges contacts and combinations," and the "overlapping between and among cultural worlds."[48] This mode of historical scholarship must be attentive to religion beyond the typical institutional settings, to "religion as it is lived." This means telling the stories of individuals, observing how they piece together religious lives through a "complex choreography of largely intuitive moves," and to "new and

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[48] *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, 17, 515. For a detailed analysis of the consensus historiography, see Catherine Albanese, *American Religious History: A Bibliographical Essay*, Currents in American Scholarship.For a critique of consensus, pluralism, and competition, see also Michael P. Carroll, *American Catholics in the Protestant Imagination : Rethinking the Academic Study of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), chapter 6.

distinctive forms of community," particularly "networks that appear especially temporary, self-erasing, self-transforming."[49]

This historiography of connection offers a much-needed complement to the dominant way historians have approached the history of religion in North America and the history of Roman Catholicism in particular. In the late nineteenth century, waves of European immigrants increased the ethnic diversity of American Catholicism, which intensified longstanding debates over assimilation and the Americanization of the church. This has become the lens through which subsequent history is told, with historians of Catholicism in America consistently focused on the "fit" between Catholicism–often characterized as an unchanging, foreign, ethnic, communal, and hierarchical Other–and American culture–seen as democratic, modern, dynamic, and individualist.[50] Notre Dame historian Scott Appleby, for example, sums up this historiographical focus in the introduction to the recent collection, *Catholics in the American Century.* "The central drama of twentieth-century U.S. Catholic history," he claims, was the way "Catholic ideas and institutions at once inhibited and facilitated assimilation into U.S. society."[51]

As Charles Brandt's story shows, Catholic and American threads are not so easy to tease apart, in one individual life or in the life of an emerging network, and the drama of contact and combination involved far more than the question of assimilation. The Hermits of St. John the Baptist included a mix of "cradle" Catholics and converts who

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[49] Albanese, "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History," 225; *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, 8.
[50] Michael Carroll critiques the "continuing presence of the consensus model," among Catholic historians like Jay Dolan as well as those focused on "multiple narratives" and localized, Catholic "lived religions." Carroll, *American Catholics in the Protestant Imagination : Rethinking the Academic Study of Religion*, 155-6.
[51] R. Scott Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History*, Cushwa Center Studies of Catholicism in Twentieth-Century America (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), 4.

folded multiple traditions together, not by simply importing old, foreign Catholicism into an American context, but by creatively incorporating elements of both into dynamic, new forms of solitary spirituality. In the process, they blurred borders between nations and cultures, pursuing solitude in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, all the while in dialogue with the Vatican and with Catholic contemplatives in Europe.[52] Building on centuries-old Catholic monastic networks, they experimented with new forms of community and established new structures of institutional support that allowed more individual freedom while also establishing clear lines of authority and accountability. The following chapter picks up these themes, examining another set of stories that provide a window into the 1960s renewal of solitude among Roman Catholics. These personal stories once again demonstrate the importance of collaboration and combination, and the importance of historical methods that accent the creativity with which individual hermits navigated the tricky terrain at the intersection of Catholic tradition and American culture.

[52] In the same collection quoted above, historian Lizabeth Cohen calls historians of American Catholicism to practice "broadband" transnational history on "multiple frequencies," moving "back and forth across registers of local, national, and international history." Lizabeth Cohen, "Re-Viewing the Twentieth Century through an American Catholic Lens," in *Catholics in the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History*, ed. R. Scott Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *Cushwa Center Studies of Catholicism in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), 53.

Chapter 5. Carmelite Hermits in the American Wilderness

In 1960, the same year Thomas Merton began building his Kentucky hermitage and Lionel Paré constructed his in Martinique, another young American monk embarked on his own journey to restore the Catholic tradition of solitude. Father William McNamara, a thirty-four-year-old Discalced Carmelite Priest, hitched a ride on a transatlantic ship, borrowed a German friend's beat up Volkswagen bug, and survived on one meal every three days, assembling his own makeshift pilgrimage to Rome. With the help of Boston Cardinal Richard James Cushing, he had arranged to meet with Pope John XXIII, eager to share his plans for a new contemplative community in America grounded in the solitary tradition of the early Carmelites, who lived as hermits in the Holy Land and later throughout Europe. They spoke in Latin and English, which the Pope was just learning. McNamara remembers it as a brief and "spotty" meeting because of "the language problem" and the pressure of others waiting for their turn with the Pontiff, but the Pope clearly understood the young pilgrim's vision for a modern, American community of Carmelites, distinctive for its "open ecumenical spirit" of engagement with contemporary culture and diverse religious traditions. "The Pope was euphoric and embraced me," he recalls. Pope John counseled him to expect obstacles and opposition from within the Church and beyond, but he encouraged him to persevere in his calling.[1]

Energized by this endorsement, McNamara returned home and established the Spiritual Life Institute of America, a small community of hermits that has persevered ever since, living out this founding vision combining ecumenical engagement and

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[1] See William McNamara, O.C.D., "Never Lose Heart: Pope John Paul XXIII Advises Fr. William," in "Passionate Pilgrims: The Story of William Mcnamara, O.C.D. And the Spiritual Life Institute," ed. The Spiritual Life Institute (2001), 26.

Carmelite desert solitude. Like the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist, this new eremitic experiment aimed to revive a historic Catholic wilderness tradition and plant it in the cultural and natural landscape of North America. Over time, McNamara's vision took root in the desert Southwest and wilderness became more than a symbolic source of inspiration or a historical relic of Christian eremiticism. In the half century since its founding, the community has come to embrace the desert as a defining feature of its identity and practice, the starkly real setting of their contemporary Carmelite solitude. In the categories of geographer Yi Fu Tuan, the wilderness ceased to be an abstract, undifferentiated "space" and became a distinctive, familiar "place," full of meaning, and one they would fight to protect.[2]

For the hermits of the Spiritual Life Institute, the wilderness landscape is a sacred space, fraught with powerful and often contradictory forces. The desert Southwest is spacious and open, uncluttered and undeveloped, a place well-suited for silence and solitude. These same features make the environment a challenging place to live, not only for its intense heat and light, but the sense of being exposed, being alone with nowhere to hide. Like the earliest Carmelites, these modern hermits embrace their desert home as a place to seek God, free from the distractions of mainstream society, but like the first Carmelites, they know from experience this wilderness home is not as permanent as it first appears, and not as separate from the pressures of the world beyond. The Spiritual Life Institute has relocated multiple times after fighting to preserve the solitude and silence of their place, and to protect their wilderness environment from development. Through this experience, in each new place the land came to be even more precious and preservation even more urgent.

[2] Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*.

These wilderness struggles also revealed another layer of tension in the hermits' sense of place. Wilderness, for the Spiritual Life Institute, was at once a place "set apart" from mainstream society and also a place of contact with the wider world. Their activism connected them with the long conjoined American traditions of wilderness solitude and environmental activism. The hermits had to deal with reporters and real estate developers, loggers and lawyers. In their current home in Crestone, Colorado, the wilderness continues to be a sacred space and a contested landscape, valuable to some for its energy and water resources and to others as a spiritual resource and a sanctuary for nature preservation. In Crestone, home to dozens of diverse contemplative communities, the desert is also a rich place for inter-religious contact, collaboration, and combination.

This chapter traces the history of the Spiritual Life Institute, focused on this unfolding story of wilderness as a sacred place of both solitude and encounter. Like the previous chapter on the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist, this one charts the reawakening of solitary spirituality among Roman Catholics in North America, beginning in the 1960s, and this one shows yet more evidence of the connections between newly revived Catholic traditions of solitude and American traditions of solitude in nature. These twentieth century Catholic hermits sought solitude in the wilderness, and precisely because of this, they entered into environmental debates and engaged with traditions of wilderness preservation. For the Spiritual Life Institute, the wilderness was also a space of ecumenical encounter, where they explored interreligious collaboration and combination.

Even as it was set apart in critical ways from mainstream society, their place in the wilderness was and is kind of "contact zone," to borrow a term from American

religious historian Thomas Tweed. In his book *Our Lady of Exile,* an ethnographic and historical study of Our Lady of Charity, a Cuban-Catholic shrine in Miami, Tweed demonstrates the power of this particular place as an orienting center, where Cuban migrants construct a collective identity, negotiate meaning, and encounter diverse others. Tweed proposes that contact zones are key to understanding religion in America and the importance of particular places. He emphasizes such contact zones need not be explicitly religious sites like the shrine, but include public spaces such as classrooms and courtrooms where diverse religious groups and competing religious norms meet. Even as they serve as orienting points on the map in an increasingly mobile world, these sites of meaning and power are not fixed, but constantly contested and shifting.[3]

Tweed is one of a growing number of scholars of religion in North America focused on "place" as a key lens, though the bulk of this work, particularly regarding Roman Catholicism, has focused on urban environments as spaces of encounter among diverse ethnic and religious groups.[4] This chapter highlights wilderness as another important contact zone, where multiple traditions of solitude meet one another and engage in the politics of environmental preservation. In particular, I focus on the remote town of Crestone, Colorado. Surrounded by an expanse of undeveloped desert and mountain landscape, Crestone is a place where diverse religious communities together negotiate the meaning and power of wilderness, solitude, and the sacred. They do this through a variety of place-making practices, through formal, collective strategies such as

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[3] Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile : Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 136. See also *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[4] See, for example, Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

naming and marking the landscape, erecting shrines and religious sites, and establishing boundaries and limits on development. Individuals also negotiate these meanings through creative, everyday tactics that link their domestic and religious practices with the surrounding landscape.[5] Drawing on oral history interviews with current and former members of the Spiritual Life Institute, this chapter examines how individual hermits narrate their stories of emplacement and displacement, situating their personal stories within the stories of Carmelite Catholic tradition and American wilderness tradition.

William McNamara and the Sacred Wilderness

William McNamara envisioned his new, contemporary contemplative community as a return to the original solitude of his Carmelite tradition. The earliest Carmelites were hermits in the Holy Land in the late 1100s. Living in caves and huts on Mount Carmel, they placed themselves in the long line of those called to desert solitude, tracing this tradition as far back as Elijah. As the original Carmelite hermits grew in number, they established settlements throughout Europe, but in these new contexts, they did not always retain the eremitic lifestyle forged caves and huts. Many embraced more apostolic practices of preaching similar to the mendicant orders of Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians. The remaining hermits were all forced to leave Mount Carmel by 1291, when battles between Muslims and crusading Christians reached their peak, but the solitude of the desert remained a potent symbol for generations of reformers yearning for the radical simplicity and solitude of Carmel.[6] In the 1560s, Spanish Carmelites Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross called for a return to the order’s primitive, eremitic roots.

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[5] On place-making strategies and tactics, see de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

[6] John Welch, *The Carmelite Way: An Ancient Path for Today's Pilgrim* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 9.

Their reformed branch became known as "Discalced," literally shoeless or sandal-wearing Carmelites, signifying this restoration of simplicity. The reform movement inspired a flourishing of "desert houses" throughout Europe, hermitages that shifted the focus to contemplation and silence rather than public ministry.[7]

McNamara joined the Discalced Carmelites in 1939, at age thirteen, leaving his home in Providence, Rhode Island for seminary at Holy Hill, in Wisconsin. From a young age, he was drawn to the simplicity and solitude of the early Carmelites, and shortly after his 1951 ordination, he requested permission to live at a desert house in France. After initially approving, his Superiors assigned McNamara to serve as priest for what he lovingly remembers as "the very active St. Florian's Parish," in Milwaukee. The whole experience, he wrote, "convinced me that we American Carmelites needed a Desert House of our own, and that American society needed, perhaps more than anything else, the biblical wilderness experience. And the Church needed hermits."[8]

McNamara acknowledged this was a thoroughly collaborative vision, the result of "a good deal of roadwork, seminaring, and some significant conversations with Thomas Merton."[9] In 1960, inspired by their conversations, Merton penned his essay, "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," elaborating the vision of a Carmelite Desert House in America, one grounded in this historic tradition and engaged with the urgent needs of the present. "Ideally speaking, such a community could engage in a very fruitful dialogue with non-Catholic intellectuals, with Oriental thinkers, with artists and philosophers, scientists and politicians - but on a very simple, radical and primitive level, though in full

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[7] Keith J. Egan, *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 55-6.
[8] William McNamara, O.C.D., "Early Priesthood: 1951-59," in "Passionate Pilgrims: The Story of William Mcnamara, O.C.D. And the Spiritual Life Institute," 22.
[9] William McNamara, *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 99.

cognizance of the problems of our time." He envisioned a community that was "contemplative and apostolic," with "a primitive and 'prophetic' character - a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the ways of the Lord."[10]

Like Merton, McNamara understood the power of this wilderness context, especially in North America. Wilderness, he wrote, "invokes nostalgia," at once for both "the lost America and the pilgrim Church."[11] McNamara also recognized the rich tradition of wilderness solitude in America. He praised Thoreau for his critique of an "over-developed, over-civilized, over-crowded, and over-ruled" America, and he embraced Thoreau's notion of wilderness as the place we "witness our own limits transgressed."[12]

This vision of wilderness solitude, ecumenical engagement and prophetic witness took shape slowly through the 1960s, as the Spiritual Life Institute grounded itself more and more fully in place. In 1963, Father William and a handful of founding members "dropped everything and went to the desert" of Oak Creek Canyon, at the outskirts of the then sleepy town of Sedona, Arizona. He had been invited to be administrator of Holy Cross Chapel, a stunning sanctuary whose towering cross rises up from the canyon's red rock cliffs. McNamara cultivated a life of solitude, first living in the Chapel basement, then a shack built in the rocks nearby, but he also maintained a public life and ministry, organizing ecumenical conferences and retreats, all while serving as pastor to the small but growing local parish. In 1967, the group sought more space for solitude and moved to an old ranch nearby, where they built their first official hermitage, named "Nada," to

[10] Thomas Merton, "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, 1960), 249.
[11] McNamara, *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 101.
[12] *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 80. *Walden,* quoted in *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 86.

signify the nothingness at the heart of the desert experience. Soon after, they built a library-chapel, called “Agape,” its floor sunk into the earth in the style of Arizona Pueblo Indian “kivas.” Over the next decade, the Spiritual Life Institute added additional hermitages named for “some favorite contemplatives in action,” including Don Quixote, Sir Thomas More, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Mahatma Gandhi, Lao Tzu, and Dag Hammarskjöld. The new space also enabled them to host symposia and a series of scholars in residence, including Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, anti-nuclear activist Dr. Norman Cousins, Quaker Douglass Steere, Catholic sociologist Rev. Andrew Greeley, and California meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran, originally from India.[13]

The Spiritual Life Institute thrived in its new home, and as the hermits deepened their ecumenical dialogue, they also deepened their connections with the desert landscape. McNamara described the power of the place: “an unspoiled, uncluttered environment that provides so much silence and solitude and such an opportunity for a salient simplicity that one can hardly resist the invitation to be still, to be wise, and to cultivate, with wild and wonderful abandon, the life of the spirit.”[14] The starkness of the desert instilled humility, forcing sojourners there to break through “masks, illusions, and deceits” and “see things as they really are: not managed, dominated, packaged; but wild, dead, uncontrollable.”[15] McNamara celebrated the positive power of the place, but also stressed the polarity of its meanings. He acknowledged the “ravenous reality of the desert” had led generations to label it a place of danger, temptation, and evil. “The central pervading atmosphere of the desert is death. That is why it plays such a vastly important

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[13] Tessa Bielecki, “Dare the Dream: A History of the Spiritual Life Institute, 1960-2001”"Passionate Pilgrims: The Story of William Mcnamara, O.C.D. And the Spiritual Life Institute," 26.
[14] *Wild & Robust: The Adventure of Christian Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2006), 178.
[15] *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 85.

role in the Jewish and Christian traditions and in the monasticism of both the East and the West." He asserted, though, that the desert could also be a "ferocious form of good," and a place of rebirth. "The beauty of the desert is spectacular! The life you find there in tenacious trees, blooming cactuses, and wild flowers is as startling as the death you find in dry creek beds, sun-bleached bones, and blowing 'dust-devils.'"[16]

With its stunning desert landscape and countercultural commitment to silence and solitude, the Spiritual Life Institute attracted a growing number of hermits, lay and religious, men and women, enough that they needed additional space. In 1972, they established a second hermitage, "Nova Nada," at the lakeside site of an old hunting and fishing lodge in North Kemptville, Nova Scotia. After many years maintaining communities in both places, the hermits were forced to relocate, as the wilderness character of both regions came under threat. In the early 1980s, traffic and development from Sedona's suburban sprawl began crowding the site of the original Nada hermitage. In 1983, they sold their Arizona ranch–now home to condominiums and a golf course–and moved to their current home in Crestone, Colorado.

Nova Nada was much more remote, and they fought harder to preserve its undisturbed wilderness quiet. Surrounded by thousands of acres of Canadian forest, the hermits had no electricity or running water, but an abundance of silence, at least until 1996, when the sound of heavy logging equipment began to echo through the trees, distant at first, but moving closer. Forestry company J.D. Irving had purchased an adjacent tract of land and was operating heavy machinery 24 hours a day, building roads, felling trees, and hauling them to a nearby sawmill. The hermits tried to halt the

[16] *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 88-9.

destruction at their doorsteps through negotiations with the company, and by 1998, when that proved ineffective, an increasingly public campaign.

The episode demonstrated the strategic ways the Nova Nada community, the company, and the media represented the value of solitude and the value of wilderness, yet another example of the contested meaning of both, and the particularly potent combination of solitary spirituality and environmental concern. Local media portrayed the story as a classic David versus Goliath struggle. Associated Press writer David Crary opened his article with a typical tone: “A giant forestry company has run into a feisty adversary in the woods of Nova Scotia: a tiny order of Catholic monks battling to prevent the buzz of chain saws from disrupting their silent meditation.”[17] Reporters found it “irresistible” to quote the hermits’ “evocative language” and offer details of their simple, solitary lifestyle. While the community certainly sought coverage of their campaign to stop the logging, they also grew frustrated at the media’s “superficial” focus on “human personal questions on the feeling level.”[18] J.D. Irving built on this narrative, portraying the Spiritual Life Institute as a tiny band of odd outsiders with an unreasonable insistence on “radical silence.”[19] In contrast, the company positioned itself as “a good neighbor… providing the benefit of direct jobs to our 300 employees.”[20]

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[17] See, for example, David Crary, "Monastery Disrupted by Irving," *Bangor Daily News*, November 17, 1997. Coverage of this episode was so remarkable it was chosen more than once as a case study of biased journalism. See, for example Trudie Richards, "The Fighting Frame: Did Journalists Play a Part in Driving a Group of Monks out of Nova Scotia?," *Media Magazine* (2001).
[18] Sister Tessa Bielecki, quoted in "The Fighting Frame: Did Journalists Play a Part in Driving a Group of Monks out of Nova Scotia?."
[19] Press Release, September 21, 1998, quoted in Annie Crombie Cathy Driscoll, "Stakeholder Legitimacy Management and the Qualified Good Neighbour: The Case of Nova Nada and Jdi," *Business & Society* 40, no. 4 (2001): 460. Driscoll and Crombie analyze what made J.D. Irving successful in maintaining power and legitimacy in the face of such a public relations challenge from local stakeholders.
[20] J.D. & Hynes Irving, K., "Good Neighbour," *Chronicle Herald* 1997.

As the dispute dragged on, the hermits grew more and more savvy at speaking for themselves, issuing their own statements and scheduling press conferences in town. To preserve their Carmelite tradition of silence and solitude the hermits sought out a host of new connections. In a radio interview, Sister Sharon Doyle, spokeswoman for the Spiritual Life Institute, described their expanding web of environmental commitments and connections:

> In the beginning it was about having disrupted our particular way of life. But as we get more educated, as we meet environmental groups, as we read more about forests, we are starting to have some pretty serious concerns about clear-cutting. We've always, as contemplative, as mystics, had a sense… of the interconnectedness of being. Thich Nhat Hanh, who's a Buddhist monk, says we inter-are... If we clear-cut in northern Maine and in the Maritimes, that can change climate levels to such an extent that someday it will change the level of the ocean, which could effect some island in the South Pacific. It's all connected, and every decision we make, we have to think in terms of the others, not just economics, productivity, more profit.[21]

They reached out to the Sierra Club and organized petition drives and public rallies of support. They researched environmental science and sustainable forestry, contemplated the ecological wisdom of diverse religions, and weighed the global implications of their local dispute.

Despite public pressure, Irving held firm to its rights as landowner, refusing to meet the hermits' demand for a two-mile buffer around their property, and at the end of 1998, the Spiritual Life Institute gave up its fight. McNamara announced the hermits, most of whom had come to Nova Nada in their twenties and were strongly attached to the land, were "exhausted," and he felt obligated to "remove them from this battlefield."[22]

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[21] Sister Sharon Doyle, interview by Laura Knowy, *Living on Earth,* podcast audio, December 5, 1997, http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=97-P13-00049&segmentID=7.

[22] Melissa Jones, "Wilderness Grows Scarce for Lovers of Solitude," *National Cathlic Reporter*, February 21 2003.

The Spiritual Life Institute was founded on a vision of desert solitude, and this vision came to life through years together in the wilderness, but the threat to wilderness proved formative as well. The community moved on from Sedona and Nova Scotia, but these losses permanently marked its identity, heightening the hermits' awareness of how thoroughly they were and are rooted in particular places. The struggles with logging and development challenged the community to better articulate its commitments to the environment, and to better integrate these commitments into its contemplative Carmelite identity. Wilderness, it turned out, was not a space so removed from society, but in fact a contact zone, a space where the value of solitude and the value of the natural environment were simultaneously contested.

Today, the Spiritual Life Institute occupies two sites – Nada Hermitage, in Crestone, Colorado, established in 1983, and Holy Hill Hermitage in Skreen, County Sligo, Ireland, established in 1995, just as logging in Nova Scotia began. Father William McNamara left the community in 2006, retiring to a hermitage in New Pine Creek, Oregon. Following his departure, there was a period of upheaval. Several longtime members also elected to leave, some remaining in solitude nearby, and others moving farther afield.

In the fall of 2012, I visited Crestone to better understand the natural and cultural landscape the community now calls home. Situated at the edge of the San Luis Valley and the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the town of 1,500 sits on an area once a sacred gathering place for American Indian groups. In 1978, Canadian multimillionaire Maurice Strong and his Danish wife Hanne Marstrand Strong acquired the 200,000 acre Baca Grande Ranch and set out to remake Crestone as a "global village" for

contemplative religious communities and a model of sustainable living.[23] Thanks to the Strongs' grants of land and money, there are now over two dozen such groups, including a Zen center, a Taoist retreat, an Ashram, multiple Tibeten Buddhist organizations, and a Shumei Institute, part of a Japanese movement for spirituality and natural agriculture. The hilltops above Nada Hermitage bear witness to this remarkable mix, dotted with a ziggurat, prayer flags and multiple Tibetan stupas. Local bulletin boards hint at more layers of spiritual seeking: business cards and fliers from individual teachers, healers, seers, and shamans, along with small groups for every imaginable practice. There is information about permaculture, sustainable building, and organic agriculture. The architecture reflects the multiple approaches to living lightly on the land, with simple structures like tents, teepees, yurts, and adobe casitas alongside sizeable homes with solar panels and other high-tech sustainable features. Crestone is at the edge of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, encompassing 3,000 square miles of protected public land, and in Baca Grande, there are over 1,200 acres more under conservation easement, including 150 acres set aside for individual hermitages surrounded by forest.

During my time in Crestone, I interviewed current and former members of the Spiritual Life Institute. I asked what led them to the community and what drew them to a life of solitude. We talked about their typical daily routine, including contemplative

[23] Maurice built his enormous wealth as an oil developer, eventually head of Petro-Canada. He simultaneously established himself as a key environmental leader in the United Nations, serving as director of international summits in Stockholm (1972) and Rio de Janeiro (1992). Hanne had a lifelong fascination with Native American spirituality and a passion for spiritually-grounded environmentalism. In 1978, visiting the recently acquired real estate, she received a visit from vision of Glenn Anderson, an eighty-year old Crestone local known as "the Prophet." Anderson proceeded to spell out a vision he had received, that a woman like her would come someday, to "preserve all the world's faiths in the valley against some imminent doomsday." The Strongs were already well-connected with spiritual leaders across the globe and set out to make this vision a reality. They began inviting groups to Crestone in the early 1980s, beginning with a Karma Kagyu Tibetan community and the Spiritual Life Institute. In 1988, they established the Manitou Foundation, which has continued building the interfaith vision, and the Manitou Institute, devoted to environmental preservation. See http://www.manitou.org/MF/history.php and http://www.manitou.org/MF/articles.php for the organization's own history.

practices like prayer and meditation, as well as domestic ones, like cooking and eating. I asked about their sense of place as they introduced me to the hermitages they call home and the natural environment around them. These conversations helped fill out the story of William McNamara and the Spiritual Life Institute, and its history of ecumenical and environmental engagement. In what follows, I have selected excerpts from three interviews. These give a rich sense of the collaborative nature of the hermits' solitude, demonstrating how they work together with one another and with the neighboring spiritual communities. These conversations also reveal the thoroughly combinative spirit of each individual. Their identity and practice are grounded in Carmelite tradition and enriched by their engagement with diverse religions and with American traditions of solitude in nature. True to McNamara's vision, the hermits I interviewed in Crestone continue to have a deep connection with their place in the desert. They understand wilderness solitude as vital and prophetic, transforming them as individuals, and also calling for transformation of the Church and the broader culture.

"Life as spacious as the desert" [24]

Tessa Bielecki first encountered William McNamara while she was in college. "He was giving a retreat, and I was so totally captivated by what he represented and what he said." In 1967, she joined him in Sedona and became his partner in building the vision of the Spiritual Life Institute into a reality. "I was the first person to really join, and there was nothing. We had a piece of property in Sedona, Arizona, but there was no 'way of life.' It was really the complimentary gifts that he and I had… He had this vision, and

[24] Tessa Bielecki, interview with the author, August 16, 2010, Crestone, CO.

then I could say, ‘Alright, how do we do that? How do we live that out?’ And I would be able to create structures and a way of life that would embody that.” Together, Father William and Mother Tessa, as she came to be called, created the “community of solitaries” that endures today, even as both have moved on. In 2003, yearning for more of her own solitude, she relocated to a hermitage fifteen miles from the Nada Hermitage in Crestone, and in 2005 she officially left the community.

Bielecki has a strong connection with the desert, having spent well over 40 years as a hermit in Arizona and Colorado, and the space around her hermitage exhibits this aesthetic. As I pull up the long gravel driveway, she comes out to meet me, and to introduce me to the landscape she loves. The nearly treeless expanse around her home is dotted with an artful mix of objects, those she has collected over the years, alongside artifacts of her day-to-day labor: the outhouse–she has no plumbing with water scarce; the skull of an elk she discovered after the last spring snowmelt; a neatly stacked woodpile ready for the coming cold; a garden of potted plants she carries inside and out, to fend off the animals; and a block of Coconino sandstone found in the creek near her first hermitage, an old sandstone homestead in Sedona. Before walking inside, Tessa pauses and concludes this first phase of the tour, “I love bones. I love rocks. I love all the earth connections. That’s partly why I live the way I live. I have to be on the land. I have to be intimately connected to the land. I actually don’t feel a separation between my body and the body of the land. It’s this landscape-inscape, which to me is the heart of my life.”

The hermitage itself reflects this blurred boundary between interior and exterior. Bielecki’s home is an octagonal structure, built in the style of a Navajo hogan, but instead of the traditional mud and earth, she explains, “This one has more windows, so the

wonderful thing is you're really outside when you're inside… This sweep of windows keeps me connected." This single room with an open view of the horizon is integral to her daily rhythm. "The moon rises and I attend to it… I'm so keyed in to the rhythm of the moon that it wakes me up, the rising of the moon, or the setting of the moon." The view is a reminder she is immersed in natural beauty. "In the city, people go to an art museum, but see, I live in an art museum. God has created all this beauty, and why? Aren't we supposed to be appreciating it, paying attention to it? I feel really guilty if I'm not paying attention to it." The hermitage also provides a window onto the human world around her. On a clear night, she says, "I can see lights" fifty miles across the San Luis Valley, reminding her, "I am part of the human family and we are connected." Inside, she feels the lingering presence of those who have come to visit. "Now you're here," she says, "and you'll always be part of this place."

Bielecki stresses that her life is structured by this attentiveness to place, which extends to even the seemingly most mundane details of her environment. "Mindfulness is essential. I have to be mindful of the fact that I need jugs of water and wood in the house. With a single photovoltaic panel hooked to a car battery, I have to pay attention. If it's too gray and cloudy, I have to watch how much I use the computer." She is mindful of the environmental impacts of this simple, solitary lifestyle. "I live light on the earth. I use very little, and take very little. I compost. I work the land and care for the trees… And not to mention celibacy is very ecological." Summing up her typical day, Tessa reflects, "I try to make my life as spacious as the desert… It's all very simple and natural. It's not like I have *practices…* Everybody talks about spiritual practice, but just living life and paying attention, that's enough for me."

In her high desert hogan and in her earlier life as a hermit in the Spiritual Life Institute, Tessa Bielecki has consistently cultivated solitude in relationship with others. Today, her closest collaborator is Father David Denny, a longtime friend who left the community soon after her, and now lives in a hermitage on the same property. In 2005, they co-founded the Desert Foundation, which fosters respect and reconciliation among the among contemplative Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, focused on the Middle East and the American Southwest. Together, they write and speak, and lead workshops, retreats, and pilgrimages engaging these diverse traditions. Since 1993, they have co-taught a course at Colorado College, at first focused on Christian mysticism, but for the last decade, exploring desert spirituality and religious combination in the Biblical Holy Land and Medieval Spain, as well as closer to home in Southwest writers like Edward Abbey. Tessa and David's partnership reflects a mutual commitment to interreligious exploration, but they also depend on one another day-to-day, collaborating on practical tasks from chopping wood to sharing a car. After leaving the community, they helped one another figure out how to open bank accounts, file taxes, and find health insurance. She tells me she "collects vignettes" of hermit pairs throughout the history of the church, and wonders if "the future of contemplative life is hermit living in pairs, men and women living celibately."

As Bielecki explains, this model of solitude in partnership mirrors the sacred bond at the heart of Carmelite tradition: "In Carmelite spirituality, there is this understanding of a spousal relationship with God, that kind of intimacy." This loving presence is particularly potent in the solitude of her desert hermitage. "This place is almost like a honeymoon cabin, so that I'm not alone. God is here. There is a sense of presence, so I'm

in relation all the time. If the moon is rising, I will say, 'Gosh, my Lord, look at that.' There's this very vivid dialogue going on all the time." For Tessa, solitude is grounded in relationship and dialogue, attuned to rhythms of the world around her, and engaged with multiple traditions of desert spirituality.

"Getting over the fear of contamination in favor of cross-fertilization" [25]

As I enter his hermitage, Father David Denny welcomes me by pointing out the Arabic greeting that hangs just inside the door. He reads aloud the words, "Ahlan wa sahlan," which he translates, "This is your land, and these are your people." The phrase captures Denny's deep and longstanding engagement with the Islamic world, grounded in his place of solitude here in the American Southwest. Since he left the Spiritual Life Institute in 2005, Father David has lived in this hermitage a hundred yards from Tessa Bielecki, and together their Desert Foundation has served as a living witness to their goal of peace and understanding among religious traditions, or as he sums it up as we stand in the entryway, "Getting over the fear of contamination in favor of cross-fertilization."

Throughout the small space are other manifestations of Denny's personal story, each embodying his connection with the desert landscape and its diverse religious cultures: a weaving from Palestine, a Berber basket and a Coptic icon of the holy family bought in Egypt, a painting of Persian contemplative sages bought in Jerusalem, and the "Our Father" written in Arabic, from Bethlehem. The carpet below our feet is a gift he brought home from a 1970 summer exchange to Afghanistan, at age seventeen, which began his fascination with Islam and the desert. As we walk past his bedroom, he shows

[25] David M. Denny, interview with the author, August 18, 2010, Crestone, CO.

off a reproduction of Marc Chagall's "The White Crucifixion," which speaks to Father David for its depiction of the suffering Christ, "at peace in a beam of light, with chaos all around," the chaos of the Holocaust. Denny commissioned the painting with his first savings upon moving to this space, a visual inspiration for his work connecting Abrahamic traditions, and for the challenge and joy of solitude in a chaotic world. As we make tea and move to his study to talk, he points out one last item, a hanging string of chile peppers, which are, he explains, "the essential icon of the Southwest."

Denny was born in Kokomo, Indiana and moved to Arizona when he was sixteen. He grew up in "a very devout" Disciples of Christ family, but he says, "like a lot of college students, I wasn't really practicing anything when I left home." As he remembers this phase, "It was the early 70s, and there were a lot of gurus coming over, and it was cool to practice transcendental meditation, or yoga, and I had some knowledge of Sufi tradition." Around the same time, his older brother became a disciple of Guru Maharaj Ji (Prem Rawat) and moved to an ashram. While at Prescott College, David encountered a Buddhist teacher and did a three and a half week vipassana meditation retreat. "It was eighteen hours a day of meditating… the hardest thing I'd done up to this point in my life, and that's part of what convinced me that religion was more than showing up at church and living a moral life. It has to do with this deeper transformation." In the midst of this shift, his college roommate gave him a copy of Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*. "This was news to me, that there was this contemplative, mystical tradition in Christianity… A light went on… I just thought monks had died out in the middle ages… it all struck me as exotic and interesting." Denny continued to read more from Merton,

and he explored other Christian contemplatives who were engaging in dialogue with Asian traditions, including Bede Griffiths and Raimon Panikkar.

The following semester, he enrolled in a New Testament course, taught by a Jesuit priest, who introduced him to the Spiritual Life Institute in nearby Sedona. Over the next few years, Denny made several extended visits and fell in love with the community. He remembers the sense of surprise and amazement at the contrast with even what he had encountered in Merton's monastic experience. "In Sedona, the fact that it was post Vatican II and that it was a new community with men and women. There was a sense of excitement that this was it was a new expression of a very ancient thing. The community was very interested in inter-religious dialogue, and it was only later that I encountered a triumphalist Catholicism that was very suspicious of other traditions… For me, the whole experience was enlarging and expanding… like the unabridged version of what I'd grown up with."

During his thirty years living in the community, Denny continued engaging diverse contemplative traditions and also explored American traditions of solitude in nature.

> When I was in the monastery, one of the people that we enjoyed reading of course was Thoreau… He was probably the first most notable American who reflected on solitude... We had a really interesting reading book. In most monasteries you read from scripture in prayer, but we actually compiled an anthology of readings that included both other religious traditions and excerpts from novels and essays that we thought would be prayerful, so every couple of months we had a selection from *Walden*.

Like Tessa Bielecki, David's connection with the desert landscape has marked his experience as a hermit. Living alone in this wide-open landscape, he says, "helps one find a king of spaciousness, to read, to pray, to meditate… Solitude allows one to live in an

environment of prayer, scripture, and nature." While living at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, he wrote about the community's built environment as an expression of their link with the landscape, describing the chapel and surrounding hermitages as "earthy" and "not artificially imposed on the land." They "grow out of the sand dunes, organically rooted in and sheltered by the earth," and they are "oriented toward the sun in order to harness its heat."[26] Like others in the community, he spent time living in Nova Scotia, which was an adjustment after so many years in the desert Southwest. Even there, he delighted in the openness of the lake, where he remembers solitary paddles in a canoe, and joyful moments ice-skating under the full moon.

Father David embraces the spacious solitude of the wilderness, with the desert not a place of escape but rather a foundation for engaging contemporary culture more fully.

> Traditionally, there's been a distinction between a recluse and a hermit. A recluse never went out. The most famous example is Julian of Norwich, in England who lived in a cell, connected to the local church and never went out. A hermit is somebody who spent a lot of time in solitude, but was not always in solitude. In the Carmelite tradition, the model was Elijah. He'd go out in the desert, then come back and disturb the status quo, or "share the fruits of his contemplation" is the way traditional Carmelites would put it. I always loved that. And my experience of solitude is that it's about expanding out and exploring territory that is uncomfortable but necessary at this time, and trying to bring that into the community.

To be a hermit is not to be "some sort of cranky misanthrope, which is a common caricature," but instead to be "out in the wilderness and be able to have a sense of this deeper pulse... In solitude, you begin to hear your own voice, and though it's hard for me to explain what I mean, but the voice of God, the ultimate voice." This traditional, Carmelite call to solitude, he explains, is urgently needed to counteract the "intoxicating"

[26] David M. Denny, "Playful, Terrible Splendor: The Art and Architecture of Nada Hermitage" in "Passionate Pilgrims: The Story of William Mcnamara, O.C.D. And the Spiritual Life Institute," 40.

ideology that is driving mainstream culture, propelling us "with tremendous energy" and "producing tremendous waste."

In recent years, Father David has experienced this mix of solitude and prophetic witness as he has traveled away from his hermitage more. In addition to his work with the Desert Foundation, he also travels to parishes across the country to raise money for Cross International, a Catholic relief and development organization. He describes this travel as "invigorating," an energizing opportunity to interact with all sorts of people and to collect "snapshots of America." I ask Denny what he tells people in the pews about himself, and how he identifies himself to those he sits beside on the airplane–a hermit, a contemplative, a priest? He says the solitude rarely comes up, and that it often feels simpler to say he is a priest. Occasionally, he says, someone genuinely wants to talk more, and in these moments he enjoys bringing up the work of the Desert Foundation.

> I really like being able to say I am a Roman Catholic priest, *and* I am committed to reconciliation between Muslims, Jews, and Christians… We all have deep, beautiful heritage. I am a priest. I love Christ, and I am fascinated with these traditions. I am in love with these other traditions, not in spite of being a Christian but because I am a Christian… In my own quiet way I can propose another way of being a priest, and another way of representing Christianity.

Father David describes a shift within himself in how he articulates his separation from and connection to society. "Especially when I joined, in 1975, I liked the idea of being countercultural, but now, I'm not as sure of that term." The Spiritual Life Institute represented an opportunity to separate from the mainstream, but over time, he realized such a countercultural position "implies conflict." Through his interreligious work toward peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, he has learned the importance of "establishing relationships, communication, mutual respect, and communion" with

others, especially those who are different, as opposed to the countercultural "harangues" of the Hebrew prophets, that too often provoked "shame and defensiveness." Through his explorations of "oriental traditions," he has awakened to a "non-dual approach to things" that resists the posture of conflict that has sometimes defined the Christian hermit as at odds with mainstream society. David Denny has lived as a hermit for almost forty years, and has cultivated a thoroughly "cross-fertilized" practice of solitude, grounded in the spaciousness of the American Southwest and fed by the vitality of diverse contemplative traditions of the desert, sustained by collaboration with Tessa Bielecki and the Spiritual Life Institute, and energized by a call to prophetic engagement with the world.

"Religious orders are usually named for a founder. Carmelites are named for a place."[27]

Eric Haarer first visited the Spiritual Life Institute in Sedona on a retreat while serving as a Mennonite Volunteer in Arizona, and he was so struck by the community, he visited again soon after their move to Crestone, Colorado. "I came here with a friend of mine to go backpacking and to volunteer at the hermitage. We both had carpentry experience and the hermitage was just getting going." For a number of years, he made more short-term visits, and in 1988, finally decided to stay. "I found something in the valley and the community that just resonated with a way I wanted to live. I wanted a purpose. I loved nature and wanted to be outside, rather than some nine-to-five office job." Haarer is one of four members who remain part of the community in Colorado today. He is the only one under formal vows, and serves as priest to the community and

[27] Eric Haarer, interview with the author, August 17, 2010, Crestone, CO.

those in the surrounding Crestone area. I meet Father Eric in the Nada Hermitage library for tea and conversation, then walk with him to see the chapel and some of the individual hermitages nestled in the surrounding landscape.

Thinking back to his first backpacking trip near Crestone, Haarer acknowledges he was most attracted to the place. “It was mainly the mountains that were drawing me… I wouldn’t have joined the community if it hadn’t been in this kid of setting, in a wilderness area.” The Nada Hermitage is situated in a dramatic spot, at the edge of the dry, open San Luis Valley at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains with their forested slopes protected as a federal wilderness area. Since his childhood, Haarer had felt called to live close to such a wild landscape. “I grew up in Michigan, in a rural farming community. We were surrounded by nature, so I was used to being outside, hiking and just hanging out outside. Growing up in the country, I was used to being in the wilderness and saw myself living in that sort of natural environment.”

The community’s Carmelite tradition linking solitude, spirituality, and wilderness especially resonated with Haarer. “Carmelites are somewhat unique in Christian spiritual tradition,” he explains. “Many religious orders in the Catholic Church are named after a founder: Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and so on. Carmelites are named after a place–Mount Carmel, in the holy land–and we really don’t know who the founders were… We know they lived as hermits on Mount Carmel, that they a desire for solitary life and that they lived in community.” He emphasizes the dynamism and diversity within the Carmelite order. This tradition, far from static, continues to evolve in a changing world, always looking back to its origin in the desert and this original balance of solitude and community. “There are many branches of Carmelite orders, but whenever Carmelites

reform, it is usually back to that eremitic tradition, back towards that desert." The Spiritual Life Institute understands itself as one kind of reform within the Carmelite family, moving back to the desert of hermits living in community.

What makes this Carmelite community so distinctive, he stresses, is the "symbiotic relationship between desert, wilderness, place, and spirituality." For the Spiritual Life Institute, "place is very important." Haarer connects this Carmelite conviction with a more universal human experience. "We are from the earth," he said, so "the geography of where you live is going to affect your spiritual life. If the land itself exudes a kind of silence and stillness, and the desert certainly does that, as do the mountains as well, then you find that is awakened in yourself as well." He insists this is true of less scenic landscapes as well. "If you live in a dehumanized, noisy environment like a crowded city where you are working 60 hours a week, it's going to have a profound effect on your spiritual life." In his more than two decades at the Spiritual Life Institute, Haarer has experienced the stillness of the desert, and he has seen countless others touched by the silence and spaciousness of the place while on retreat from their busy lives. Sharing this place is a joy to the hermits, but he also has learned he needs time away from the demands of hosting guests. "Ironically, we sometimes have to get away from here to get more solitude. We have a cabin up in the mountains where we go for our personal retreat times. I sometimes go to another retreat center. Or sometimes I just go up into the mountains, do some camping, and enjoy the silence and solitude."

Haarer highlights a second distinctive feature of the Spiritual Life Institute, that "Carmelites are traditionally fairly unstructured," or as he later clarifies, that the structure is idiosyncratic, to fit the needs of each hermit. The community gathers for prayer several

times a week and one week of each month they remain in complete solitude, but otherwise, each individual follows his or her own schedule and personal practices. Haarer reflected on how his practice of prayer has changed over time. “When we begin, we do need more structure and discipline. We need people to teach us. At the beginning, I prayed in the chapel, certain specific prayers, certain readings, at certain times, everyday, year in and year out, in conjunction with spiritual direction. First, you need that bedrock of practice to become ingrained in you. Then you can be exploratory.” He explains how much he has enjoyed the freedom to let these practices evolve and to explore new directions in his reading and his prayer life. “The spiritual life is like any relationship. It’s going to change and develop. As a relationship matures, the words become less important, and it is more about being in the presence of another person. There is a kind of move from meditation to contemplative life. Now, prayer is less wordy… more a kind of enjoyment, being with.”

Father Eric describes his current daily routine, which like other contemplatives, is structured around a balance of work and prayer, but he emphasized the importance of flexibility in his practice, and the opportunity to be outside. “Part of my morning ritual is to get up and bike 10 miles each morning. And right now that’s where I pray best.” Nada Hermitage is surrounded by an expansive network of gravel roads, which wind their way up to the other religious communities and the mountains beyond, and stretch out to the flat expanse of the San Luis Valley below. On his bike, Haarer can pray as he explores the richness of the place, beginning each day “awakened” by a sense of connection to the natural and human environment. He contrasts this practice with the conventional notion of contemplative prayer. “I think people get this misguided notion that if I’m not sitting

with my legs crossed on a zafu with my hands folded… Well, no, the point is where does God reach you best. It might be hiking, or biking, or walking… in a chapel or in your La-Z-Boy chair."

Over the years, he has enjoyed similarly earthy explorations in his reading practice. As we walk outside, visiting some of the individual hermitages Haarer built over the years, he describes the range of American nature writers who have been an inspiration to him, including Thoreau, John Muir, Edwar Abbey, and Barry Lopez. As we peek in the small structures where guest retreatants stay, each built into the sloping land below the chapel, he emphasizes again that for the Spiritual Life Institute, place is integral: "We feel that if we provide the silence, the solitude, and the beauty, which is very important, the beauty of nature, then if a person is predisposed, it's kind of a natural thing to pray. It is our unnatural life that keeps us from being spiritual." One of the goals of the Nada Hermitage is to provide space for visitors to step away from the unnatural life, "to provide a place where the junk is taken away." The community recognizes a kind of agency in this place, which can powerfully transform those who pass through it.

Like all those I interviewed, I ask Father Eric his experience of popular conceptions and misconceptions of what it meant to be a hermit, and like others he described a paradoxical polarity. "The word hermit almost always has a negative connotation: A person who doesn't take a shower, who is anti-social, who just wants to escape the world… but none of that is true." On the other hand, he observes, "The word hermitage has come into vogue," and that "spirituality in general is in vogue." Haarer attributes the positive view of hermitage and spirituality to a growing anti-institutionalism in American religion. "Go to any bookstore and the spirituality section is

through the roof," but for many Catholics and Protestants alike, "somehow the institution is bad and you need to get away from it." This question clearly strikes a nerve, and Father Eric carefully attempts to articulate how hermits should be understood as part of institutional religion, even as they live in tension with it.

> Hermitages are sometimes seen as anti-institutional, and I think that is part of the draw. I don't think they are anti-institutional, and I think we need institutions. If we don't have institutions, spirituality can become a very selfish kind of thing… one's own private way of living their own life and calling it spiritual.
>
> Living in the context of an institution holds you accountable to certain beliefs, to certain practices, just accountable to a larger world. So, I don't think hermitages are anti-institutional, but they have that aura, of being on the edge, on the cutting edge, doing their own thing…
>
> Now oftentimes, that's how hermitages got started, with people having a tension with the institutions and moving out. And on the other hand, there is a good sense in being in tension with institutions… That's how institutions grow and change, by having these people who are somewhat liminal, out on the edges being more exploratory, but at the same time still accountable.

Once again, this reveals Haarer's sense of history. Individuals and institutions change over time and in relationship. Hermits are not selfish and separate, but rather integral to institutions, and especially those they critique. Notice too the spatial language Haarer uses to define this relationship. Hermits live in liminal space, "out on the edges." They venture into unexplored space, but do so accountable to institutional anchors, traditions of belief and practice that are not fixed, but centers of power that move, slowly and collaboratively.

Father Eric stresses the importance of balancing solitary, contemplative life with an apostolic responsibility to the larger world. The Spiritual Life Institute is home to its hermit community, but is also a retreat center. They publish a magazine and occasionally

travel to give talks and retreats. They serve as the defacto Catholic parish in the area. These are vital ways the community stays connected, so "we can share with the world what we learn in our own solitude… and not keep it selfishly." Haarer fills with excitement when describing the unpredictability of contemplative life in contact with the world, especially in a context as diverse as Crestone.

> I love it. I lived ten years in Ireland, which is 97% Roman Catholic, and I found that kind of claustrophobic. There is a certain kind of energy that can happen when people from so many widely different ranges of thought are coming together. We get all kinds of people here on retreat, or for mass, and there is an energy I just love about that. If pushes me to learn and to grow.

Even though he does not have regular contact with contemplatives from the surrounding communities, he finds their mutual commitments to silence and solitude inspiring. Knowing there are other contemplatives nearby, "that encourages me to follow that path that I have been called to live with integrity."

Haarer also describes particular ways the communities in Crestone collaborate, working together to provide for those in need, in a rural community with few economic opportunities, and working together when "the land itself is under threat." In the early 1980s, the Air National Guard proposed using the San Luis Valley for military training exercises. At the time, there were still just a handful of religious communities, but they joined together with neighboring towns to force an environmental impact study, which eventually blocked the proposal. Today, Haarer explained, there is a formal structure, the Crestone Spiritual Alliance, which facilitates this kind of collective action, and there has been a steady flow of concerns. "There have been questions about access to the National Park… another proposal to take water from the valley for Albuquerque, Denver, and Colorado Springs… plans for oil exploration in the valley." He sums up what motivates

the diverse communities of Crestone to unite: “Love for the beauty and the wilderness, the silence and solitude. Those are really the shared common values amongst all of the religious communities... and when those come under threat, the communities really unite against it.”

Conclusion

These individual stories from hermits associated with the Spiritual Life Institute echo the themes from the previous chapter and the story of Charles Brandt, revealing the spirit of collaboration and combination in the lived practice of twentieth century American Catholic hermits and highlighting wilderness as a particularly potent contact zone. Together, these cases provide a nuanced, intimate look at how individual hermits navigated a landscape layered with connections between Catholic traditions of solitude and American ones, as well as connections with diverse religious communities also drawn to the wilderness.

These chapters take up Catherine Albanese’s challenge to scholars of religion in America to collect “snapshots” of religions “as they are lived,” attentive to the “choreographies of contact and combination.” These personal stories allow us to “catch in the act” the “processes of religious exchange,” which Albanese stresses define not only individuals but in fact “form the sacred economies of the culture.” Snapshots of contact and combination “help us see how religions work and how they grown and change.”[28] These oral histories of individuals at the heart of the 1960s Catholic renewal of solitude reveal processes of change internal to Catholicism, but also the broader dynamics of the

[28] Albanese, "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History," 225.

sacred in American culture. They explored connections with diverse religious traditions, reflecting a broad spirit of interreligious collaboration. As this new generation of hermits adapted Carmelite traditions to their modern, North American context, they, like others in this study, renegotiated the norms that defined solitude as sacred, at once revered and reviled.

In particular, these cases demonstrate importance of place as a locus for such connection. Wilderness, solitude, and the sacred continue to be bound together, mutually constructed and contested. As they sought spaces of silence, apart from mainstream society, the Catholic hermits in these chapters came to know and love particular places, developing deep bonds with the environment around them, a sense of alignment between the "inscape and the landscape," in Tessa Bielecki's words. They have adapted their contemplative practices to savor the spaciousness of the surrounding desert, whether it is Bielecki attending the rise of the moon or Eric Haarer rising early to pedal and pray along Crestone's backroads. Their built environments also reflect their profound sense of place, their hermitages sunk into the earth and powered by the sun. Their homes also reinforce their experience of wilderness as a point of contact. David Denny surrounds himself with artwork representing desert spirituality in all its diversity, a collection that serves as a visual reminder of the layers of combination that link his story with Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim contemplatives.

True to William McNamara's vision, these hermits continue to explore the sacred tensions of their wilderness home. They stress the power of the desert landscape to break through "masks, illusions, and deceits" and "see things as they really are: not managed,

dominated, packaged; but wild, dead, uncontrollable."[29] The place, they assert, has a kind of agency all its own, a capacity to transform so strong it can be dangerous. Grounded in Carmelite tradition, they strive to maintain balance through the support and accountability of their immediate community. They are also committed to balancing a contemplative and apostolic mission, embodying Thomas Merton's call for a "primitive and prophetic" solitude, crying out in the wilderness as a challenge to the church and the culture.[30]

Together with the Hermits of Saint John the Baptist, the Carmelite hermits of the Spiritual Life Institute helped revive the practice of solitude among Roman Catholics in North America, planting seeds of change that would grow and spread. Since the 1960s, new expressions of solitude have developed within established religious orders, new communities of hermits have formed, and individuals now live under vows as diocesan hermits. Sense of place continues to be important for these diverse expressions of solitude, even as many hermits live in settings far less wild than the pioneering Catholics profiled here. As solitude has spread, Catholic hermits have also continued to seek ways to stay connected, with one another and with the church and the world. The next chapter examines this ongoing story, as Catholics and others pursued solitude in increasingly diverse modes and contexts, in the process establishing new networks and embracing new technologies of connection.

[29] McNamara, *Mystical Passion: Spirituality for a Bored Society*, 85.
[30] Merton, "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal," 249.

Chapter 6. Alone, Together: Networked Solitude in a Networked World

According to one of the contributors in the *Raven's Bread* newsletter, "at the moment, a hermit's life is 'in' and experiencing a revival throughout the whole world."[1] This quarterly publication started in the mid-1980s as an "interactive forum" for about 30 Roman Catholic hermits and aspiring hermits. It now reaches over 1000 subscribers worldwide, in print and online, who represent diverse expressions of solitary life. This surge in solitude certainly does not look like religious revivals of the past, characterized by throngs of worshipers, spirited singing, fiery sermons, and mass conversions. The *Raven's Bread* newsletter does, however, reveal important similarities between the contemporary "hermit revival" and previous moments of religious awakening in American history. Revivals emerge during times of rapid cultural change, when traditional anchors, including religious institutions, no longer seem secure. Individuals experience disorientation, and have the impulse to create new institutions, or to revive religious forms from a more distant past. These individual and local innovations soon spread, as leaders establish new communication networks and utilize new technologies.[2]

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[1] Karen Fredette and Paul Fredette, *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 7, no. 3 (2003).

[2] William McGloughlin outlines several broadly shared characteristics of religious revivals. William Gerald McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). In 1740, George Whitefield preached across colonial America, drawing crowds and stirring what contemporaries soon called the "Revival of Religion" and what we now know as the "Great Awakening." His message spread not only through his booming voice, but also through the remarkably prolific work of William Seward. This friend and promoter travelled ahead of Whitefield, stirring anticipation in person and in print. "Sometimes writing a hundred letters a day," he established an "ever-expanding letter-writing network." Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 90, 97. Frank Lambert stresses the importance of such promoters, along with magazines and other media in "inventing" the awakening, connecting scattered stirrings of the spirit into a "coherent, intercolonial revival." Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6. For a contemporary take on Whitefield's celebrity status, see Gary David Stratton, "Paparazzi in the Hands of an Angry God: Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Birth of American Celebrity Culture," *theotherjournal.com: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* 18(2010).

Raven's Bread is one of several emerging networks that support this increasingly widespread "revival" of solitude, not only among Roman Catholics, but among an increasingly diverse range of individuals. These networks provide a forum for contemporary hermits and solitaries to negotiate their identities in conversation with one another. Through these connections, they are reclaiming historic models of eremitic life and redefining solitude in the context of an American religious landscape changing in several key ways. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues warned in *Habits of the Heart,* traditional religious institutions have continued to decline in membership and the individual is increasingly the locus of religion in America.[3] Increasingly, individuals are not seekers, looking for a new religious affiliation, but instead identify as "spiritual, not religious."[4] Like this broader reshaping of American religion, I argue the revival of solitude is increasingly shaped by the rise of digital technologies. These new tools facilitate new online networks, which bear important continuities with earlier modes of connection, but also constitute something new, what Elizabeth Drescher describes as a "Digital Reformation." To understand the changing culture of solitude in America, and the changing culture of religion in America, we must investigate online spaces and digital technologies, which are ushering in "radical new globalized modes of access, participation, co-creativity, and distributed authority."[5]

This chapter tracks the impact of this Digital Reformation by examining several networks within the contemporary revival of solitude. I begin with *Raven's Bread*, picking up the story of reform within Roman Catholicism. The newsletter nurtures a

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[3] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*.
[4] "“Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation."
[5] Elizabeth Drescher, *Tweet If You [Love] Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2011), 1.

dialogue among hermits, raising questions about the meaning and practice of solitude. Next, I profile three individuals who read and contribute to *Raven's Bread,* but who also participate in other online networks exploring solitary spirituality in diverse religious traditions. These cases demonstrate what sociologist Barry Wellman calls "networked individualism," a shift away from tight-knit, local communities and toward non-local networks centered on individuals. I juxtapose these religious networks with a final example: the "Cult of Chris McCandless." In the decades since this solitary wilderness wanderer died in a bus in the Alaskan bush, increasing numbers of fans have risked their own lives and ventured to the site. They also congregate online, where they share stories and images of their pilgrim travels, and also debate the norms of authenticity that define sacred solitude in the wild.

Raven's Bread

Raven's Bread traces its roots to the Roman Catholic Church, and the "renewal of the life of hermits" discussed in the previous two chapters. Bishop Remi De Roo saw the early signs of this revival in British Columbia, and his 1967 *in scriptus* helped set in motion reforms to canon law, which officially recognized the hermit as a consecrated way of life in 1983.[6] Even after the change, however, many bishops were (and still are) reluctant to take responsibility for these diocesan hermits, called to solitude but not under supervision of a community. In 1984, Dominican Friar Father Bede Jagoe established a newsletter and loose network named *Marabou* (from the Arabic for hermit) to foster interchange among these scattered solitaries and to support individuals as they discerned

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[6] *Animadvertenda In Scriptus* facta a Remi J. De Roo, Episcopo Victoriensis, circa Schema Emendatum Propositionum, De Accommodata Renovatione Vitae Religiosae, 1967.

whether and how to make public vows. *Marabou* featured spiritual reflections, poetry, a biographical profile of an historic hermit, stories of contemporary hermits, reflections on legal and canonical interpretation, and a bulletin board. Bede enlisted a handful of regular contributors and others to help manage the logistics of printing and posting the publication. The mailing list began with 30 and grew to nearly 200 subscribers by 1997, when Fr. Jagoe passed on editorial responsibility to Karen Karper, now Karen Karper Fredette, who had been helping for several years.[7]

Karper maintained the basic mission and format of the newsletter, but also expanded and adapted it to serve a wider audience of hermits, including any who "live alone by choice for spiritual reasons."[8] Reaching beyond its Roman Catholic origins, *Raven's Bread* explicitly welcomes those exploring this life, but "not living in strict solitude." Karper's own experience reflected some of the varied ways people live as hermits, and the trajectory she would set for the newsletter. For thirty years, she had lived in a cloistered community, the Sisters of Poor Clare, before leaving to pursue a yearning for more solitude. She spent six years as a hermit in West Virginia, living with her cat, Merton the Tom, before moving to North Carolina and marrying Paul Fredette, a priest whom she met in West Virginia.[9]

In 1997, Karen and Paul renamed the newsletter *Raven's Bread*, reflecting their desire that like the raven sent by God to nourish Elijah during his time of solitude, the newsletter would "bring regular nourishment to all those living the hidden life of

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[7] Back issues of Marabou are now archived on the Raven's Bread website: http://www.op.org/ravensbread/marabak/default.htm

[8] Karen Karper Fredette, interview with the author, August 5, 2011, Hot Springs, NC.

[9] See Karen Karper, *Where God Begins to Be: A Woman's Journey into Solitude* (Eerdmans, 1994).

contemplative prayer as hermits and solitaries."[10] Under their direction, the newsletter has become more collaborative, a place for hermits to share their stories, news, announcements, letters, and spiritual reflections. There is a bulletin board with posts by those offering and seeking practical resources like a suitable hermitage, as well as those seeking correspondents or organizing communities. The back page lists recommended books, many by *Raven's Bread* readers and contributors.

Paul added another new feature that serves to create space for readers to construct their own identities as hermits. His "Wood B. Hermit" cartoon follows the misadventures of a bearded, ragged-robed hermit as he faces the not so romantic realities of solitude. Wood B. never seems to get lonely thanks to the constant companionship of furry friends, both welcome and unwelcome critter companions. He struggles to grow anything in his garden. He shops for handy hermit gadgets to make silence more bearable. Wood B. creates a space for self-deprecation, a space to laugh at how seriously hermits often take themselves. The cartoon demystifies the hermit life and satirizes the stereotype of a monolithic hermit identity, signaling *Raven's Bread's* openness to multiple models of solitude.

Image removed due to copyright concerns.

Rather than reinforce a single, authoritative vision of solitary life, *Raven's Bread* instead raises questions about what it means to be a hermit in the contemporary world. Who are we and what should we call ourselves? What sorts of social relationships are appropriate? Where do we live? What kind of spiritual and practical work are we called

[10] Karen Fredette and Paul Fredette, *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 1, no. 1 (1997): 2.

to do? How are we connected to the broader world? Each issue contains a section titled, "Hermits ask… and Respond," where readers submit reflections on a common question. These questions range from mundane sorts of logistical challenges of hermit life to the deeper joys and fears of solitude. This section consistently serves to demonstrate the diversity of practices and perspectives among *Raven's Bread* readers, and it creates an ongoing dialogue from issue to issue as readers respond to one another. Together they negotiate their individual identities, supporting and challenging each person's sense of authentic vocation. The exchanges in *Raven's Bread* also establish a collective identity, a sense of solitude as growing, diverse, and engaged with the world. I will briefly survey some of the most common questions that arise in the newsletter, which exemplify this collaborative and deliberative dynamic.

Hermits Past and Present

Raven's Bread readers consistently define themselves through their historical roots. The Desert Fathers and Mothers are the most prominent historic foundation, and this oldest Christian monasticism becomes the standard that authenticates the practices of "new" hermits in other times and places. For the first six issues, Raven's Bread ran a regular feature profiling "America's Desert Fathers and Mothers", stretching from Johannes Kelpius in the colonial period to Sister Joan Sutherland, one of the pioneers in the late 1960s. No figure is more important than Thomas Merton in directly inspiring the revival of interest in solitude and eremiticism. Raven's Bread contributors often note, however, that Merton was an exceptional solitary, the"Hermit of Times Square" who corresponded with prominent figures, published voluminously, and pursued Eastern contemplative traditions as passionately as Christian ones. Readers recognize that they

must chart their own course in their own context, with historic hermits as an inspiration more than a template. One contributor submits this advice to new hermits: "Quit thinking about Thomas Merton. Quit thinking about Thoreau. Quit using the word 'poustinia.' Shut up... you'll do fine."[11]

Solitude and Social Relationships

Solitude is the distinguishing quality of eremitic life, but contemporary hermits negotiate together what it means to live as a solitary with the real constraints and obligations of things like family and finances. They share practical strategies like scheduling certain times for phone calls or visits. They share ways of finding solitude while caring for aging parents. They also discuss the difficulties of being distant from family, discussing, for example, how they deal with grieving for a loved one when they are far away. Raven's Bread fosters an especially lively dialogue among and about those pursuing solitude in marriage.[12]

Many hermits begin with strict social boundaries that help them maintain their privacy, but they often become less rigid as they realize a deeper sense of solitude that involves more than just being alone. One quotes Merton, writing, "one becomes a solitary at the moment when no matter what may be one's external surrounding, one is suddenly aware of one's own inalienable solitude and sees that one will never be anything but solitary. From that moment, solitude is not potential – it is actual."[13]

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[11] *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 10, no. 3 (2006).
[12] Although Karen Karper and Paul Fredette do not call themselves hermits, their presence as editors keeps open the question of whether and how a couple can live together as hermits. On the lone occasion they weigh in, Karper and Fredette note, "Our solitude is 'relative,' not absolute (whose is?) but we manage to maintain an atmosphere of silence and prayer in our home." Ibid.
[13] *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 8, no. 4 (2004): 4.

Solitude in Place

One way hermits negotiate the boundaries of their solitude is in their choices about where they live, but when it comes to dwelling place, *Raven's Bread* again demonstrates the stereotype as just that. A few readers report living in wilderness, but most report living in more conventional places–in mobile home parks, in brick ranch subdivisions, in high-rise apartment buildings, in inner-city slums, and even in prison cells. Like others, contemporary hermits often choose where to live largely based on practical concerns including safety, convenience, and affordability.

Hermitages do not always match the romantic image of the idyllic hut in the woods, but many hermits still develop deep connection with their particular place. In the newsletter, readers often identify themselves with their place-name (e.g. Karen Karper, Still Wood, Hot Springs, NC). Many write about nature as sacred space, and they share ways they seek to live lightly on the land. The newsletter models this, each featuring a short "Word from Still Wood" accompanied by a seasonal illustration of the editors' hermitage. The Fredettes use these visual and verbal nature reflections to provide framing metaphors for themes of each newsletter, grounding this global collaboration in their particular mountain valley.

Solitude in Practice

Hermits express their identity through their place, "where they are from," and also their practice, "what they do." Many have a written or unwritten personal "rule" that outlines their daily routines of prayer, reading, relaxation, and work. Hermits often start off with relatively rigid schedules that grow more flexible over time. *Raven's Bread* maintains a collection of eremitic rules from the history of the church, which they send to

interested readers. They also provide regular opportunities for readers to share their own basic routines and practices in the newsletter.

Paul and Karen write that *Raven's Bread* represents the "unity and diversity of eremitical life," and that meditation and contemplative prayer are the common ground that "transcends denominational differences and becomes a focal point for people of diverse beliefs to meet in shared experience." Contributors routinely discuss other religious practices, including Eucharistic Liturgy, Liturgy of the Hours, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, lectio divina, centering prayer, use of a mantra, the rosary, the stations of the cross, and fasts.

Readers describe these not only as private activities, but also as expressions of concern for the world and commitment to the common good. Contemplative prayer deepens their sensitivity to the suffering around them. Silence and solitude allowing them to better hear the "cry of the world." Others write that they "pray the paper," whether in print or online, to direct their compassion toward the world's places of need. Alone in silence, the hermit can live more deeply in solidarity with the suffering: "To be drawn into this dread solitude is really an invitation to keep company with God's loneliness -- God emptied in total identification with us -- ignored, hidden, forgotten, profoundly poor. Drawn by this Presence, the hermit stands with rejected ones everywhere."[14]

Work and simple living also provide opportunities to live in solidarity and contribute to the common good. In a reprinted article, "Must Hermits Work?," Kenneth C. Russell touts the value of labor as a means to "share the lot of the rest of humanity, particularly the working poor" and to "shape the solitary life to conform to the realities of

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[14] *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 2, no. 4 (1998).

our time."[15] Richard Simonelli advocates in particular the work of simple living, in contrast to the busyness of society at large: "Hermits offer the 21st century a model of human decency, wholesomeness, and an interiority that we all so desperately need. Living in a low-key, low-tech way, the hermit's renunciation is good news for an over-stressed contemporary world."[16] Many readers articulate vows of simplicity, striving to live as economically and ecologically responsible citizens of the planet, and they describe a range of practices toward this end–gardening, recycling, eating a vegetarian diet, and going without a car–practices that, however private, minimize their very real footprint on the world.

Raven's Bread has grown into a key site for individuals to negotiate together the norms of solitude. Karen Karper Fredette writes, "Paul and I feel like we are the hub of a 'world wide web' of hermits and solitaries."[17] The newsletter has also raised the visibility of this growing trend and attracted the interest of every manner of news media. The Fredettes have been interviewed by major media including *Newsweek, The New York Times, NPR, CBS News, and CBC Radio-Canada,* as well as countless other reporters, bloggers, and researchers. Paul recalls the greatest flurry of interest came after they were featured on *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* Karen takes all this in stride, accustomed to curiosity seekers since her time alone in West Virginia. "If you want to get an interview, just tell them you're a hermit."[18]

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[15] *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 6, no. 2 (2002).
[16] *Raven's Bread: Food for Those in Solitude* 4, no. 1 (2000): 2.
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[18] Karen Karper-Fredette, interview with the author, August 5, 2011, Hot Springs, NC.

The Fredettes have embraced this expanded exposure and been intentional about getting their voices heard. Karen self-published two memoirs, narrating the story of her hermit years and the transition to married life.[19] In 2008, she and Paul published *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life,* a survey of the growing trend toward solitude and a resource for those interested in such a life.[20] In recent years, they have also embraced online platforms to expand their ministry of "service to hermits and lovers of solitude around the world." They correspond with hermits and offer a range of resources trough their website, including "copies of hard-to-find documents and data about eremitical life such as juridical commentaries; bibliographies; sample rules and articles on various aspects hermit life." In 2013, they began recording an hour-long weekly "virtual TV broadcast about hermit life," available on YouTube.[21] Even as they learn to utilize these online tools, Karen and Paul recognize the tension in utilizing technology in service of solitude. This is both a serious issue, and a debate they diffuse with their typical tone of light-hearted humor, embodied in the Wood B. Hermit cartoon.

Image removed due to copyright concerns.

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[19] Karper, *Where God Begins to Be: A Woman's Journey into Solitude*; Karen Karper Fredette, *Where God Is Ever Found: From Cloister to Couple, a Woman's Autumn Journey* (2012).
[20] Paul A. Fredette and Karen Karper Fredette, *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2008).
[21] http://www.ravensbreadministries.com/

Networked Individualism: Alone Together Online

With over 1,000 readers, *Raven's Bread* represents a diverse range of individuals who part of this contemporary revival of solitude. The newsletter also demonstrates how much these dispersed individuals value opportunities to connect with one another. As *Raven's Bread* has grown, so have a host of other networks of religious solitaries, serving the needs of those wanting more intimate connections and a more focused common purpose. Utilizing a range of communication technologies, these networks deepen the dialogues discussed above, providing more opportunities to discern and discuss what constitutes authentic solitude for each individual.

The cases in this section investigate three examples of such smaller, emerging networks and the lives of three *Raven's Bread* readers active within them. These cases exemplify the broader restricting in contemporary social life and contemporary American religion. For much of human history, social life was arranged around small, tight-knit groups (family, household, clan, workgroup, church, etc.) and also large, hierarchical bureaucracies (city, nation, corporation, denomination, etc.) Sociologists including Barry Wellman and Manuel Castells argue we are in the midst of a radical shift toward a new social arrangement, a "network society" or "networked individualism." The Internet, social media and mobile communication technologies have helped speed this shift, creating new forms of non-local "community," typically defined by their porous boundaries, multiple scales of connection, and narrow, specialized common interests. These new networks bear both similarities and differences with historic networks of solitude, whether hermits clustered together, alone.[22]

[22] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*; Wellman, *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*; Rainie and Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*.

Sister Laurel O'Neal: Negotiating the Norms of Catholic Solitude[23]

As *Raven's Bread* has developed from a small network of Roman Catholics into a broadly inclusive forum for exploring solitude, other networks have emerged for hermits discussing solitude within Roman Catholicism. In 1999, Terrye Newkirk created a Catholic hermits email group, which now has 238 members. The group is often quiet for stretches of time, then erupts in debate as members negotiate the norms of authentic solitude, especially orthodox Catholic solitude. I have followed the email list for more than five years, tracking in particular these moments that elicit animated exchanges and reveal members' deep convictions, hopes, and fears. In addition, I interviewed the current list administrator, Sister Laurel O'Neal to ask about her experience with the online network, and to talk with her about her blog, "Notes from Stillsong Hermitage," which is another important site for articulating a Roman Catholic perspective on solitude.

Soon after I joined the list, debate erupted, focused on how the Catholic hermit should dress. Some scoffed at the "question of habits" as trivial and legalistic compared to "more important issues" like prayer and spirituality. For others, what to wear raised profound theological and vocational questions. As one member said, "this whole issue of dress code hits on something far deeper than what we cover our bodies with!" Over fifty emails circulated in a matter of days as members debated whether it was good or bad for the hermit to be visible in public. Sister Laurel argued habits were most appropriate because they signal the hermit's identity as fundamentally within community–silence in service of the Church. Others dismissed distinctive dress as elitist and even offensive. An email from the group's administrator summed up the mood and sought to establish a

[23] Sister Laurel O'Neal, interview with the author, April 12, 2010, Lafayette, CA.

spirit of civility: “Nothing wrong with a good discussion or strong opinion. However, some topics are by nature inflammatory, and the question of habits is one. I just ask you all to remember this and tread a bit softly on the feelings and views of others.”

Another common issue that stirs debate is the appropriate boundary between Roman Catholic solitude and other contemplative traditions. In 2012, the Catholic Hermits list again flourished with activity, this time debating whether Catholic hermits should practice yoga. For some, this was a non-issue, but to others, it constituted a fundamental conflict with orthodox Catholic faith. Sister Laurel O’Neal, describes these sorts of debates as “brush fires,” and acknowledges she is usually “right in the middle of them.” When discussions burn hot, competing perspectives vie for authority, seeking to define and police the borders of Catholic solitude. At the height of these disagreements, a few members often announce their frustration and their decision to unsubscribe from the list.

Sister Laurel O’Neal has been living in solitude since the early 1980s. She read Canon 603 when it was first issued, in 1983, and began to read and think about eremitical life. After several years, she petitioned her diocese to be recognized as a hermit. Twenty-three years later, after a long and process full of countless roadblocks, she ultimately professed solemn vows in 2007, becoming a diocesan hermit. After her own experience waiting and working through the process, O’Neal decided to create a blog, “Notes from Stillsong Hermitage,” where she could share reflections and resources with others considering solitary vocations. “I had this feeling that I’ve got to find a way to write. I’ve got to find a way to share, and to do it so it doesn’t intrude on this space. Somebody told

me about blogs. I had heard the word, but didn't really know what it meant. And I looked at it and thought you know, now that's very cool."

Ever since, she has maintained a regular presence online. She now receives a steady stream of email messages from readers seeking advice, and these answers constitute much of the content for the blog. Laurel decided early on to limit the interactive features of the site, as a way of preserving her sanity and the sanctity of her solitary hermitage. "I didn't want comments coming on my blog because I saw the blog as an extension of this place, and hospitality is one thing but having people trampling through your place with muddy boots is a whole other thing. It just felt like it would conflict with solitude."

Between the Catholic Hermits list, the blog, and a new email list exclusively for diocesan hermits, the Internet is a vital part of Sister Laurel's vocation of solitude. She acknowledges this sometimes feels like a contradiction. "People ask me all the time, how can you be on the Internet and be a hermit. It's not an easy question to answer. It's not even an easy question for me to answer for myself sometimes." She stresses, however, "Solitude is a communal reality. It has to do with communion. You don't renounce society, you transcend it. And what you actually transcend are all the myths and values that anesthetize people. You don't avoid others or you don't grow." The Internet provides her with opportunities to grow and stay connected, even as she maintains a life largely alone.

Sister Laurel also acknowledges she sometimes wrestles with the seeming contradiction of living in solitude in the suburbs. For health reasons, she lives in a senior apartment complex in Lafayette, California. The place is "as quiet as you can get in the

middle of town," but she sometimes dreams of a different home. "You know, I would love to be able to live sort of out in the forest. Actually, the desert is a favorite place of mine. There's something about way the air feels on my skin. Everything about it makes something happen for me. But I know I can't do it." Instead, O'Neal makes the most of her context, connecting with both the human and more-than-human community in her midst. "I actually live outside a lot in the summertime. I pray out there. I read out there. I eat out there… I take walks a lot. There are lots of trails nearby." She feeds cats and raccoons who come to her porch, and occasionally inside. Muddy paw prints dot the sliding glass door, signs of eager visitors. Like hermits in more remote settings, she cultivates a relationship with her environment, however wild it is.

She is also attentive to her human neighbors, surrounded by seniors who also live alone in the adjacent apartments.

> It shapes the way I have come to think of what Merton calls the "unnatural solitudes." There are so many people here who are isolated, because they are old, they're spouses have died, whatever. This place weighs on my mind. The people come and go. They never have contact with one another. That shapes me. It causes me to think about people, and to be around them and to help them if I can. That's pretty different from most people's idea of a hermit. I don't think most people imagine a hermit going over on a Saturday morning to somebody's apartment, but I do that from time to time.

Sister Laurel O'Neal maintains an active network of connections online, communicating with other hermits navigating the evolving opportunities and challenges of solitude in the Roman Catholic Church, and she also offers this caring presence to those who are physically close.

Evan Howard: Semi-Eremitical Evangelical[24]

Evan Howard embraces a hybrid identity he describes as semi-eremitical, semi-monastic, or semi-solitary. He is committed to a disciplined life of contemplative solitude, and he is also a married father of two and a part-time professor. His personal rule of life outlines a balance of physical work, reading and writing, and daily praying of the Divine Office in his monastic cell, built into a rocky cliff near his family's Colorado homestead. During our conversation in the cell, Howard describes his personal wrestling with the idealized models of historic Christian hermits, and his eventual realization the "label of hermit" would be a "false path." "What I needed to do was to seek after what was authentically Evan, and not to try to put some crazy label to it… If you want to call it solitude, or a hermit, fine. I give up trying to name it." Throughout this process, he has relished the opportunity to discern this identity in dialogue with others in the pages of *Raven's Bread.*

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[24] Evan Howard, interview with the author, August 15, 2010, Montrose, CO.

Evan Howard and his monastic cell.

Howard is clear about his identity as an evangelical, a rarity among readers of the newsletter. “I came into Christianity through the Jesus Movement–you know, the Jesus People or Jesus Freak–in ninth grade, and I went right from there into Campus Crusade for Christ.” After graduating Trinity Evangelical Seminary, he served on the staff of a Vineyard Fellowship and helped “plant a seeker-sensitive” “clone” of the Willow Creek megachurch. Howard also experienced a subsequent conversion to the justice-oriented tradition within American evangelicalism. While at Whitworth College, he encountered Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and the Sojourners community, as well as a community of committed Christian students.[25] He and his wife Cheri made a pledge to radical simplicity; one they have deepened and maintained ever since, whether living and serving in inner-city urban ministries or living lightly at their remote homestead.

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[25] Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger : A Biblical Study* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1977).

Alongside this evangelical identity, Howard traces a longstanding connection with contemplative Christian traditions. He remembers watching *Brother Sun, Sister Moon,* the 1972 biopic that linked Francis of Assisi's earthy spirituality with American countercultural themes. In seminary, he and Cheri took regular silent retreats hosted by Roman Catholic sisters. Other evangelicals were making similar connections. Howard remembers his excitement when *Sojourners* magazine published an issue featuring the Desert Fathers, Thomas Merton, Henry Nouwen, and other contemplatives. By the end of seminary, he and Cheri had written "our first monastic rule."

Evan Howard is clear in his calling as a "contemplative for the sake of the church," probing the intersections of evangelicalism, social justice, and spirituality as a resource to others. Fulfilling this call, he devotes extensive time to solitary study and prayer in his cell, and he seeks opportunities to connect with others. He is active in a local congregation, participates in several academic societies, publishes books and articles, and travels to lead workshops and seminars on Christian spirituality. Howard has slowly, and very thoughtfully come to utilize the Internet as a tool for making these connections. His website offers a range of resources: a newsletter, articles, links, audio recordings of talks, and a series of videos, including one explaining his personal rule of life.[26] When I talked with him in 2010, he explained his ambivalence toward the Internet and social media. These powerful tools enable him to research and write in solitude and to share his work with the world. They also have the capacity to powerfully disrupt his solitude:

> Though I want to, and have to be connected to the Internet, there are some boundaries that I just have to be sure and maintain. Even just

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[26] The website is home of the organization he founded and directs: organization, Spirituality Shoppe, an Evangelical Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality. http://spiritualityshoppe.org/

> relationally… because it would invade the solitude, even the mental solitude, if that makes sense. I would be so cluttered with information and relationships and things, that you can't have the openness, the mental openness to think about things… and that takes time, and freedom.

Howard has learned to embrace his role as a connected contemplative, as a contemporary challenge and one rooted in tradition: "One lesson I have learned from my exploration of historical models is that solitude and community are never really separate. A solitary nearly always keeps some kinds of relationships."

Brother Richard Simonelli: Interfaith Contemplative[27]

Richard Simonelli describes his life as "a crazy walk to hermitage," wandering many roads in and through multiple spiritual traditions, eventually leading to solitude. In 1968, he left his Brooklyn home to do "the hippie thing," hitch-hiking to San Francisco. There, he first encountered Zen, stumbling upon a roommate who was meditating in the house, which was otherwise chaotic with music and drugs. Simonelli began regular practice at the San Francisco Zen Center, under teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. He continued to meditate in Zen communities in Portland, Oregon and at Shasta Abbey, in California. "I sat for seven years, and nothing really happened, but they said to sit and meditate, so I did… I really just needed community, and rules, and Zen had a lot." Disillusioned with Zen, he moved to Boulder, CO, drawn to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa, whose community he was part of for ten years. Along the way, Simonelli explored the men's spirituality movement of the late 1980s and 90s, and for two decades, he also journeyed through recovery from addiction. Healed by participation in the Native American Wellbriety movement, he now works as a writer and

[27] Brother Richard Simonelli, interview with the author, August 19, 2010, Nederland, CO.

communications specialist for the movement, and he continues to draw inspiration from Native spiritualities.

Brother Richard Simonelli's multi-faith altar.

In the early 1990s, Richard Simonelli and his wife divorced, and he moved into a cabin at the outskirts of Boulder. Steadily, his life grew more and more solitary. He was increasingly frustrated with the rigidity of spiritual community, and felt ready for more independence. In 1997, a friend gave him a copy of *Raven's Bread,* and he began to see his path to solitude as part of something bigger. He began sending submissions, and soon

was contacted by Judith Thackray, a nearby hermit who had seen his writing in the newsletter. Simonelli soon moved to Nederland, CO, to be in the same town, and the two have been "companions in solitude" ever since. "I think it's pretty essential to have someone that you resonate with. I don't know what the stereotypes of hermitage are that are out there, but I don't think it's about being totally alone. I don't think it ever was."

Grounded in the "Contemplative Vedanta" of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, Thackaray is committed to solitude and to interfaith dialogue. In 1998, she founded the Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada, a non-local, online community that now includes members of a wide range of backgrounds: "Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Cherokee & Other Native American Spiritualities, and Islamic Sufism."[28] Both Thackary and Simonelli have taken vows as hermit members of the order, and both combine Native American and Eastern contemplative traditions.

During our conversation, he explained how the group has adapted the Native American tradition of the "talking circle" to an online context.

> The idea in a talking circle is that the person who is talking holds the stick, then puts it in the center. You're really talking to the center of the circle, which is God, or the Creator. So everyone is talking to the Creator… We're doing it online. Sister Judith jumped on the simplest form–email. You know, there are websites with all sorts of fancy things… In my Native American work, we've tried video talking circles. There is all this technology, but almost all of it fails or goes flat after a while. So sharing by email seems to be the simplest way.

Like the *Raven's Bread* newsletters, these talking circles begin with suggested topics and questions, but they evolve into more fluid exchanges. Simonelli stresses that online interfaith dialogue allows diverse contemplatives to learn from one another, but also

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[28] http://contemplative-vedanta.blogspot.com/p/osa-info.html

pushes them to be more grounded. “You have to be anchored in your own tradition. It can’t just be the spiritual supermarket, where you do a little of this and a little of this.”

Brother Richard has embraced this online community, and he has also embraced his connection to the land. He described to me his daily rhythm of waking early for tea and meditation, followed by a period of work at his computer. In the afternoons, he drives up to a nearby trailhead for a hike, a nap, or to meditate outside. He emphasizes just how important this connection is: “The land to me is not just a good experience, not just fun to visit. The land is my savior… it’s a spiritual presence just like Jesus is to some others.” During my visit, he shared several places near his home that are “sacred sites,” bearing significant memories. He described more distant places he visits on regular retreats, where he can enjoy the spaciousness of the prairies and the mountains.

For the past decade, Richard has lived in a duplex, in the center of what he describes as a “growing, and very busy” mountain town. He expressed a yearning to live even more intimately with the land, “maybe in a sod house off the grid, or at least somewhere with a garden,” but he also laughed about how much nature is present even in his current context. “This is a town of foxes and bears. I’m interconnected here. When the raccoons come for my garbage I throw water on them and chase them away.” Brother Richard confirmed what many Americans feel, whether they are hermits or not. Online connections can be rich and meaningful, but sometimes it is important to unplug from the digital world and experience other kinds of embodied connection.

Into the Wild: The Cult of Chris McCandless and the Magic Bus

Religious hermits increasingly rely on digital technologies and online networks, and this Digital Reformation is also reshaping spiritualities of solitude in American

popular culture, well beyond the bounds of traditional religious institutions. One vivid example of this is the loose network of fans devoted to Christopher McCandless, a.k.a. Alexander Supertramp, who graduated from Emory University in 1990, donated his $24,000 of savings to charity, then wandered the American west in search of adventure. His travels culminated with a sojourn in the Alaska wilderness, where he lived alone in an abandoned Fairbanks City Transit bus, until he died of starvation 118 days later. This story is well known thanks to *Into the Wild,* the 1996 Jon Krakauer book and 2007 Sean Penn film.[29]

What is less well known is the story of enthusiastic fans who travel to the bus each year and share their stories, pictures, and videos online, creating a thriving subculture of individuals. Whether or not they live alone, these fans, like the hermits in the preceding cases, connect with one another online to negotiate the meaning and purpose of solitude. Like other cases throughout this study, this one clearly demonstrates the polarizing dynamics of the sacred. McCandless has developed into a contested symbol of sacred solitude, inspiring both awe and anger, fascination and frustration. Fans are inspired by his courage to live boldly, pursuing solitude and simplicity in the wild, but many are also troubled by his recklessness and stupidity, and his disengagement from family, friends, and the broader world.

More than twenty years since the McCandless story became public, this tension continues to simmer, especially focused on Bus #142, the “Magic Bus” where he lived and died in solitude. Journalists Jon Krakauer and Chip Brown each produced feature-length pieces early in 1993, for *Outside* and *The New Yorker* respectively, and beginning

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[29] Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1996); Sean Penn, "Into the Wild," (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008).

with these earliest accounts, the bus was represented as a memorial site, holding the memory of Chris's painful final days of starvation, and a container for the sacred, holding the relics of his simple, solitary life.[30] Krakauer and Brown both detail the material traces of McCandless's time there: a toothbrush and a pair of toenail clippers, a pair of boots and scribblings on the walls. On his first visit, Krakauer recalls feeling like an intruder in a sacred space.[31] His book culminates with an epilogue in which he visits again, this time with Chris's family. His mother Billie holds the spoon she remembers from an old set of silverware. She presses an old pair of jeans to her face, declaring, "They still smell like Chris." His father Walt installs a brass plaque and they arrange a bouquet of wildflowers and spruce boughs. Billie leaves a suitcase, filled with emergency supplies and a note urging "call your parents as soon as possible." Krakauer notes, "The suitcase also holds a Bible that belonged to Chris when he was a child, even though, she allows, 'I haven't prayed since we lost him.'"[32]

The sacred end point of Chris's pilgrim journey is now a destination for others who want to remember him. Since the first news reports of McCandless's death, visitors have traveled to Bus #142 from near and far, on foot and on skis, on ATVs and in helicopters. Pilgrims record their reflections in notebooks on the bus, and they post their stories and photos online, on personal blogs and on public forum sites, such as www.christophermccandless.info, which boasts 969 members and 4100 separate postings. Dozens of visitors chronicle their pilgrimage in YouTube videos, sharing their

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[30] John Krakauer, "Death of an Innocent: How Christopher Mccandless Lost His Way in the Wilds," *Outside*, January 1993., Chip Brown, "I Now Walk into the Wild," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 8 1993. Krakauer's article generated more mail than any in the magazine's history. Some readers praised McCandless as noble and heroic, while others condemned him as reckless and narcissistic. See the author's note in Krakauer, *Into the Wild*.
[31] *Into the Wild*, 179.
[32] *Into the Wild*, 202.

journey down the Stampede Trail, across the Teklanika River, approaching the clearing where the bus sits, and entering it reverently. Based on the number of comments and views, it is clear that hundreds of thousands who cannot make the journey in person experience the sacred space on their computers. These online videos and photos often feature similar shots, inventorying the relics in the bus, focusing on the plaque, and showing McCandless's marks left on the walls. The videos often weave in quotes from McCandless, taken from Krakauer's book, and feature McCandless's own still photographs, especially self-portraits taken at the bus, which are now widely available online.[33] Since the release of the film, many YouTube videos now also include songs from the soundtrack and scenes from the movie. Just as the bigscreen movie premiered, Krakauer and Penn filmed their own joint visit to the bus for the Sundance Channel's "Iconoclast" television program, and later YouTube, their pilgrimage promoting the movie, the book, and the bus. These media have steadily multiplied and mingled with one another, shaping and sustaining the myth of Christopher McCandless and a subculture of devoted fans, what some now call "The Cult of Chris McCandless."[34]

A few video-toting visitors have returned multiple times over the years, updating viewers on the state of the bus and acting as caretakers for the sacred shrine.[35] Kasey Cory, one of the most frequent visitors, stirred quite bit of controversy in 2007, just before the Hollywood movie release, when he sold the bus's instrument panel on ebay for $177.50. Cory, a resident of nearby Healy, Alaska has for years posted videos of his

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[33] Walt McCandless published previously unreleased photographs in 2011. Christopher McCandless, *Back to the Wild: The Photographs and Writings of Christopher Mccandless* (Twin Star Press, 2011).
[34] Power, Matthew. "The Cult of Chris McCandless." Men's Journal. September 2007. http://www.mensjournal.com/feature/M162/
[35] See, for example the Youtube videos of "goodwinjonathan": "Into the Wild Magic Bus 1, 2, 3, etc. http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=goodwinjonathon&view=videos

regular trips to the bus, where he often straightens and updates the status of things.[36] On ebay, he justified his removal of the panel (and a number of other items potentially for sale in the future) as part of his own commitment to maintaining the sacredness of the site: "To be honest, my rationale for this removal was that the bus and the area around it were becoming littered by material spread around by visitors and animals alike and in appreciation for the amount of effort undertaken by those who successfully make it out there (and those who don't) some cleaning was in order." In an interview posted on Outside magazine's blog, he challenged the understanding for the sacred as invested in a particular place or particular objects: "It's not about the shrine out there in the woods that's sacred. It's not any one item; it's the area. It's not about the instrument panel, or about that bus. It's about decisions, chasing dreams, humanity, and people like to take what they read, and what they see, and attach it to a place, to a thing, to have it resonate."[37]

As with any sacred symbol, the "Magic Bus" of Chris McCandless represents a whole constellation of social ideals, and in this case in particular, the solitary separation from the pollution of consumer society. When that ideal was violated and items from the bus were treated as commodities to be bought and sold in an online marketplace, the reaction was swift and strong, confirming these are potent, public symbols of sacred solitude. Kasey Cory's actions elicited outrage from bloggers, journalists, and countless fans, but also from the authoritative voices that helped create the McCandless myth in the

[36] See his "mtcaving" YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=mtcaving&view=videos&start=160

[37] Christina Erb, "Q&A: Selling Part of Bus 142," *Outside Blog,* posted October 19, 2007 http://outside-blog.away.com/blog/2007/10/qa-selling-bus-.html Cory is also quoted as saying, ""I did the whole thing just to get people talking about it." See Elizabeth Bluemink, "'Into the Wild' release spurs eBay sale," *Anchorage Daily News,* October 5, 2007 http://dwb.adn.com/news/alaska/story/9355534p-9269546c.html

first place. Outside magazine denounced Cory as an "unscrupulous profiteer." Camping beside the bus with Krakauer, just prior to the film release, Sean Penn denounced the disappearance of McCandless's boots as yet another example of someone "hungering to have an eBay item" before the release of the movie.[38] This iconoclastic cult of Chris McCandless has its own sacred norms and hierarchy of high priests who wield authority, if not control, and who attract criticism of their own.

Damage to the bus is one concern, but local officials in Healy and in Denali National Park also worry about the growing stream of pilgrims who risk their lives to visit Bus #142 and experience the solitude of the backcountry. Since the 2007 film, some estimate more than 100 McCandless fans a year make the trek. Rusty Lasell, the chief of the Tri-Valley Volunteer Fire Department in Healy, reports rescuing more than a dozen lost, stranded and injured visitors in the summer of 2013 alone.[39] In 2010, Swiss traveler Claire Ackermann drowned while attempting to cross the swollen Teklanika River, the same one that blocked a starving Chris McCandless from hiking back to civilization. Several Healy residents have proposed relocating the bus, airlifting it closer to the trailhead, or destroying it altogether, convinced the pilgrimage destination is too dangerous, and puts too much demand on local first responders to rescue unprepared McCandless devotees.[40]

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[38] See David Germain, "McCandless boots missing from bus: 'Into the Wild' Director Sean Penn was saddened to discover they'd been taken." *The Anchorage Daily News/Associated Press,* September 21st, 2007.

[39] Eva Holland, "Chasing Alexander Supertramp," (2013). See also Peter Beaumont, "In Alaska's Wilds, the Mystic Hiker's Bus Draws Pilgrims to Danger and Death," *The Observer*, January 18 2014; Diana Saverin, "The Chris Mccandless Obsession Problem," *Outside*, December 18 2013.Robyn Doolittle, "Penn's Film Feeds Legend: Alaskans tired of rescuing 'pilgrims' in the wild" *The Toronto Star* Oct 16, 2007 http://www.thestar.com/News/World/article/267203

[40] Shortly after the film's release, the Alaska Public Radio Network devoted an entire hour of "Talk of Alaska" to the debate over what to do with the bus. "Talk of Alaska: The McCandless Bus — Move it or Leave it?" November 13, 2007 http://aprn.org/2007/11/13/talk-of-alaska-the-mccandless-bus-move-it-or-

Others in Healy see the bus as a blessing in disguise, creatively capitalizing on its popularity by offering accommodations to visitors and assistance to reach the site (via dogsled, helicopter, and more).[41] In addition, the 49th State Brewing Company in Healy now owns a replica of the bus, the one used in Penn's film, and offers visitors the opportunity to "actually walk inside The Bus and take your own self-portrait like the one found inside the camera of Christopher McCandless." The brewery promotes this alternate pilgrimage destination:

> You can still walk 20 miles through mosquito-infested tundra, risk your life crossing the Teklanika River to get a photo next to the "Magic Bus." Please be safe, hire a guide and check in with Park Service before you depart. Or you can come to the 49th State Brewing Company, visit the Magic Bus from the movie, then walk 20 yards and try one of their handcrafted beers or enjoy a burger or steak in their popular bar & grill.[42]

This surge in solitude tourism is strikingly similar to the wave of Walden pilgrims detailed in the first chapter, including the creative and controversial attempts to profit from the relics and to replicate the experience. What is new is the extent to which this new pilgrimage is shaped by the culture of the Internet.

Bus #142 exemplifies the polarized dynamics of the sacred, especially as they play out in an increasingly networked world. It is a symbol of solitude in the wild, and a destination for wilderness devotees, but it is also a decaying remnant of urban Alaska, abandoned along a stretch of mining road over 50 years ago. Its meaning is produced and reproduced in stories, images, and cultural practices, in Hollywood and in Healy, in the wild and online. "Authentic" symbols, spaces, and experiences of solitude increasingly

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leave-it/ , leaving locals responsible for rescuing stranded pilgrims. As the flow of visitors has continued, the debate rages on. Sean Doogan, "Should the Infamous Mccandless Bus near Healy, Alaska Be Removed?," *Alaska Dispatch News*, June 4 2013.

[41] See, for example http://www.earthsonglodge.com/into-the-wild.html

[42] http://49statebrewing.com/bus.html

mix together with carefully crafted and craftily commercialized reproductions. The lines blur between what is natural and artificial, real and virtual, as politics and profit become entangled with the sublime purity of sacred solitude and its sacred place in the wilderness.

McCandless's story is now much more than a story; it is a lived religious phenomenon with a dynamic community of producers and consumers, devotees and detractors. It manifests itself in the embodied practice of pilgrimage and the material objects that bear McCandless's memory. The "Cult of Chris McCandless" is an example of an emerging religious culture that is visible both "on the ground" and on the Internet, one that engages America's oldest and newest frontiers. Together with the other cases in this chapter, this one demonstrates the demand for a mix of research methods, probing the history and practice of solitude through face-to-face oral history interviews as well as online ethnography. This layering of sources and methods reveals the ongoing dynamics of sacred solitude, as individuals continually renegotiate collective ideals in conversation with one another and with the broader culture.

Conclusion

For the last several years, as I have pursued this cultural history of solitude in America, I have taught regular courses in environmental history and ethics. Inevitably, during each semester, at least one of my undergraduate students will approach me after class or during office hours to talk about Christopher McCandless. He embodies the mystique of solitude, which remains alluring to a new generation pondering their spiritual path and their place in the environment. These students often express mixed emotions and want to talk through the inspiring but troubling story.

Over time, in my teaching, I have begun to address this story head-on, presenting to students the ongoing conflicts over McCandless and the bus. I situate these contested dynamics of sacred solitude historically and spatially, stressing this is no isolated case, but an example of polarities that also swirl at a broader scale in the contradictory representations of Alaska itself. Since long before the McCandless story, the "49th State" has been culturally constructed as America's frontier, a pure, wild landscape set apart from the profane impacts of modern, global, industrial civilization–just the sort of place most fitting for an adventurer in search of solitude. Literary scholar Susan Kollin argues Alaska has become configured as "a hypernatural landscape in the dominant American imagination," a sanctuary of solitude and pristine wilderness at a time when the rest of the nation is increasingly profaned by sprawling development.[1] She challenges this myth, however, highlighting the history of resource extraction and American expansionism in

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[1] Kollin argues this reality was both revealed and concealed by the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, which national media reported with images of dying wildlife and oil-drenched beaches, often ignoring the history of logging, mining, and whaling in Prince William Sound or the decades of industrial development brought by the oil industry. Susan Kollin, *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 25.

the state. Sanctification of Alaska, Kollin argues, obscures the state's complicated past, imagining it as a previously unsettled virgin land, and erasing the history and ongoing presence of indigenous peoples.

Kollin echoes William Cronon's influential essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," which challenges the romanticized vision of wilderness that has dominated American environmental discourse for so long. Cronon's essay opens his 1996 edited volume *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature,* one of the most important and early articulations of an interdisciplinary environmental humanities. More than a collection of essays, it represents the collaboration of over a dozen scholars who gathered for a semester-long, weekly seminar aimed at probing the cultural construction of nature. In the Introduction, Cronon describes one of the group's regular practices, first proposed by Donna Haraway. She invited each participant to collect and share "found objects"–"texts, advertisements, paintings, anything that would exemplify as concretely and vividly as possible the ideas of nature we wished to explore." The group curated a "gallery" of these objects, many interspersed in the book, intended as a "a rich and playful tool" to challenge themselves to think in "new and unexpected ways that unsettle conventional ideas of nature."[2] The book's authors "rethink" a range of concepts linked to nature in the American imagination, but they are committed to more than playful critique. Cronon stresses the book exemplifies "the practical relevance for practical problem solving of humanistic disciplines that are rarely even consulted by policymakers and activists who devote

[2] William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 27.

themselves to environmental protection."[3] I routinely use *Uncommon Ground* in my teaching, assigning the readings and challenging students to collect and share their own found objects.

The historical cases in this study, from Johannes Kelpius in his colonial-era cave to Chris McCandless in his post-industrial-era bus, serve as a collection of found objects, which together provide a window into the dynamics of the sacred. Through these cases, I have traced the genealogy of solitude as a remarkably durable and dynamic sacred symbol. This study shows solitude as integral in creating and sustaining a whole ecology of cultural constructions, concepts that are foundational for American environmentalism (nature, wilderness, the frontier, the sublime, the primitive, simplicity, etc.) and American religion (spirituality, authority, community, authenticity, purity, moral integrity, etc.) Solitude anchors and animates these constellations of themes, even as it constantly adapts to new contexts and new contestations. Like Cronon's work, this dissertation is probing and playful. I draw on the humanistic disciplines to sketch a cultural history of solitude, not only as an exercise in scholarly critique, but also a constructive contribution to the practical and political challenges facing American environmentalism and American religion.

Alone in the Anthropocene: The End of Solitude and the End of Nature

Since the publication of *Uncommon Ground*, scholars have continued "rethinking" these interlocking, foundational concepts that have both defined and constrained American environmentalism. A wave of recent books herald the dawn of a new era in the politics and culture of the movement. Emma Marris re-imagines nature for a "post-wild

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[3] Ibid.

world," calling humans to actively embrace our role managing this "rambunctious garden," since "we already running the whole Earth, whether we admit it or not."[4] Paul Wapner says we are "living through the end of nature," which is an opportunity for the movement to "liberate itself" from a narrow focus on wild nature and instead pursue both "ecological health and social health."[5]

Wapner intentionally echoes Bill McKibben's best-selling 1989 book, *The End of Nature,* one of the earliest popular books outlining the impacts of climate change, and one of the earliest to challenge the concept of nature itself. "By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us."[6] McKibben argues there is no longer any space set apart from humanity, thus signaling the end of nature, and in a sense, also the end of solitude. In an era of global climate change, there is no possibility of an absolute separation from society.

Scientists increasingly argue the climate is only one of many earth systems that bear the marks of human impact. Habitat destruction, invasive species, ocean acidification, and urbanization have transformed the planet, and for the first time in history, human activity is "changing the Earth on a scale comparable with some of the major events of the ancient past," and these changes appear "permanent, even on a geological time-scale."[7] A growing number of scientists now propose we have entered a

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[4] Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 2.
[5] Wapner, *Living through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism*.
[6] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 58.
[7] Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "The New World of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Science & Technology* 44, no. 7 (2010): 2228.

new epoch in the long history of the Earth, labeling it the Anthropocene, to signal humanity's influence as its distinctive feature.

In 2012, Peter Kareiva, Michelle Marvier, and Robert Lalasz announced a new vision for "Conservation in the Anthropocene," and at the core of their argument was a critique of the American romance with solitude. They trace the "myth of solitude" to nineteenth century thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who claim "the greatest use of nature is as a source of solitary spiritual renewal, describing nature as a place to escape modern life, enjoy solitude, and experience God." Kareiva and his colleagues accuse them of hypocrisy, for celebrating simplicity and solitude while living close to town and riding the train. They criticize more recent voices like Edward Abbey, who "pined for companionship in his private journal even as he publicly exulted in his ascetic life in *Desert Solitaire*."[8] In a video that accompanies the article, Kareiva, who is Chief Scientist for the Nature Conservancy, attacks Abbey and others who perpetuate the "myth" of solitude, saying, "It's a lie! It's a total lie."[9]

After several years researching solitude and sharing my findings with others, I am thoroughly familiar with this "gotcha" critique, which looks for any lapse in absolute solitude as proof of hypocrisy. Thoreau was not *really* alone, and not *really* in the wild, and neither were countless individuals who followed him. Surely hermits with highspeed Internet are not *real* hermits. But this critique misses the point. Throughout American history, solitude has maintained its mystique, and remains a *real* cultural force, even as purity has proven elusive in case after case. Often, the public is in on the secret, well

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[8] Michelle Marvier Peter Kareiva, and Robert Lalasz "Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility," *Breakthrough Journal 2* (2011).
[9] http://thebreakthrough.org/people/profile/Peter-Kareiva

aware of the not-so-hidden "hypocrisies," but many are still drawn to the magnetic pull of solitude.

Kareiva and his colleagues call for a "new conservation" grounded in pragmatism rather than ideology, and realism rather than romantic notions of solitude in nature. Throughout this study, I have critiqued the romantic stereotype of solitude, not to spell the end of solitude, but to reveal a resilient, pragmatic tradition, in which the "end" of solitude is not absolute separation from society, but rather a more balanced, grounded, intentional engagement with the world. The cases gathered here show this is not merely a fantasy, and solitude is not merely a fiction. In a variety of contexts, individuals continue to carve out spaces to be alone, whether to connect with God, self, or nature. And the broader culture continues to clamor for their stories, hungry for models of bold, counter-cultural choices, for examples of disciplined practice, and for the promise of grounding in place. This, I would argue, is precisely the sort of solitude most fitting for the Athropocene, for a future in which boundaries continue to blur between the human and the natural, the authentic and the artificial. As a new wave of "post-environmentalists" praise progress and technological solutions, now more than ever we need models of creative and committed solitude, grounded in place.[10]

Solitude in American Religion

Solitude is a distinctive and dynamic tradition with deep roots in American religious culture. As I have shown, stories of solitude have inspired and confounded popular audiences, and influenced scholarly discourses as well. In 1901, William James

[10] see Ted Nordhaus Michael Shellenberger, *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* Kindle ed. (2011). "Conservation in the Anthropocene" is one of the featured essays.

called for new attention to individual religious experience beyond ecclesiastical institutions. He positioned solitude as a pure, universal category for an emerging comparative scientific study of religion. Investigating his experience in the Adirondacks, this study demonstrates how much his fascination with solitude was historically contingent, shaped by encounters with backcountry guides and hermits and an emerging culture of conservation.

Precisely because James was sensitive to these historical trends, his work anticipated what has been a steady turn toward individual spirituality in America. James' contemporary Émile Durkheim observed this growing individualism as both a unifying democratic value and a potentially dangerous threat to social solidarity. Generations of subsequent scholars have wrestled with this tension, anxiously observing the shift toward individual "spirituality" separate from affiliation with religious community. In 1985, *Habits of the Heart* warned of declining religious institutions and increasing "expressive individualism." Nothing encapsulated this concerning trend more than "Sheilaism," the authors' caricature of a self-focused, personal religion.

Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow responded with more optimistic interpretations. Roof claimed baby boomer spirituality was not vague, shallow, and self-centered, but in fact demonstrated reflexivity in adapting to a complex and changing world. Wuthnow recognized a shift from spiritualities of "dwelling" to spiritualities of "seeking." He proposed a middle path, "practice-oriented spirituality," that would draw on the resources of longstanding religious traditions and institutions, while recognizing the importance of individuals' own intentions and adaptations.[11]

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[11] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*.

This study provides many examples of solitude that fits their more hopeful take on individual spirituality. Hermits throughout history have sought independence from religious bodies, but rather than shallow self-centeredness, most ground themselves in historic traditions of solitude, determined to demonstrate their authenticity and integrity. They have also proven creative, adapting established practices to new contexts and creating new combinations out of diverse traditions.

This study also demonstrates something none of these scholars could fully anticipate, that those living in solitude, those seemingly most isolated in their spirituality, are in fact highly networked. Throughout history, hermits have sought out connections with one another, not only linking up with like-minded individuals, but also establishing creative collaborations, combining diverse traditions. This connective impulse has been bolstered by the rise of digital technologies, facilitating new forms of community among solitary dwellers.

Carrying the Stories of Solitude

After a full day visiting with Brother Richard Simonelli, he broke the flow of conversation to offer his gratitude. Like the other hermits I visited, he thanked me for taking time to hear his story, and for sharing bits of other stories I had gathered, whether historical or contemporary. For me, and for those I interviewed, this was a rare chance to discuss solitude in a way that was intimately personal, while also reflecting on broader cultural connections. Brother Richard paused to recognize just how much he appreciated our exchange: “You know in the indigenous traditions of the Southwest, there is the Kokopelli figure, the flute player. Kokopelli was a messenger. That’s one of the

understandings. He travelled from community to community, from region to region, and he carried the stories. What you are doing is a little like that–visiting, listening, and sharing stories."

I have covered lots of ground in this research project, collecting stories of solitude in archives, books, and news media, in face-to-face oral history interviews, and in a range of online contexts. I am convinced this mix of sources and methods is essential, not only for this project for others investigating the contours of American religious cultures. Our challenge is to visit, to listen, and to share; to gather stories across a variety of contexts and to carry them into new communities; and to let these stories speak to and with one another in new ways. My research demonstrates the value of the sacred as an interpretive perspective. Even these largely hidden stories of solitude buzz with energy, connected to a constellation of collective values that are constantly being reimagined and reinforced.

In my travels, I have been continually aware that research is a two-way exchange. Those I encountered along the way share a deep fascination with solitude, and we join with a whole history of others before us who circulate the stories and images of solitude in America. We share a sense that something is at stake in these stories, that solitude is a powerful, sacred symbol whose meaning and value are never quite stable. And so we continue to carry these stories forward, reinterpreting them in our own context.

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