



## The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology

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### CHAPTER

## 5 *Prosoche*: The Art of Attention

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### Abstract

As the very fabric of life continues to fray and tear, the need for us to be able to apprehend the whole, to see all things as existing in intimate relationship with one another, has never been more necessary. The ancient Christian contemplative tradition, with its deep commitment to the simple practice of *prosoche* or attention, offers one important resource for helping us recover a more encompassing vision of the whole. One also finds a striking commitment to the practice of attention in modern and contemporary traditions of reflection on the natural world. And while the precise meaning of what it is to pay attention varies tremendously among and between these traditions, there are compelling reasons for considering them together. Perhaps the most significant reason is their shared sense of what it means to cultivate the art of attention as part of a serious, disciplined practice. This chapter argues that the recovery of such practice can help us heal some of the imaginative rifts that have prevented us from seeing and living in the world with a sense of its integrity, beauty, and mystery.

**Keywords:** [contemplation](#), [Christian contemplative tradition](#), [attention](#), [reflection](#), [natural world](#)

**Subject:** [Christian Spirituality and Religious Experience](#), [Religious Studies](#), [Christian Theology](#), [Religion and Ecology](#)

The highest ecstasy is ...attention at its fullest.<sup>1</sup>

SIMONE WEIL

Nothing is more essential to prayer than attentiveness.<sup>2</sup>

EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

“THE SALMON ARE back. I saw them yesterday.” Sr. Claire whispers these words to me at breakfast on New Year’s morning. She offers this report to me in her usual, straightforward manner. Yet there is more than a little excitement in her voice. The salmon in the Mattole River watershed here in Northern California have been struggling for survival. Their habitat has been so severely compromised by logging that fewer and fewer of them have been making it upstream each year to their spawning grounds. There is concern that soon they may stop coming altogether. So, their return this year is cause for celebration. And word of their presence has now become part of our New Year’s celebration at Redwoods Monastery. Soon, I am standing on the bank of Thompson Creek gazing down into the rushing water below. But I do not see them. Not immediately anyway. I laugh at my own impatience. Then I take a deep breath and settle in to wait and watch. I am joined in this vigil by Claire and by my daughter Julia. It is cool and dark under the canopy of redwood, alder, and maple trees, silent, except for the sound of the wind and the water. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and continue scanning the water below. Still nothing. Perhaps I am not looking in

the right place. But it has been so long since I have seen salmon in the wild. Would I recognize them even if I saw them? I am not sure.

p. 142 It is a familiar feeling, this uncertainty about what I am looking for and how to look for it. And it pertains not only to salmon but to almost everything that matters most to me. This concern with learning how to look, how to pay attention, how to see—learning to avoid missing, through carelessness or inattention, that which is most precious and valuable—is, I think, at the heart of what first brought me to this monastery over thirty years ago. And it is what draws me here still. The previous evening, I had gathered with the members of the Redwoods Monastery community and with other friends of the community who had joined them for the New Years–Epiphany celebration, to sit in the darkness of the monastery chapel, waiting, watching, keeping vigil. Standing on the edge of the riverbank this morning is, I begin to see, another way of keeping vigil, part of the essential spiritual practice of paying attention.

In the Christian spiritual tradition, the practice of watchfulness or keeping vigil traces its roots back to at least the late third and early fourth centuries, when Christian monastics first entered into the silence and solitude of the Egyptian desert to search for God. The early monks spoke of the value of *prosoche* or attention, of *nepsis* or vigilance, and of *hesychia* or stillness in their quest for an encompassing, contemplative awareness of the Divine. At its deepest level, the contemplative life was understood by the ancient monastics as a way of seeing (or to extend the metaphor as the monks often did, a way of listening or touching or tasting or smelling). *Theoria*, the word most often used to describe this contemplative awareness, refers to a way of seeing that includes but also transcends what is visible on the surface. It is a way of seeing deeply into the *whole* of reality, God, the world, everything, and situating oneself with integrity in relation to this whole.

But what does it mean to see and apprehend the whole? What does it mean to see in a way that honors both what is visible to the eyes as well as what is not visible? In an age of ecological crisis, addressing these questions has become both more crucial and more problematic than ever. As the very fabric of life continues to fray and tear, the need for us to be able to apprehend the whole, to see all things as existing in intimate relationship with one another, has never been more necessary. In spite of this, some of our most characteristic ways of thinking about and imagining the world have made it increasingly difficult for us to do so. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the oft-noted bifurcation and antagonism between scientific and religious ways of apprehending reality. Although both science and religion have a deep investment in being able to apprehend the whole of reality, the radical materialism and reductionism that underlies so much contemporary scientific thought and the radical transcendence and dualism at the heart of so much contemporary religious thought and practice makes a rapprochement between them seem, at times, impossible. And in the present cultural moment, at least in North America, the often-aggressive sense of antagonism between Darwinian determinism and classical religious thought and practice (in particular, p. 143 though not exclusively, fundamentalist Christian thought and practice) only seems to be deepening. We are being encouraged to see reality not as whole, but as bifurcated or fragmented, as rooted either in matter or in spirit, as guided either by biological forces or by an unseen, divine hand.<sup>3</sup>

That this fragmented vision of reality seems so transparently thin and inadequate has done little to undermine its imaginative and even programmatic power in the present moment. Nor can one avoid the sense that it is contributing profoundly to our deepening feeling of alienation from the living world, to what some have referred to as the disenchantment of the world.<sup>4</sup> Still, there are other ways of seeing and apprehending reality that are more subtle and more deeply rooted in our intuitive feeling for the whole, and that are not as susceptible to such simple reductions. The ancient Christian contemplative tradition, with its deep commitment to the simple practice of *prosoche* or attention, offers one important resource for helping us recover a more encompassing vision of the whole. One also finds a striking commitment to the practice of attention in modern and contemporary traditions of reflection on the natural world. And while the precise meaning of what it is to pay attention varies considerably among and between these traditions, there are compelling reasons for considering them together. Perhaps the most significant reason is their shared sense of what it means to cultivate the art of attention as part of a serious, disciplined practice. The precise shape of this discipline came to mean one thing for the monk, and another for the poet and naturalist. But one can often discern a shared sense of the value of the *practice* itself, of all that can come from learning to be still and pay attention—to oneself, to the world, and yes, to the mysterious sense of the whole that sometimes

emerges from such practice. The recovery of such practice can, I believe, help us heal some of the imaginative rifts that have prevented us from seeing and living in the world with a sense of its integrity, beauty, and mystery. Learning to pay attention, in such a way that we can begin to perceive and become

## Cleansing the Doors of Perception

To *think* of a thing is different from to *perceive* it as 'to walk' is from 'to feel the ground under you.'<sup>5</sup>

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

p. 144 Standing on the banks of Thompson Creek at Redwoods Monastery that morning, scanning the water for the returning salmon, I found myself suddenly aware of another moment years earlier when I stood looking out onto the Columbia River near my childhood home in Washington. Or rather, looking out onto the enormous Grand Coulee Dam that spanned its banks. And blocked its flow. I remember how the sheer enormity of the dam staggered my ten-year-old imagination. I felt dwarfed by it, reduced to something small and fragile and insignificant. My stomach pitched and churned as I gazed out onto its immensity. I thought: if it wanted to, this thing could engulf me. It was 1964. I was traveling through Eastern Washington on vacation with my family and we had made a detour on our journey back home to Seattle just to see the dam. It did not disappoint. I stood there a long time looking out onto that vast expanse of concrete (enough to bury the state of Texas a foot deep, I was told), listening to the roar of the water as it tumbled down, down, down into the abyss. I thought about the turbines, hidden deep inside the dam. They were especially fascinating to me. I did not even understand altogether what they were, how they worked, only that by some strange alchemy involving water, gravity, and the churning of those turbines, a massive amount of energy came coursing out of that Dam. Power. Electricity: enough to run everything—the lights in our home, my electric train, the entire city of Seattle where I lived. My father worked for a lighting company at the time; those were his light bulbs (I imagined) lighting up the skyscrapers in downtown Seattle. I had just done a third-grade report on light bulbs, tracing the intricate path of those frail filaments along which a vast, unseen source of energy coursed and emerged, eventually, as light. Standing there that day on the Grand Coulee Dam, it all came together for me: the wonderworld of technology, the seemingly infinite promise of the future, all that we, I, could do to change the world.

Another thing I realize as I reflect back on that day: I hardly noticed the river—the mighty Columbia—at all. It was an afterthought. So were the salmon. Nor did I think to ask who had lived there before the dam was constructed, or what had become of their home and their culture. No, I was mesmerized by this technological colossus, unable to see anything beyond its mass and weight. It had created a cosmos all its own and for the moment I stood within it.

p. 145 It is troubling for me, more than forty years later, to have to reckon with this experience. It so clearly expresses the character of my life in that place at the time—detachment and alienation from the natural world—and my own complicity in its impoverishment. Certainly, I had a strong sense of the beauty of the Pacific Northwest, something that lives deeply within me even now. But I had no particular sense that my relationship with the place had a moral or spiritual character, that it involved reciprocity or responsibility. Nothing in my Catholic school education had led me to think in these terms—not even the sacramental tradition in which I had been raised (and to which I devoted myself for many years as an altar boy). Nor had I been taught to think this way at home. I was in this respect typical of many of those living at the time in my home place: appreciative of the physical beauty of our home, but unaware of and unprepared to take responsibility for the effects of our lives upon the world around us. The damming of the Columbia by then had already drastically depleted the salmon run. It had also flooded the dwellings and sacred sites of the native peoples, and helped accelerate their displacement from the shore of the Columbia to distant reservations. But there were formidable economic interests that ensured that this and other dams would be built, that the wild Columbia would be reduced to what it has now become: a cluster of lakes.

That all of this could have unfolded without serious resistance or even comment by the large majority of those living in the Pacific Northwest, and that I myself should have been so completely unaware of these realities, is to me both astonishing and shameful. I was only a child. But still I wonder: why was it so difficult for me, for us, to see the river, or for that matter the world through which it coursed? I have since come to

realize that the fate of the Columbia is hardly remarkable at all and that a similar fate has befallen wild rivers all across the West. At the root of these developments is the widespread acceptance of the notion that rivers are to be thought of (seen) fundamentally as natural resources—that is, as elements within a complex restoring impoverished, degraded watersheds. There are more and more cases, such as in the Klamath river watershed on the California–Oregon border, where the particular economic–ecological–moral calculus that has led to the degradation of so many watersheds and ecosystems is beginning to change, where the dams are beginning to come down and the salmon are starting to return. We are learning to see these places more fully, and to reorient our lives in relation to them.

p. 146 Still, the challenge of learning to see the places we inhabit in all their vibrancy, beauty, and power, and to value them in other than purely utilitarian terms, remains. There are still too many instances where our inability or unwillingness to see has resulted in the most callous disregard and destruction of the natural world. It is here, it seems to me, that the contemplative traditions, with their deep commitment to cultivating both a sharply focused attention and an encompassing awareness, can be of such great help to us. For the contemplative traditions (by which I mean to include here not only monastic traditions of thought and practice but also kindred religious, poetic, and ecological traditions) invite us to consider not only what it means to see the world, but also what it means to see and know the self *within* the world. Indeed, they are bound up together. From this perspective, learning to see anything truly cannot occur without a significant deepening of self-knowledge. Nor can one hope to acquire any significant knowledge of the self if one does not experience a cleansing of what poet and visionary William Blake called the “doors of perception.” In his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake memorably asserted: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to us as it is, infinite. For we have closed ourselves up, ‘til we see all through the narrow chinks of our cavern.”<sup>6</sup> This statement expresses with haunting clarity an insight one encounters continuously in the contemplative traditions of thought and practice: that the true significance of what we see and experience is often obscured by a kind of moral–spiritual blindness. Our vision of the world is incomplete, distorted. We still possess the capacity for living within a fuller, more encompassing vision of reality. But it must be *retrieved*. The imagination itself must be made whole.

The great English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge points to something similar in his reflection on what it means to *perceive* a thing: “To *think* of a thing is [as] different from to *perceive* it,” he noted, “as ‘to walk’ is from ‘to feel the ground under you.’” What is it to perceive a thing, in the sense that Coleridge means it here? It is, I believe, to allow it to enter into one’s imaginative life so that it becomes part of the fabric of one’s being. Certainly, perception, understood in this sense, involves thinking. But it is a certain kind of thinking that is sensitive to nuance, hungry for meaning, open to ambiguity. It often proceeds slowly, carefully, allowing experience and awareness to accrue gradually. It is thinking that wants to enter into lively relationship with the thing about which one is thinking, perhaps become immersed in it. In one of this notebook entries, Coleridge noted: “There have been times when looking up beneath the shelt[e]ring Tree, I could Invest every leaf with Awe.”<sup>7</sup> Here, perhaps, one catches a glimpse of that cleansing of the doors of perception to which Blake alludes. And if it is fleeting in character, such perception is nevertheless real, and can gradually become woven into a growing awareness of what Wordsworth describes as “the deep power of Joy...[by which]...We see into the *Life* of Things.”<sup>8</sup>

p. 147 Joy. Awe. The capacity to see into the *life* of things. Everything appearing to us as it is: infinite. Here are elements of a vocabulary of contemplative practice that point to a different and fuller way of seeing and living in the world.

Thinking about all of this in the context of my experience at Redwoods Monastery, especially the practice of keeping vigil (both the long vigil in the monastery chapel on New Year’s Eve and the vigil on the banks of Thompson Creek on New Year’s Day), I find myself considering again the meaning of our collective, if varied, efforts to cultivate a habit of attention that takes seriously the deep connection between what some have referred to as the interior and exterior landscapes. Even this language of two landscapes, I realize, risks perpetuating the kind of fragmented way of apprehending reality that has already done so much harm—to us and to the world. What we need most at this moment is a language and a way of living supple and fluid enough to allow us to dwell deeply within the liminal space or penumbral region where the imagination and the living world meet and move together.<sup>9</sup> The two landscapes, if one wishes to speak in these terms, need to be seen and apprehended as dimensions of a single, whole, indivisible reality. But how to find such a

language? How to cultivate such a way of living? In what follows, I want to focus my attention on these two fundamental questions by considering how the ancient spiritual practice of watchfulness or attention, and its contemporary poetic, artistic, and ecological expressions might help us reimagine what it is to live in the

## Cultivating a Habit of Regard

Live as though you were dying every day.<sup>10</sup>

ABBA ANTONY

I look at the world; this world that I quite often feel as though I were seeing for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

SENECA

p. 148 Abba Poemen, one of the most highly respected of the early Christian monks, once said: “Vigilance, attention to the self, and discernment; these are the guides of the soul.”<sup>12</sup> Among the ancient Christian monks and among many of their non-Christian contemporaries, the cultivation of the habit of *prosoche* or attention—to the self, to others, to the world, and to God—was close to the heart of what it meant to practice the spiritual life. “Pay attention to yourself,” was often the first word of counsel a monk would receive upon embarking on the ascetic path. But its importance endured throughout the life of those seeking to live this way of life with integrity and awareness, gaining new significance and meaning as one’s life and experienced deepened. Toward the beginning of Athanasius’s *Life of Antony*, the conversion to the monastic way of life of Antony is described in these simple terms: “He began to pay attention to himself.”<sup>13</sup> At the end of his life, Antony is reported to have exhorted his disciples: “Live as though you were dying every day, paying attention to yourselves and remembering what you heard from my preaching.”<sup>14</sup> Such statements make clear the centrality of *prosoche* for the life of the monk. But what exactly did such attention entail? What was its meaning in the life of the one who undertook this way of life? And how did it contribute to the monk’s capacity to see and live in the world more fully?

One response to these questions is to note the importance of the connection, as the saying of Abba Poemen indicates, between the practice of *prosoche* and the work of *diakrisis* or discernment. Indeed, in some respects, these can be considered almost equivalents. Both ideas point to the notion that the cultivation of the self is a profound, moral-spiritual project apart from which no real understanding of anything is possible. Discernment here refers to the capacity, rooted in deep experience, for making subtle judgments about the questions that matter most. In the desert monastic tradition, discernment came to be considered one of the characteristic features of one possessing spiritual maturity or wisdom. The one possessing discernment could sort through the myriad thoughts and impulses flowing through the mind and distinguish between those most likely to feed the ego or otherwise blind the soul and those that would lead one to become more deeply grounded in the true center of his own identity in God. The lack of discernment in the life of the monk was likewise considered fatal. “Without discernment we are lost,” said one of the elders. This was no small problem among those who undertook this life, for as so many of the stories emanating from this tradition suggest, the tendency toward self-deception and moral blindness was (then as now) pervasive. Engaging in the long, slow process of learning to pay attention to oneself and to cultivate discernment was crucial if one was to have any hope of realizing in one’s life a genuine sense of openness, honesty, and freedom. It was the key to acquiring something the monks valued above all else: the ability to see and live with a pure heart.

p. 149 For the monks, realizing this ideal in their lives meant above all learning to live with an intense awareness of the present moment. This is the significance of Antony’s statement, “Live as though you were dying every day.” Live, in other words, with a continuous awareness of your mortality and hence of the unutterable preciousness of every moment. As philosopher Pierre Hadot has demonstrated, the practice of *prosoche* figured importantly not only within early Christian monasticism but also for many non-Christian philosophers, especially those from the Stoic and Epicurean schools. Here also, *prosoche* was understood as a fundamental spiritual exercise, the primary aim of which was to alter one’s very consciousness of time, leading one to an intense, encompassing awareness of what it is to live in the present moment. “It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit,” says Hadot.<sup>15</sup> Marcus Aurelius gives eloquent expression to the practice of *prosoche* as it was



understood within the Stoic tradition: “Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring *at the present moment*, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are *present here and now*, and to apply rules of discernment to your *present* representations....”<sup>16</sup> The monastic tradition had observed that in saying *today* he was not counting the time passed, but as one always establishing a beginning, he endeavored each day to present himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God—that is, pure of heart and prepared to obey his will, and no other.”<sup>17</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, one of the great monastic teachers of contemplative practice, noted that prayer, by which he meant the profound communion of the mind with God, was only possible for one who knew what it meant to pay attention: “If you seek prayer attentively you will find it,” says Evagrius, “for nothing is more essential to prayer than attentiveness.”<sup>18</sup> To pay attention to one’s own existence so carefully that each moment carried with it a sense of living within eternity could have a significant impact on one’s very sense of what it meant to be alive. But such heightened awareness of the present moment was not limited to the personal or even interpersonal dimension of one’s life. It extended, potentially, to one’s very sense of what it is to be alive in the world.

p. 150 In an important essay entitled “The Sage and the World,” Hadot suggests how the practice of *prosoche*, in particular this acute attention to the present moment, could contribute to a growing sensitivity in the life of the sage to an awareness of the world as a whole and to what it meant to be alive in the world. Indeed, for the sage as for the monk, awareness of the present moment was inescapably bound up with an awareness of existence itself. The first-century Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca reflects on this mystery in one of his *Letters to Lucilius*, commenting: “As for me, I usually spend a great deal of time in the contemplation of wisdom. I look at it with the same stupefaction with which, on other occasions, I look at the world; this world that I quite often feel as though I were seeing for the first time.”<sup>19</sup> Here we see the kind of dramatic deepening of perception that could and sometimes did occur, according to Seneca, when one learned to pay attention. The habitual way of seeing things—that is, looking with a glancing or cursory attention—suddenly falls away in favor of a sense of astonishment, or as Seneca puts it, stupefaction, in the face of what one appears to be seeing for the first time. It is noteworthy also that Seneca makes hardly any distinction here between the power of one’s perception of wisdom, that is the inner life of the sage, and the power of one’s perception of the life of the world. These were seen and experienced as elements of a single, continuous awareness of the whole of reality. To see “as if for the first time,” was to be alive and awake to oneself and the world.

The Christian contemplative tradition struggled deeply with what it meant to learn to pay attention, to live with a simple awareness of the whole. The monks recognized how easy it was to become distracted, how various and complex and powerful were the impulses and thoughts that drew and held and obscured the mind, that prevented one from acquiring the simple, honest awareness of the self and of God that was at the heart of contemplative living. They knew that unless one could learn to attend to and eventually master the myriad conflicting “thoughts” that arose continuously in one’s mind, one’s consciousness would never be clear enough or free enough to enable one to pay attention to the things that matter most—the truth of one’s own life, the needs of one’s fellow human beings, the luminosity of the living world, or the abiding presence of God. The ascetic work oriented toward clearing space in the mind became the necessary ground out of which the very possibility of a more encompassing awareness of the whole could arise and take root in one’s life. Still, the realization of this ideal in the life of the monk was immensely difficult, for the effort to practice attention in relation to any particular aspect of one’s life inevitably raised more searching questions arising out of the deeper currents of one’s life, often rooted in feelings and experiences of which the monk had no conscious awareness.

p. 151 Why, for example, were anger and judgment and pride so tenacious, so difficult to overcome? Why was it often so difficult to pray? Why was it so challenging to live with others in community, so difficult to express simple affection or love toward another? These fundamental questions often had a deeply personal character, touching on the most intimate and hidden dimensions of a monk’s life. But they also possessed very often a relational, social, even ecological character, touching on the monk’s capacity to engage others and the world as a whole, not in a condition of perpetual anxiety and blindness (i.e., not beholden to the power of the passions or thoughts) but openly and freely. The early monastic literature bears witness to the monks’ conviction that it was indeed possible to learn to live this way; but it also suggests how long and difficult the struggle to achieve such freedom could be. All the crucial spiritual exercises—solitude,

stillness, fasting, attention to one's thoughts, meditation on scripture, submission to the authority of an elder—were oriented toward helping the monk realize this freedom and express it in relation to God and others. And all of them depended on the ability of the monk to cultivate the capacity for paying attention, for Sometimes one needed to attend to and resist or struggle against a particular thought or impulse, as for example the temptation to succumb to or act out of lust or pride or anger. If given enough room to fester in the soul, such thoughts could consume one entirely, often leading to a condition of chronic anxiety or even despair. The upwelling of such thoughts in the mind (or as the monks often imagined them, as attacks from the demons) could be utterly debilitating and demoralizing; but attending to them carefully also provided the monk with an opportunity to scrutinize the complex character of his desires and the wounded, anomalous places in his soul to which such thoughts appealed. Bringing these thoughts to conscious awareness and struggling to understand oneself in relationship to them could help to initiate a gradual transformation in which their particular power gradually dissipated and the mind could regain its own original freedom.

An important example of this work can be seen in the monks' struggle to practice true detachment. Captured emblematically in Antony's response to the radical call to discipleship of Matthew 19:21, the ascetic impulse toward detachment gave crucial expression to the desire for a single-minded existence focused on God. At the most fundamental level, this meant simplifying one's life, letting go of everything that might prevent one from opening oneself fully and freely to God—one's possessions, one's place in the world, one's family even; but more than this, it meant relinquishing the very identity <sup>p. 152</sup> that one had built upon these things. Clearly, such radical renunciation was a profoundly liberating gesture for many of the early Christian monks; but it could also be destabilizing and disorienting, provoking fears and anxieties that could utterly overwhelm the one who had initially made such a gesture in faith and hope. The practice of attention, in this context, involved learning to notice and respond to the particular thoughts and fears that most directly threatened to undermine one's purity of intention or the thoughts that tended to arise when one failed to live into this intention with honesty or integrity. Paying attention to such thoughts could be immensely painful, for doing so could and often did lead the monk toward an utterly debilitating "loss of nerve," a discouragement so deep that his very sense of the presence of God and of the grounding truth of his own life might be undone completely. Yet, for anyone who hoped to arrive eventually at a place of true freedom, it was critical to learn to pay attention to all those thoughts and thought streams arising in the soul.

The "great dust cloud of considerations" that Antony described as having blinded his vision in the early stages of his ascetic journey was in fact comprised of very particular thoughts and feelings that needed to be sorted through and distinguished from one another if the monk was to have any hope of arriving at a clearer vision of his life. For the one struggling to practice detachment, for example, there was a particular need to pay attention to the sense of sadness (*lupe*) that sometimes arose in the mind as one considered all one was leaving behind. This, at least, is how Evagrius of Pontus framed the question. "The monk with many possessions," says Evagrius, "carries around the memories of possessions as a heavy burden and a useless weight; he is stung with sadness and is mightily pained in his thoughts. He has abandoned his possessions and is lashed with sadness."<sup>20</sup> *Lupe* or sadness occupied a central place in Evagrius's taxonomy of the eight principal thoughts with which the monk must struggle. And as with all the other principal thoughts, the power of sadness lay in the particular way it acts upon the mind, allowing certain latent fears and anxieties to take hold of one and determine how one understands one's experience, indeed one's entire existence. The persistent presence of sadness in the soul could, Evagrius suggests, lead one eventually to be overcome with doubt and regret about the fundamental choice to open oneself to the monastic path. Feelings of sadness about one's lost possessions are the primary expression of this doubt and regret; they are experienced, Evagrius suggests, sometimes as a kind of weight, other times as a stinging whip. The images themselves suggest what is really at issue: that one has not truly let go of these things or one's feelings about all they represent for one's life. They are still present in the mind as <sup>p. 153</sup> a heavy, tormenting presence. It is for this reason that the work of attending to and struggling to understand and overcome the debilitating hold of such thoughts on the mind is so crucial in the life of the monk. Evagrius describes the serious consequences of failing to do so: "When certain thoughts gain the advantage, they bring the soul to remember home and parents and one's former life. And when they observe that the soul does not resist but rather follows right along and disperses itself among thoughts of pleasures, then with a hold on it they plunge it into sadness with the realization that former things are no more and cannot be again because of the present way of life

And the miserable soul, the more it allowed itself to be dispersed among the former thoughts, the more it has now become hemmed in and humiliated by these latter ones.”<sup>21</sup> This simple, phenomenological account of the monk’s predicament forcefully conveys the sense of growing, deepening loss and disorientation that only grow in number and subtlety and power the longer they inhabit the soul. The monk who does not attend to or learn to understand them may well come to experience himself as bound in a kind of web—humiliated, discouraged, unable to see anything, unable to pray.

This was, in Evagrius’s understanding, the most devastating effect of this dispersion of thoughts: contemplation, that pure, unfettered apprehension of the presence of God at the center of one’s life, became impossible. “Sunlight does not penetrate a great depth of water; the light of contemplation does not illuminate a heart overcome by sadness.”<sup>22</sup> One could also say the same of a heart overcome by anger, pride, gluttony, or any of the other *logismoi* or thoughts that threatened to colonize the soul. This is why the monastic tradition placed such emphasis on the need to purify and transform one’s mind or heart: for the monk to experience the profound and abiding sense of God’s presence that was the great hope of monastic life, it was necessary to have arrived at a place of genuine freedom. Only a sustained commitment to pay attention to oneself and search out the deep sources of the soul’s chronic attachments could lead the monk to such a place.

p. 154 The mysterious process of reshaping one’s consciousness, which is fundamentally what the practice of attention to one’s thoughts was understood to facilitate, was at the very heart of the monastic practice of *prosoche*. But practicing *prosoche* meant more than simply attending to and resisting those obsessive preoccupations symbolized by the *logismoi* or thoughts. It also meant learning to recognize and open oneself to those intimations of the presence of God always close to hand in the life of the monk. It meant learning to see—oneself, God and the world—with a full, free, encompassing vision. The specific practices understood to help one realize this vision—silence, solitude, dialogue with an elder, and rumination upon scripture, among others—both narrowed and sharpened the focus of the mind and opened it little by little to the widest possible horizon. The practice of rumination or meditation on scripture, nearly ubiquitous among the ancient Christian monks, provides a useful lens for considering how the practice of *prosoche* not only protected the monk from the kind of mental dissipation that made contemplation impossible, but also opened up a space where one’s perceptive capacities became ever more refined and one could begin to sense oneself as dwelling in relation to the infinite.

The sustained practice of meditation on the Word of God was a foundational element in the daily round of communal prayer practiced by the ancient monks. Attending to the Word, turning it over carefully and reverently in the mind, was believed to provide protection and solace in the monk’s continuous struggle against the demons, while also gradually opening up a space in the mind in which imageless or pure prayer could begin to take hold in one’s life.<sup>23</sup> Part of what made the practice of rumination on the Word so important was precisely its facility for focusing the monk’s attention on the simple awareness of God. A saying from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* tells of a brother who, while reciting Scripture at the *synaxis* with one of the elders, “forgot and lost track of a word of the psalm.” The elder noticed this, and when the *synaxis* finished, described to the brother his own practice. “When I recite the *synaxis*, I think of myself as being on top of a burning fire: my thoughts cannot stray right or left.” He then asked the brother: “where were your thoughts, when we were saying the *synaxis*, that the word of the psalm escaped you? Don’t you know that you are standing in the presence of God and speaking to God?”<sup>24</sup> Here one catches a glimpse of how critical the simple capacity for paying attention was in the spiritual experience of the ancient monk. To allow one’s attention to wander and to “lose track” of the psalm was, it seems, tantamount to losing track of the presence of God. Such a view perhaps says as much about the power the ancient monks attributed to the Word of God as it does about the power of attention itself. But there is a clear sense here that they are bound up together, that attention is not only an ascetic practice, but a disposition or orientation that is necessary for anyone who hoped to apprehend the Divine. Inattention or carelessness in one’s practice of meditating on scripture could open the door to a stream of *logismoi* and cause one to become oblivious to the presence of God mediated through those words. It was this concern that led one elder to affirm: “if God reproaches us for carelessness in our prayers and distractions in our psalmody, we cannot be saved.”<sup>25</sup>

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The monks recognized that without a clear and abiding awareness of God’s presence at the heart of one’s life, there could be neither meaningful resistance to the many *logismoi* that constantly threatened to



dissipate one's consciousness, nor a recognition of one's true identity in relation to the Divine. If to consent to *logismoi* meant, as has been suggested already, consecrating oneself to demonic partners, then attainment of the kind of tranquility of mind and purity of heart that came as a result of the practice of John Cassian's *Conferences*, Abba Isaac advocates the continual repetition of a single verse from scripture (Ps 70) as the key to opening up the consciousness to the presence of God. He claims that: "the verse ('O God, make haste to save me, O Lord, make haste to help me') is an impregnable battlement, a shield and a coat of mail which no spear can pierce ... it will be a saving formula in your heart."<sup>26</sup> This verse, with its concise, urgent expression of need and its hope that one will indeed be saved from whatever trouble one is facing, became particularly beloved of the ancient monks; indeed, it is still uttered in Christian monastic communities today at the beginning of gatherings for communal prayer.

Why were early monks prepared to put such trust in the simple repetition of a single verse from the Psalms? And how did such practice become part of the "saving" work of the contemplative? A clue is provided in Abba Isaac's allusion to the inner disposition one should cultivate in reciting and ruminating upon the text. He contends that "a person who perseveres [in such practice] in *simplicity and innocence* ... is protected."<sup>27</sup> The precise character of this disposition is not described here in any detail, but its basic meaning is not difficult to discern. The person who meditates in this way, Isaac suggests, has already begun to move beyond the condition of habitual distraction that characterizes the mind of the one who is still tyrannized by thoughts and impulses beyond his control. He is *protected* from them—that is, from the distraction and dissipation that comes from allowing them room to fester in the soul—by the simplicity and innocence with which he opens himself to the presence of God manifested in the Word. But it is more than simple protection; the acquisition of such simplicity and innocence is itself understood to be an expression of the soul's growing purification and openness, the *means* through which one could know and stand in the truth of God. Reciting the text in a condition of openness, vulnerability and trust, "ceaselessly revolving it" within oneself, would eventually lead one, the monks believed, to a place where "continual meditation becomes finally impregnated in [y]our soul."<sup>28</sup>

The practice of *prosoche* here entailed a steady deepening and simplification of the mind, as one moved from the recitation of a text with the lips—a physical, embodied act often undertaken in the company of others—to a largely internal and hidden process in which one's consciousness gradually became both capacious and simple enough to behold the Divine. While the precise manner in which this shift of awareness happened could not always be perceived or fully understood, the monks testify that through sustained practice the Word did sometimes become an "interior possession," so deeply absorbed into the monk's consciousness that it was no longer possible to discern any distance between the text, the One revealed in the text, and the person ruminating on the text. There was only an expansive awareness of oneself as living in the presence of God. Abba Nestoros, in another of Cassian's *Conferences*, describes the mysterious process of transformation this way: "If these things [from scripture] have been carefully taken in and stored up in the recesses of the soul and stamped with the seal of silence, afterwards they will be brought forth from the jar of your heart with great fragrance and like some perennial fountain will flow from the veins of experience and irrigate channels of virtue and will pour forth copious streams as if from some deep well in your heart."<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to miss here the sense of profound inner transformation that was, for the early monks, at the heart of their practice of simple attention to the Word. Nor should one underestimate the sense in which such attention became the ground of an encompassing awareness of the whole.

The *Conference* of Abba Isaac cited above provides further insight into how this process of rumination worked and why the particular quality of attention required for practicing it came to mean so much to the early monks. Above all, it was because of their conviction that the power and presence of God could be encountered and experienced only through such sharply focused attention. Abba Isaac claims that this verse from Psalm 70: "...Carries within it all the feelings of which human nature is capable. It can be adapted to every condition and can usefully deployed against every temptation ... this verse keeps us from despairing of our salvation since it reveals to us the One to whom we call..."<sup>30</sup> It is striking to note how capacious scripture was seen to be, a single verse carrying within it and calling forth from the one who recites it "all the feelings of which human nature is capable." A complex array of emotions is compressed into and carried by this briefest of utterances: a cry for help; humility; watchfulness (born of unending worry and fear); a sense of frailty; assurance; confidence; desire; love; terror. The spiritual *potency* this work is clear: it reveals, Abba Isaac claims, "the *One* to whom we call."

The early Christian monks were convinced that the practice of holding the Word at the center of one's consciousness would lead gradually toward a living *encounter* with the One speaking in and through the text. cast away the wealth and multiplicity of other thoughts, and restrict itself to the poverty of a single verse."<sup>31</sup> When it does so, the monk may well find himself in that sublime place that Abba Isaac claims one can come to know when the experiential grasp of the Word becomes fused with the experience of pure prayer — "contemplation of God alone."

There is a clear bias in this teaching toward simplicity: God is the simple one *par excellent* and the one who wishes to know God must become simple, at least in the sense of allowing the mind to regain its capacity for simple, focused attention and awareness. Complexity, especially the baffling and often-chaotic complexity of the *logismoi*, is a clear source of pain and trouble in the monk's life; and the one who would gain access to the inner stillness that makes "contemplation of God alone" possible must learn to rein in and ultimately overcome the tyranny of this particular complexity. But what of the beautiful complexity of the world itself, especially the natural world? Is this also to be overcome and transcended? Or does it call in its own way for the monk's attention? Certainly there is ample testimony in this tradition to the need for the monk to overcome the temptations of the world. Indeed *fuga mundi* or flight from the world is one of the great themes of early Christian monastic teaching. But this ideal is more ambiguous and subtle than it often appears. Yes, certain aspects of life in the physical world—especially sexuality, material wealth, and inordinate attachment to home and family are often portrayed as particularly fraught with potential trouble for the one who seeks the deep freedom promised by monastic life. But as often as not, it is the inner disposition of the monk, the tendency to become enslaved by certain habits or practices that comes in for closest scrutiny, not the things themselves. And the force of eschatological awareness among the monks—

p. 158 their sense of living against the horizon of eternity—often led them to call into question the ultimate value of things that were judged to be, in comparison to the life of the world to come, inherently ephemeral. Such ideas certainly contributed, in parts of the monastic tradition at least, to the sense that "the things of this world" were not to be valued as highly as the ultimate realities rooted in the life of God. Evagrius, for example, believed that "If the intellect has not risen above the contemplation of the created world, it has not yet beheld the realm of God perfectly. For it may be occupied with the knowledge of intelligible things and so involved in their multiplicity."<sup>32</sup> This comment reveals the ongoing struggle the early monks often experienced in their attempts to affirm the transcendent and encompassing mystery of God that could be encountered in created things but not completely contained by them.

There are recurring voices within this contemplative tradition that insist that the highest forms of contemplation will always involve cultivating an openness or movement toward radical transcendence—toward a divine mystery beyond language, beyond images, and even beyond this world. Still, there is also evidence for the persistence of a tradition of thought and practice that came to be known as *theoria physike* or natural contemplation. In this approach to contemplative practice, attention to the natural world became a means of attending to the Divine; and awareness of the presence of the Divine unfolding within the mind could lead to a heightened sensitivity to the created world. Abba Moses, whose teaching is recorded in one of John Cassian's *Conferences*, comments on the immense difficulty for any embodied being of acquiring the kind of pure knowledge of God to which Evagrius refers. "To look upon God at all times and to be inseparable from Him, in the manner which you envisage, is impossible for a man still in the flesh and enslaved to weakness. In another way, however, it is possible to look upon God, for the manner of contemplating God may be conceived and understood in many ways. God is not only to be known in His blessed and incomprehensible being, for this is something which is reserved for saints in the age to come. He is also to be known from the grandeur and beauty of His creatures ...."<sup>33</sup> This idea, which would later develop into the notion of the "two books" (scripture and creation) by which God is known to human beings, suggests the importance the early monastic tradition attached to the practice of apprehending the Divine through the created world. If the practice of paying attention to the created world in this way was sometimes ambiguous or fraught with tension, there was nevertheless a clear sense in this tradition that authentic contemplative practice could and often did involve learning to see deeply into the created world.

p. 159 Peter of Damaskos, an eleventh-century Eastern Christian writer, gives eloquent expression to this ideal, and points to the subtlety and depth involved in paying attention to the created world:

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By ...contemplating dispassionately the beauty and use of each thing, he who is illumined is filled with love for the Creator. He surveys all visible things in the upper and lower worlds: the sky, the sun, the moon, stars and clouds, water-spouts and rain, snow and hail, how in great heat liquids the many varieties of plant and herb, both wild and cultivated. He sees in all things the order, the equilibrium, the proportion, the beauty, the rhythm, the union, the harmony, the usefulness, the concordance, the variety...contemplating thus all created realities, he is filled with wonder.<sup>34</sup>

Such expressions of wonder in the midst of the created world are not uncommon in the Christian contemplative tradition. Still, this account presents a striking phenomenology of what it meant for the contemplative to learn to cultivate such wonder in response to the created world. A crucial dimension of this work, according to this particular witness, involved learning to contemplate the created world *dispassionately*. In English, this word has many different connotations, almost none of which capture the particular meaning it had in the ancient Christian contemplative tradition. There, as the work of Evagrius, Cassian, and others makes clear, it meant learning to see beyond or free from the passions, those anomalous thoughts and feelings that often clouded the mind and prevented it from apprehending reality freely and openly. To “contemplate dispassionately the beauty and use of each thing” is, in this sense, to see things clearly—unencumbered by the clinging, egoic mind. It is to be free and open enough in oneself to see things for what they are, to appreciate their particular qualities, and to see them as part of a whole. In the context of the Christian contemplative tradition, this means seeing them *in God*. Peter’s account helps us to see this how intimately this contemplative experience of illumination—a strong recurring motif of spiritual awakening in the Eastern Christian tradition—is connected to a sense of deeper apprehension of the beauty and harmony of the created world. To wake up in this way is a single, integrated experience; it is to come alive and learn to see everything, oneself, God, the world, as part of a whole.

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## Attention as Ecological Practice

[Darwin’s] manner of deep watchfulness [allowed] the ordinary ground of life to become sanctified, to be brought into *sensus plenior*—a “fuller sense”—through the offering of simple attention.<sup>35</sup>

LYANDA LYNN HAUPT

Can these ancient contemplative traditions help us in our efforts to learn to see and cherish the world more deeply? I confess that this question has come to have real personal importance for me. Over time, I have come to feel that the often-hidden work of contemplative practice—rooted in a simple, open-hearted attention—does have enormous meaning and significance. And that the deepening of awareness that occurs through this practice really can change the quality of being, not only one’s own being but also the being of the world as a whole. This, I realize, is an audacious claim, and one that cannot be proven. Still, there is ample testimony from the contemplative traditions that such practice can and often does yield a deep sense of freedom and openness—to oneself, others, God, and the world as a whole. And that this shift in awareness has meaning not simply for the one engaging in such practice but also for the larger community, however that community is understood. The contemplative undertakes this work not only for himself or herself but also for the sake of the larger whole. My own experience of sitting in stillness, of waiting, listening, struggling in the silence of such contemplative space—whether in the company of my friends at Redwoods Monastery or as part of a more solitary practice—has given me glimpses into the kind of clarified awareness and deepened reciprocity that can arise when such simple attention takes root in the soul. It can soften the hard edges of one’s habitual perceptions, so that what previously seemed utterly distinct or separate from one’s own life now appears as intimately woven into the fabric of one’s very being.

As I consider again my own experience growing up amidst the wild beauty of the Pacific Northwest, and how little I saw or felt the world around me, such contemplative practice takes on new meaning. I begin to see it as part of the work of reparation, part of my attempt to create in myself a more fluid and open space in which the world can live and breathe and move. Also a way of reckoning with my own deep sense of loss. Perhaps, I think, my own deepened regard for the world, *our* deepened regard, born of sustained contemplative practice, may contribute to its healing.

p. 161 Still, I wonder: what would it mean for contemplative practice—in particular the practice of *prosoche* or attention—to be considered an integral part of a deepening *ecological* awareness? What shift or expansion in such a reconceived understanding of contemplative practice—for example, a retrieval and renewal of the old idea of *theoria physike* or natural contemplation—contribute to actual ecological renewal? One such direction would be to apprentice ourselves to those who have realized in their own lives something of this holistic and integrating way of seeing the world. It is especially important in our own time, I believe, that we find a way of overcoming the kind of corrosive dichotomies that have prevented us from seeing the world as whole. At a moment when the very fabric of the world is fraying to the point of utter dissolution, it is more than a little dispiriting to behold the specter of militant Darwinism contending with equally dogmatic religious ideologies for cultural supremacy. Too often, this discourse is haunted by the old, reductive dualisms that do little to contribute to our capacity to reimagine the world as at once biologically complex, aesthetically rich, and spiritually significant. But one also finds work arising from a range of different discourses—science, literature, spirituality, and art—contributing to a less reductive, more nuanced and whole way of perceiving and living in the world. To consider the contemplative character of such work, to ask how our emerging efforts to notice, understand, and appreciate the living world more inclusively can help us heal both our divided imaginations and our increasingly fragmented world, is an important and necessary task.

Recent work on the origins of western science and on the work of early naturalists suggests that some of our assumptions about the fundamental differences distinguishing so-called “religious” from “scientific” ways of apprehending the natural world may need to be revised. This is particularly true if one focuses less on the explicit question of the possibility of the existence of God (in light of scientific discovery and thought) and more on the distinctive manner in which certain scientists and naturalists learned to look at the natural world.<sup>36</sup> In spite of many thoughtful attempts to find common ground between the respective positions of science and religion, the former question has often yielded a sense of radical incompatibility or

p. 162 incommensurability between two competing and ultimately alien positions. But if one pauses to examine carefully the particular manner in which many scientists and naturalists have trained themselves to gaze at the world, and to consider the language they use to describe their experience of the natural world, a very different sense of things emerges. Here one often finds a deeply contemplative sensibility that reveals a reverence and even a love for the world that often cannot be accounted for by employing the limited vocabulary of science. Such testimony ought to give us pause about making overly simple assessments about the absence of spiritual thought and practice, including contemplative practice, amidst the scientific community. This has led at least one observer to suggest that we need to begin thinking about the meaning of a “contemplative science.”<sup>37</sup> While such practice of contemplative attention to the world cannot always be translated into an explicitly theistic worldview (indeed those who look at the world in this way often remain skeptical about traditional religious belief), it nevertheless suggests fruitful possibilities for considering anew the spiritual significance of the practice of looking carefully at the natural world.

Richard Holmes’s book, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, offers a marvelous starting point for helping us rethink what it means to attend to and value the natural world—on its own terms and as a source of spiritual meaning and wonder. Holmes points to the contemporaneous developments of science and romanticism in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe and demonstrates that, contrary to the common perception of a deep antagonism between them, they should be understood as having developed symbiotically and as having continuously informed and challenged one another. The magnificent discoveries by Joseph Banks in geography and anthropology, Humphrey Davies and Antoine Lavoisier in chemistry, and William and Caroline Herschel in astronomy, for example, unfolded within a rich cultural-intellectual milieu in which the literary work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Mary Shelley was also seen as contributing significantly to the search for a more complete understanding of the living world. The longing to see and understand the world fully and deeply characterized the work of both scientists and poets, and they participated in what came to be understood as a shared project. At the center of this shared project was a passion for looking carefully at things. But it was a particular way of looking at things. Evidence for this is especially apparent in the private journals and letters of, among others, Joseph Banks, Gilbert White, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth, and William Herschel. Holmes points to the “precise, even reverent contemplation of nature ... an (almost sacred) attention to things simply and precisely observed” as one of the hallmarks of this age.<sup>38</sup>



- p. 163 Consider this account from Coleridge's journal from November, 1803, in which he describes what he beheld upon waking early one morning on a coach ride to London:

Fleeces, wool packs in shape/rising high up into the Sky. The Sun at length rose upon the flat Plain, like a Hill of Fire in the distance, rose wholly, & in the water that flooded part of the Flat a deep column of Light. — But as the Coach went on, a Hill rose and intercepted the Sun—and the Sun in a few minutes rose over it, a compleat 2nd rising, thro' other clouds and with a different Glory. Soon after this I saw Starlings in vast Flights, borne along like smoke, mist—like a body unindued with voluntary Power / — now it shaped itself into a circular area, inclined — now they formed a Square —now a Globe — now from complete orb into an Ellipse — then oblongated into a Balloon ...now a concave Semicircle; still expanding, or contracting, thinning or condensing, now glimmering and shivering, now thickening, deepening, blackening!<sup>39</sup>

One senses here something of the sense of stupefaction in the face of existence in the world to which Seneca earlier alluded. And yet the mind is not clouded, but rather intensely alert to the intricate shape and texture of things, to their strange beauty, to their wondrous power. There is a desire to perceive in all these different elements moving *together* the very dynamism and life of the world. Such intense preoccupation with seeing and describing things—whether the shape and movement of the world before one's eyes, the chemistry of invisible gasses, or the subtle pattern of the stars in the heavens—was at the same time an effort to *imagine the world*, to feel and understand the world and one's place in it in a new way. To be sure, the opportunity to probe the intricate workings of the natural world so closely sometimes had a disturbing, destabilizing, effect on the imagination. It could be terrifying to look out onto a world so new, so strange. But the struggle to learn to stand within a world of such power and intricate beauty was understood as a whole, inclusive work—one with a deep contemplative character—in which scientists and poets were engaged together.

- p. 164 Still, one of the undeniable effects of the scientific discoveries of this age was to call into question many of the old certitudes, in particular certain ↵ classical religious and theological ideas. The very meaning of the world was changing and the question of whether this emerging vision could still support a meaningful theological response became one of the great and troubling questions of the time. Nowhere, perhaps, did this question come to more acute expression than in response to the work of Charles Darwin. More than one hundred fifty years after the publication of his revolutionary *Origin of Species*, the questions are still with us. Whether we can even read Darwin clearly through the distorting lens of our own culture wars remains an open question. The common perception of Darwin—embraced both by scientists for whom Darwin's understanding of evolution has become a foundational truth and by those Christian believers for whom Darwin's ideas represent a threat to a theistic worldview—is that he saw the natural world as bereft of spirit. The challenge of rethinking this perception is immense, not least because we must do so through the filter of our own increasingly hardened cultural and religious assumptions. Still, there is another way of thinking about Darwin's contribution, and it involves—surprisingly perhaps—attending carefully to the *contemplative* character of his work as a naturalist. Lyanda Lynn Haupt has recently argued that, if we focus less exclusively on Darwin's theory of natural selection and its possible theological implications, and examine more carefully his remarkable development as a naturalist as chronicled in his early notebooks and diaries, we may begin to grasp more clearly than we have done before the distinctive contemplative sensibility that grounded his work. In her beautiful and original book, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent: The Importance of Everything and Other Lessons from Darwin's Lost Notebooks*, Haupt suggests that Darwin's own complex and intricate way of paying attention to the world can and perhaps ought to be understood as a significant form of contemplative practice.<sup>40</sup>

Haupt uncovers this important element of Darwin's work by focusing her attention on Darwin's little-known "Ornithological Notes," which she reads alongside Darwin's *Beagle Diary*.<sup>41</sup> Based on a notebook Darwin kept during his five-year voyage on the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836, the "Ornithological Notes" offer us an important window into understanding how Darwin grew as a naturalist during his years on the *Beagle*, and how his capacity to see and feel and interpret the natural world deepened and matured. In Darwin's more mature works, which he carefully prepared for publication, we find, says Haupt, "the polished results of his ornithological study and contemplation." But in the "Notes," she suggests, "we find the study and contemplation themselves, and they are wonderful—quirky, zealous, irreverent, and humble." The

- p. 165 "Notes," together with the *Beagle Diary*, ↵ she argues, "reveal not only the seeds of Darwin's thoughts on



evolution but also his deep sensitivity regarding the behavior and ecological study of animals in their natural, wild places.” They reveal, in other words, how Darwin learned to “watch, how to think, how to twine beauty with science, and objectivity with empathy.”<sup>42</sup> These are qualities of mind and habits of being. It is this growth and deepening of Darwin’s own awareness of the world that Haupt finds most striking and which leads her to make one of the boldest claims of her book: “Over time [Darwin] grew as a watcher of birds, and he was elevated in mind, in imagination, and—this is a word rarely used in connection with Darwin, but I will argue for it strongly—in spirit.”<sup>43</sup> One almost never hears talk of Darwin’s spirituality, or of his spiritual vision. This is in no small measure due, I would suggest, to the limitations we often place on such language. If describing Darwin’s vision of the world as spiritual requires us to locate him firmly within a recognized historical, creedal expression of faith, such as that which in he grew up as a member of the Church of England, we may well have to disavow any such language in speaking of his view of the natural world. But if we mean by such language what Haupt does when she speaks of Darwin’s slow “conversion to a particular way of seeing—a biological vision that is relentless, patient and steeped in a naturalist’s faith that small things matter,” then we may be compelled to reconsider both Darwin’s view of the world and our understanding of spirituality.<sup>44</sup> Through Haupt’s careful, patient attention to Darwin’s growth as a naturalist, she helps us to see and feel Darwin’s way of engaging the world for what it was: a kind of contemplative awareness. “His manner of deep watchfulness,” she suggests, allowed “the ordinary ground of life to become sanctified, to be brought into *sensus plenior*—a ‘fuller sense’—through the offering of simple attention.”<sup>45</sup>

This is Haupt’s language, not Darwin’s. But it is an intriguing and illuminating choice of words for describing what she believes to be Darwin’s fundamentally contemplative orientation to the natural world. This phrase *sensus plenior* is most commonly associated with a notion common among early and medieval Christians that careful, prayerful attention to the sacred text often leads from a mostly literal understanding of the text to something fuller, richer, more imaginatively and spiritually expansive. The possibility for this *sensus plenior* was believed to be inherent in the text itself, which mediates a mystery beyond itself—the very presence of the Divine. But as we saw earlier with the example of the early Christian monks, it requires a perceptive reader to draw forth this fuller sense, to make it real in the life of the reader. This contemplative approach to reading, in which one becomes more and more sensitive to the infinitely capacious power of the Word, and is gradually transformed by it, provides a useful analogy for understanding the gradual process through which Darwin learned to become sensitive to the fuller sense of the natural world. And it allows us to hold in the imagination the kindred character of distinct contemplative practices arising from widely varying traditions and contexts.

Darwin had important models that shaped how he oriented himself in and thought about the natural world, including the work of the great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Haupt suggests that Darwin’s initial way of framing his observations in South America was, if anything, still modeled too closely on Humboldt’s example. He had yet to find his own voice. However, the “Ornithological Notes” allow us to witness Darwin working his way through what Haupt describes as “the imposed transcendence of Humboldt’s influence to the more honest, personal transcendence located in the true, everyday things of the earth.” Here, she suggests, we encounter not simply the seeds of Darwin’s later theories, but more importantly the very font of Darwin’s creativity as a naturalist. In his growing capacity to see and describe and take in the world, we begin to perceive what she describes as “the beauty of that which is still being formed.”<sup>46</sup> Haupt is referring here to a still-being-formed awareness, in particular the delicate, mysterious process by which Darwin became attentive to the life-forms around him and to the meaning of his own relationship with these life-forms. Darwin’s early descriptions of bird-life in Brazil reveal a still-narrow and thin awareness of the world around him. Moving through an ecosystem widely acknowledged to possess the highest avian diversity in the world, Darwin noted: “I was surprised at the scarceness of birds.”<sup>47</sup> His eyes and ears were not yet attuned to this particular place, to the subtle movement of life-forms in the rainforest. And when he did see birds, his ability to notice or describe their differences or particularity was severely limited; the word he uses most often to describe the birds he sees in those early entries is simply “beautiful.” But within a year, Darwin’s notebook came to be filled with detailed morphological and behavioral patterns born of his growing capacity for patient observation. He was beginning to learn how to pay attention, and in paying attention to feel himself drawn into the world he observed. It is in this kindling of relationship, Haupt suggests, that we can best appreciate Darwin’s emerging contemplative vision.

p. 167 There is a telling moment early on in Darwin's time in Brazil when one senses his awareness of the world through which he is moving already ↵ beginning to deepen. He is still learning to know the place, and his ability to see and feel what is around him is not yet mature. Yet, he is beginning to open himself to and allow Darwin's increasing ability to "calm himself, to see into things on his own." He describes the delight he experienced (though he notes that "delight is ...a weak term for such transports of pleasure") from the elegance of the grasses, the distinctive gloss of the foliage, and the strange paradox of the way sound and silence enfold one another in the forest. Commenting on this phenomenon, Darwin observed: "Within the recesses of the forest when in the midst of it [the deafening noise of the insects] a universal stillness appears to reign."<sup>48</sup> This was still early in his time in South America, and one does not yet see evidence of the kind of careful observation of minute variations in the appearance and habits of different species that would become a habitual part of Darwin's engagement with the natural world. Still, one sees here something perhaps just as important, his growing awareness of all that simple, careful attention could yield.

It is not easy to determine how or whether Darwin's cultivation of this capacity for contemplative awareness of the natural world contributed to his eventual formulation of the theory of natural selection. Haupt makes a persuasive case that Darwin's time sense of *engagement* with and *participation* in the natural world was crucial to his ability to discern the intricate patterns and relationships that he later incorporated into his theory of natural selection. But the practice itself, the careful work of noticing, describing, and responding to the natural world, something Haupt claims reflects Darwin's "conversion" — from student to pilgrim — remains among the most important legacies of Darwin's journey in South America. Darwin's time in Maldonado, southern Uruguay, in April 1833, marked a particularly important turning point. It was a year and a half into his journey, a moment when his long, steady practice of carefully attending to birds in the wild had begun to yield new insight and appreciation, and a heightened sense of intimacy with the birds of this region. His attention to the Chucao Tapacolo, a shy forest species not at all easy to see, reveals his changing sensibility. They are small birds, and as Haupt notes, "to observe them closely, Darwin made himself small, and quiet, and patient." He comments in his notebook: "This bird frequents the most gloomy & retired spots in the humid forests ...and at some times, although its cry may be heard, it cannot with the  
p. 168 greatest attention be seen; ↵ but generally by standing motionless, in the wood, it will approach within a few feet, in the most familiar manner."<sup>49</sup> Compared with Darwin's later, momentous encounters with finches on the Galapagos Islands, this simple description of an encounter with a small, elusive bird hardly seems worth mentioning. Still the note of familiarity that Darwin sounds here suggests the extent to which he was gradually coming to occupy what Haupt describes as "the center of [his] natural insight." The "simple warmth," toward his subjects, the "quiet intimacy" of his encounters with birds is noticeable and striking. So is Darwin's growing capacity for patience and stillness in the presence of other living beings. This sense of Darwin's deepening capacity to see and feel the life of the world around him is one of the most significant elements to emerge from his "Ornithological Notes."

Darwin's deepening capacity to see and feel the intricate particulars of the life of the world around him would eventually contribute significantly to his ability to perceive the pattern of the whole, something that would only come to full expression in his later, more mature works of natural history. Yet, in his work in South America, we witness him coming alive to the presence of animals and beginning to feel something of their mysterious power. "Here, in patience, in stillness," Haupt notes of Darwin's approach in the "Ornithological Notes," "the birds show themselves and tell their secrets. Their stories are not shaken out of them beneath a microscope but revealed, animal to animal, with a kind of earthen *familiarity*, on the forest soil."<sup>50</sup> It is Darwin's growing attention to this mysterious, complex reality, his deepening habit of "expectant familiarity" as he observed the lives and habits of animals, that shines through so clearly in the "Notes"; also his growing habit of what Nora Barlow has called "sympathetic participation" in the lives of these animals, something that transformed his thinking about the natural world and helped him (and eventually all of us with him) to see the intricate patterns underlying and sustaining it.

Darwin became increasingly bold in inquiring into animal consciousness, something that would later bring him under suspicion of engaging in a kind of reckless anthropomorphism. But Haupt questions whether he is really guilty of this, and suggests instead that Darwin was beginning to imagine the world with an intimacy and humility and creativity that took him far beyond anything most of his contemporaries at that time had begun to conceive of. "In his observations of seals and birds and other animals, in his often playful musings about their thoughts and behaviors, Darwin utterly, and even joyfully, abandoned his privileged

p. 169 human status. He threw his own thoughts and behaviors right into the animal mix, putting ↵ all creatures, including humans, on the same continuum of consciousness. Rather than imposing human consciousness upon animal behaviors, he animalized consciousness in general.” And in so doing, something began to applied to the practice of a naturalist whose work would ultimately become such a large, even dominating presence in the scientific community. Yet, Darwin’s thinking about the natural world as a whole, and about the evolution of species in particular, depended, crucially, on his increasingly refined capacity to disappear, to enter quietly into the intimate and hidden lives of the animals in whose presence he moved daily. His *experience* of noticing and feeling the life of the world around him, of learning to make ever more subtle distinctions in the behavior and appearance and even thought of animals, his sense of the sheer richness and complexity of the ecological reality within which he found himself moving—*this* was the ground out of which his thinking and his increasingly bold theorizing about the natural world emerged.

This intuition about Darwin’s shifting sensibilities, gleaned from a careful reading of the “Ornithological Notes,” leads Haupt to an unconventional but fascinating insight regarding Darwin’s time on the Galapagos Islands, a time that many have pointed to as crucial to his development of the theory of natural selection. It would be many years before Darwin himself made the conceptual leaps enabling him to articulate his mature theoretical thinking on this subject. But here on the Galapagos Islands, Haupt notes, Darwin “experienced his most radical intimacy with wild beings ...a closeness to animals that surpassed anything he had yet known.”<sup>52</sup> How, precisely, did this experience shape Darwin’s later thinking about evolution? It is impossible to say for certain. But Haupt invites us to consider how the patterns emerging in Darwin’s felt sense of the world, especially his sense of “wild intimacy” with the living beings among whom he moved, may have contributed to his deepening understanding of the character of relationships within and among species. Darwin’s mature vision would eventually reveal what Haupt describes as “a natural order that refuses to mark humans as separate or exceptional or beyond the reach of wildness.”<sup>53</sup> This, of course, is part of what made his theories so controversial. It still does. But there is something noble and beautiful in this way of seeing the world. And if this reading of Darwin’s work as a naturalist is correct, it means that this vision of the world arose in no small part ↵ from his own personal sense of profound participation in, and intimacy with the natural order. Attention to Darwin’s contemplative practice as a naturalist suggests how his actual experience of intimacy within the natural world may have contributed to his ability to see and imagine the natural world as a place of endless intimacy among and between species.

p. 170 “Immense and wonderful” is how Darwin described the wild life of the world around him late in his life.<sup>54</sup> This simple exclamation belies, of course, the long hard years of patient observation that informed this sensibility. Nor can it be understood apart from the painful questions about the coherence of the universe that haunted him for most of his life; Darwin would never arrive at anything like a simple affirmation of a theistic worldview. Still, the habitual tendency to view Darwin’s work as undermining our capacity for apprehending the natural world as a source of spiritual wonder is misleading. Darwin’s own lifelong practice of attending carefully to the natural world yielded a sense of the world as beautifully and intricately patterned. As he articulated in the *Origin of Species*: “When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled.”<sup>55</sup> This observation is capable of many varied interpretations; it has been and will continue to be seen by many (happily or unhappily) as clear evidence of the utterly materialist underpinnings of Darwin’s thought. But there is also something else here worth pausing over: Darwin’s sense of the “ennobling” character of the larger pattern of unfolding life to which his own painstaking observations of the world, first apparent in his “Ornithological Notes,” led him. When one considers how ennobled the world appeared to him through the lens of his mature theory of natural selection, and the extent to which his brilliant apprehension of the whole depended on his long cultivation of a capacity to see and respond to the intricate character of living beings, one feels a sense of renewed appreciation for the power of simple attention to yield a synthetic, integrated understanding of the world. By attending to Darwin’s development as a naturalist, it becomes possible to view him as having been not only a scientist of extraordinary originality and theoretical range, but also an uncommonly perceptive contemplative. And it points toward a growing awareness that has come to mark so much of our own emerging sensibility regarding the natural world—that long, patient attention to the world is a meaningful and significant form of contemplative practice, and that our capacity to deepen and sustain such practice may well prove crucial to the work of tending to and helping repair the world.

## Looking Deeper into the World

The question is not what you look at but what you see.<sup>56</sup>

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

My ambition reaches no further than a few clods of earth, sprouting wheat, an olive grove, a cypress....<sup>57</sup>

VINCENT VAN GOGH

In the American wing of the Chicago Art Institute hangs a painting by George Inness called *The Home of the Heron*. Inness painted it toward the end of his life when he was living in Tarpon Springs, Florida, and it is without question one of his most beautiful and fully realized works. During the last few years, Inness's work and this painting in particular have become important to me. Whenever I am in Chicago, I make a point of going to see it. I never tire of looking at it. At the center of the canvas, rising up out of the mist, is the small but recognizable profile of a heron. The eye moves toward it immediately. But then one notices the grove of trees above and around the heron—their slender trunks and soft, bronze foliage framing the bird as it rises from the water. The geometry of the painting is meticulously constructed, with the horizontal and vertical planes balanced in perfect proportion to one another—something that helps one behold and respond to the painting as a whole. And yet nothing is fixed. There are no clear boundaries. Everything moves and is bound together within a kind of gentle haze. One senses this almost immediately. And yet it is not simply or easily apprehended. There is a depth and dimensionality to Inness's work, especially his late work, that keeps drawing one further in. It holds the eye and the imagination even as it recedes before you. It opens up and out, moving endlessly beyond itself. Like the heron, rising up out of the mist and into the world.

The longing to see and perceive the whole, even as one notices and responds to the distinctive character of this or that particular facet of the whole: this is something that characterizes both the contemplative and the aesthetic gaze. The contemplative gaze often draws upon an aesthetic intuition in which combinations of color, form, texture, and dimension help to conjure an image of the Divine or an image of the space in which one encounters the Divine. Such images work, paradoxically, to open the imagination to a certain way of seeing and to signal the limits of images and the imagination in helping us apprehend the Divine.

p. 172 Evagrius's blue sapphire works exactly like this, presenting the mind with a particular image through which one can begin to sense and feel the expansiveness of prayer, all the while pointing to an immensity far greater than the mind can grasp. The blue sapphire draws one in and sends one forth into the endlessness of the divine mystery. It holds the contemplative gaze even as it releases it. The mind grasps and is grasped by the particular even as it empties itself to dwell within the whole.

One sees something analogous at work in certain expressions of landscape painting. Here the fashioning of color, form, texture, and dimension become a means of seeing and taking in both the minute particularities and the mysterious whole, both the "outer world" perceptible to the senses and the "inner world" mediated by the senses but infused by Spirit. Certainly this was true for George Inness, who was influenced, as Henry David Thoreau and other American transcendentalists were, by Emmanuel Swedenborg's idea of "correspondence"—the belief that there is a spiritual world that corresponds to the world we know and perceive in our senses. These worlds are not separate and distinct from one another; rather they are interwoven, part of a single fabric. As Adrienne Baxter Bell notes of Swedenborg's vision of the spiritual world: "This world is not above the natural world in space but is an *interior* world, lying within the realm of the natural...."<sup>58</sup> Inness found this idea immensely helpful in developing an aesthetic-contemplative vision capable of taking in the whole complex fabric of the world—its material particularity inseparable from its spiritual meaning.<sup>59</sup> He gave eloquent expression to this vision in his work, especially in the softness of tone that characterizes his mature landscapes. He shared this manner of "painting softly" with a number of his contemporaries—James McNeill Whistler, John Henry Twachtman, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and others—in whose work one can also sense the fluidity of relationship between and among things, the impermanence

of boundaries, the subtle fusion of worlds.<sup>59</sup> Here one encounters a sustained if varied effort to behold and represent things in their utter singularity, in their ever-shifting relationship to every other thing, and in their relationship to the whole.

meant to try to behold the world this way and why it mattered. In a letter written to his son on September 8, 1906, near the end of his life, Paul Cezanne describes the immense difficulty he feels in trying to represent what he sees: “I must tell you that as a painter I am becoming more clear-sighted before nature, but that with me the realization of my sensations is always painful. I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded  
p. 173 before my sense. I have not the magnificent richness of colouring that animates nature. Here on the bank of the river the motifs multiply, the same subject seen from a different angle offers subject for study of the most powerful interest and so varied that I think I could occupy myself for months without changing place, by turning now more to the right, now more to the left.”<sup>61</sup> There is tremendous pathos in this old man’s reflections on his work, especially regarding the gap he experiences between what he sees and feels (or more broadly what comes to him through his “sensations”) and what he is able to express. It is painful for him to reckon with this gap and with his awareness of how far he is from being able to realize and express his true subject.

But there is also something beautiful and hopeful in this reflection, especially in Cezanne’s sense of the endlessness of all that lay before him, its fathomless mystery. And the allure he feels in the face of the ever-shifting, always emerging, never completely describable motifs along this riverbank. He is becoming more clear-sighted before nature. But he is also becoming more aware of its endless complexity and intricacy, the shifting moods of a place depending on the time of day and season. It cannot be grasped or known, not completely. It can only be seen, partially and provisionally. Then seen again. And yet again. Here one senses the recognition of the need for a kind of *ruminatio* in which one can be drawn ever deeper into the mystery of what one beholds, and forward in search of the forms that can best express what one sees. In a letter written to Emile Bernard sometime earlier, Cezanne explains why in these latter years he found himself increasingly drawn toward abstraction. Again it has to do with color. “Now, being old, nearly 70 years, the sensations of colour, which give the light, are for me the reasons for the abstractions which do not allow me to cover my canvas entirely nor to pursue the delimitations of the objects where their points of contact are fine and delicate....”<sup>62</sup> There is something akin here to the softness of expression toward which Inness and the tonalist painters found themselves drawn, which allowed them to express the subtle movement and relationship between and among things. For Cezanne it is abstraction that makes this possible, especially the *empty spaces* on the canvas that enable one to sense the fine and delicate points of contact between and among particular objects. How carefully one must look to see and notice these points of contact and the spaces between them; how much it helps in the work of cultivating awareness of the relationships between and among things and between those things and the larger whole.

Some years earlier Vincent van Gogh found himself struggling with similar questions, including the question of how to capture and represent the way particular colors present themselves in the landscape. In a  
p. 174 long, detailed letter to his brother Theo written in September 1882, van Gogh describes his preoccupation with “the question of the depth of color,” especially in relation to the color effects seen in autumnal woods. He tells his brother that he has not seen such effects represented in Dutch paintings, and he longs to do so in his own work. But once he embarks upon his own attempt, he encounters unexpected difficulties. He realizes he has not looked closely enough.

Yesterday evening I was working on a slightly rising woodland slope covered with dry, mouldering beech leaves. The ground was light and dark reddish-brown, emphasized by the weaker and stronger shadows of trees casting half-obliterated stripes across it. The problem, and I found it a very difficult one, was to get the depth of colour, the enormous power and solidity of that ground—and yet it was only while I was painting it that I noticed how much light there was still in the dusk—to retain the light as well as the glow, the depth of that rich colour, for there is no carpet imaginable as splendid as that deep brownish-red in the low of an autumn evening sun, however toned down by the trees.

Here, the artist struggles to convey the full complexity and delicacy of what he sees and with the uncertainty he feels about how to give life to what he sees on his canvas. His subject is simple: a grove of beech trees at dusk on an autumn day. Yet, there is so much that must be accounted for if one is to give life to this



particular scene. The light and dark reddish-brown of the ground. The lighter and darker “half-obiterated” shadows cast upon it by the trees. The “enormous power and solidity” of the ground. The sudden realization while painting (while the day is draining away) of how much light remained in the dusk. The need to He has not noticed all of this before, certainly not with the subtlety and precision with which he now beholds what is before him. But now that he begins to see in this way, he sees even more. And he describes it for Theo.

p. 175

Behind those saplings, behind that brownish-red ground, is a sky of a very delicate blue-grey, warm, hardly blue at all, sparkling. And against it there is a hazy border of greenness and a network of saplings and yellowish leaves. A few figures of wood gatherers are foraging about, dark masses of mysterious shadows. The white bonnet of a woman bending down to pick up a dry branch stands out suddenly against the deep reddish-brown of the ground. A skirt catches the light, a shadow is cast, the dark silhouette of a man appears above the wooded slope. A white bonnet, a cap, a shoulder, the bust of a woman show up against the sky. These figures, which are large and full of poetry, appear in the twilight of the deep shadowy tone like enormous *terres cuites* [terra-cottas] taking shape in a studio.

The entire, complex life of the scene begins to emerge in this written account, even as it is taking form on the canvas. One can sense van Gogh’s delight in his growing awareness of all that is unfolding before him, the distinctive particularity of objects and figures, the shifting movement of light and shadow, the depth and complexity of color. We who stand before his finished work sometimes feel, perhaps without always knowing what it is we are feeling, the intensity of the gaze that brought this work into being. From his letters, we can sense that this gaze was rooted in the desire to see everything, to miss nothing and to perceive as far as possible not only the distinctive character of individual things but the whole pulsing life of what was unfolding before him. The relations between and among things. The movement and play of light and shadows, of time passing. And to gather this into a single aesthetic expression that holds and reflects the life of the subject.

Van Gogh complained to Theo what a “hard job” it was painting this particular scene. “The ground used up one and a half large tubes of white—even though the ground is very dark—and for the rest red, yellow, brown, ochre, black, sienna, bistre, and the result is a reddish-brown, but one ranging from bistre to deep wine-red and to a pale, golden ruddiness. Then there are still the mosses and a border of fresh grass which catches the light and glitters brightly and is very difficult to capture.” One smiles to read this account, the artist’s technical account of pigments and the amount of paint required revealing more than he knows about the depth of his own commitment to see and tend to the world before his eyes. A hard job. Yes.

But his complaints feel a little half-hearted, for he seems to sense already the importance of what he is struggling to say in his work—its importance to him, certainly, but not only him. “I said to myself while I was doing it: don’t let me leave before there is something of the autumnal evening in it, something mysterious, something important.”<sup>63</sup>

p. 176

I confess I find this expression of regard for the world immensely moving: “Don’t let me leave before there is something of the autumnal evening in it.” For me, this captures simply and beautifully what it means to commit oneself to the work of sustained attention to the living world. What would it mean, I wonder, to hold this observation at the center of our own efforts to live with greater attention and awareness? To be able to say: “Don’t let me leave before my eyes become sensitive and responsive to the life unfolding around me. Don’t let me leave before the life of this particular place that I now inhabit begins to enter into and take hold of me body and soul. Don’t let us leave before the luminous world becomes woven into the center of our consciousness, our concerns.”

We are still struggling to understand how the practice of attention to the subtle workings of the natural world can be integrated into a unified spiritual vision and how such a vision can contribute to a more thoughtful, respectful way of inhabiting the world. Part of this work will surely involve giving more careful attention to the aesthetic dimensions of our experience—the way light, color, texture, and form appear before us in the world and enter into our consciousness. Such attention can and often does open out onto a wider and deeper sympathy for the life of particular places and a concern for their well-being. And it can inform a decidedly ecological sensibility as the awareness of oneself as inhabiting a distinct watershed or

ecosystem begins to take hold and flourish. But just as important to this larger work will be the effort to understand how the kind of attention the ancient monks referred to as vigilance, watchfulness, and *prosoche* can expand and deepen our capacity for noticing and dwelling within the whole. Entering into the space of thing while also remaining open to the wider field of being all around, the contemplative practitioner gives himself or herself to an intensely focused gaze upon a single thing (envisioned in the Christian contemplative tradition as “the one thing necessary”; or “the pearl of great price”; or “the narrow gate”) that is understood to be a doorway into a world of endless communion. The mind reduces its scope of attention in order to discover that it already inhabits this more expansive space, and participates in a larger whole. The stillness into which one descends in contemplative practice is the climate in which attention, which initially cannot alight on anything, gradually becomes simple, open, receptive. The mystery at the heart of such stillness begins to reveal itself, in particular moments of insight and understanding about the self and the world, and in the emergence of an awareness so capacious and wide-ranging that it cannot be bounded by anything. Or even named. It is noteworthy that Evagrius, who bequeathed to us the beautiful image of the blue sapphire as an emblem for the nature of authentic contemplative experience, also suggests that true prayer is at its deepest level, imageless. It includes and encompasses everything but cannot be contained by anything.

p. 177

“The song of a river,” Aldo Leopold once noted, “is audible to every ear, but there is other music ...by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it you must first live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers. Then on a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it—a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and centuries.”<sup>64</sup> I ponder this as I think about that morning on the banks of Thompson Creek near Redwoods Monastery when I stood searching for the returning salmon. And I recall too that moment years earlier when I stood atop the Grand Coulee Dam, stunned by its technological wonder, blind to the presence of the Columbia River and the salmon moving through its waters. Perhaps I was too young to know how to listen for the song of that river, or the vast pulsing harmony within and beyond it. I had not yet discovered in myself a space capacious enough to receive and hold that harmony. Little by little, through long years of practice, this has begun to change.

For me that morning on the banks of Thompson Creek possessed (and possesses still) deep poignancy. I had longed to see these creatures. Not only for the simple pleasure of encountering them, but also because of what their presence would mean for the possible return to health of the local watershed, to this place I had come to love so deeply. I realized too that I was seeking to recover something in myself, a healing of my own imagination, my own long-dormant capacity to see and feel the living world. There was a time when I would not have considered these salmon or the place itself worthy of my attention, when my ability to fit them into a recognizable world was almost non-existent. My own path toward a more “sympathetic participation” in the world has been long and slow. Gradually I have come to understand that the practice of attention—whether rooted in the ancient monastic practice of *prosoche* or in an even older tradition of watchfulness born of anticipation at the wonder one might behold in looking out into the living world—is crucial to the path I must walk. Little by little I am learning again to see and yes, love the world.

p. 178

That morning, I stood for a long while looking down into the water with my daughter and my friends from the monastery. Would they come? Would they? “There!” someone cried out, pointing to a bend in the creek. And then I saw them, a pair of salmon moving slowly upstream, their dappled, gleaming bodies undulating in the current. Straining to find their way home. I watched them for several long moments and did not turn away. I did not want to miss anything: the music of the river, the dark green moss on the rock, the branches of the alders quaking in the morning breeze, my companions beside me, these beautiful wild beings moving in the water below. In that moment, there was only this whole, this vast pulsing harmony, and I was in it. After a few moments the salmon moved further upstream and eventually disappeared from view. But the sight of them moving in the water remains etched in my mind. I behold them still.

## Notes

1. Simone, Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, Vol. I, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2004), 515.
2. Evagrius, *On Prayer; The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. I, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 71.
3. See William, Gibson, *A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature* (New York: Metropolitan, 2009).
4. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20.
5. William, Blake, *Complete Writings with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 158 [paraphrased for inclusive language].
6. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 35.
7. William, Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *Oxford Poetry Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58.
8. For a thoughtful discussion of the significance of the notion of the "penumbral" for interpreting liminal experiences, see Michael Jackson's *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity and the Real* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
9. Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980) [VA] 91; 97.
10. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 64: 6; cited in Pierre, Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 257.
11. *Apophthegmata Patrum* [AP] Poemen 35; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 172 [modified translation].
12. Athanasius, VA 3; Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 32. [modified translation].
13. Athanasius, VA 91; Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 97. [modified translation].
14. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.
15. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7, 54. cited in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.
16. Athanasius, VA 7; Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 37. See also VA, 16: "as though making a beginning daily, let us increase our dedication. For the entire life span of men is very brief when measured against the ages to come" (Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 43). And VA, 91: "Be watchful and do not destroy your lengthy discipline, but as if you were making a beginning now, strive to preserve your enthusiasm" (Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 97).
17. Evagrius, *On Prayer; The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. 1, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 71.
18. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 64: 6; cited in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 257.
19. Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 3: 7; *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79.
20. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 10; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 98.
21. Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 22; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 83.
22. On early Christian monastic reading of scripture, see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); "Hearing, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and the Shape of Early Monastic Spirituality," *Anglican Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 5–25; Luke, Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) [10.1093/0199273200.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/0199273200.001.0001)<sup>51</sup>; Steven D. Driver, *John Cassian and the Reading of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. 111–117 on prayer in relation to reading; Elizabeth, Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
23. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Anonymous 146. F. Nau, "Histoires des solitaires égyptiens," *Revue d'orient Chrétien* 13 (1908): 50. English translation: Benedicta Ward, *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The "Apophthegmata Patrum" (The Anonymous Series)* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986), 4.
24. AP Theodore of Enaton 3; Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 79.
25. Cassian, *Collationes* 10: 10; For a critical edition, see E. Pichery, *Jean Cassien, Conférences, Sources chrétiennes* [SC] 42, 54, 64 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955, 1958, 1959); English translations: *Western Asceticism*, ed. Owen Chadwick (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1979); John, Cassian, *The Conferences. Ancient Christian Writers* 57, ed. and trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); John Cassian, *The Conferences. Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Colm Luibéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, n.s. no. 11, trans. Edgar C. S. Gibson (Oxford: Parker and Co., 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973). Pichery, SC 54, 86; Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 240–242.
26. Cassian, *Collationes* 10: 10; Pichery, SC 54, 91; Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 243. A fascinating commentary on this disposition can be found in the dialogue between Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki contained in Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968). Suzuki associates the idea of innocence with the Buddhist idea of "Anabhoga-Carya," roughly translated as "effortless" or "no striving." It connotes a kind of openness and transparency of mind that enables one to apprehend and stand in "the original light of Suchness which is Emptiness" (104–105). Merton's response, most of which is rooted in the language and thought of the ancient desert tradition, points to a similar notion crucial to the early Christian monks.
27. Cassian, *Collationes* 10: 10; Pichery, SC 54, 90; Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 243.
28. Cassian, *Collationes* 14: 13; Pichery, SC 54, 201; Gibson, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 442.
29. Cassian, *Collationes* 10: 10; Pichery, SC 54, 86; Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 242.

31. Cassian, *Collationes* 10:11; Pichery, SC 54, 86; Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, 243.
32. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. 1, 62.
33. Cassian, Abba Moses, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. 1, 97.
34. *Note-books* (New York: Little Brown, 2006), 15–16.
36. Richard Holmes's book, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), offers a thoughtful and nuanced discussion of how the deeply enmeshed work of scientists and romantic poets and writers in the eighteenth century created the conditions for the kind of play of ideas and movement among and between different modes of thought that is increasingly difficult for us to imagine.
37. For a thoughtful analysis of the distinctively *contemplative* dimension of contemporary scientific thought, see Allan, Wallace, *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
38. Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*, 249.
39. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, 39.
40. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*. Haupt is particularly sensitive to the way Darwin looked at things in the natural world and to the importance of this way of looking for our own understanding of what it means to behold the world. See also Adam, Gopnik, *Angels and Ages: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life* (New York: Vintage, 2009): "More than anything else in life, Charles Darwin liked to look at things. He liked to look at things the way an artist likes to draw, the way a composer likes to play the piano, the way a cook likes to chop onions: it is the simple root physical activity that makes the other, higher order acts not just possible but pleasurable" (72).
41. Charles, Darwin, "Darwin's Ornithological Notes," ed. Emma Nora Barlow, *Bulletin of the British Museum* (Natural History) Historical Series 2 (1963): 201–278; Charles, Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary*, ed. Richard Darwin Keynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Charles, Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Zoology Notes and Specimen Lists from H.M.S. Beagle*, ed. Richard Darwin Keynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
42. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 11–12.
43. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 14.
44. See Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: A Biography*. Vol. 1, *Voyaging* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 325–327, 396–399, 438–439, for an illuminating discussion of Darwin's complex and shifting relationship to the Church of England and his struggle to reconcile orthodox Christian belief with his emerging understanding of the principles of evolution. Brown suggests that "the religious sentiment was never strongly developed in [Darwin]" (325) and that his continued adherence to the teachings of the Church of England may well have owed as much to his temperamental aversion to confronting doubt and to the conventions of his class as it did to any particular conviction Darwin had regarding the truth of those teachings. Still, there is little doubt that he did ultimately find it impossible to reconcile his emerging scientific understanding with the teachings of Christianity. Even so, this leaves unanswered the question of how best to understand the potential spiritual significance of Darwin's work as a naturalist, in particular his deep devotion to paying attention to the world. It is here that Haupt's work is especially helpful, for it opens up a space that allows us to distinguish Darwin's struggles with religion from the contemplative character of his work as a naturalist.
45. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 15–16.
46. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 49–50.
47. Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Zoology Notes*, February 29, 1832, 65.
48. Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary*, 42.
49. Darwin, "Darwin's Ornithological Notes," 250.
50. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 86.
51. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 86.
52. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 186.
53. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 187.
54. Haupt, *Pilgrim on the Great Bird Continent*, 244.
55. Charles, Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 314.
56. Henry David Thoreau, *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 86.
57. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Ronald de Leeuw, trans. Arnold Pomerans (London: Penguin, 1997), 470.
58. Adrienne Baxter Bell, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* (New York: Braziller, 2003), 28.
59. Bell notes: "Innes was not especially engaged by the challenge of capturing, through his art, the fleeting, physical appearances of scenes in nature, of representing nature according to information derived through physical sight. He attempted, instead, to express something far more difficult to discern: a sense of nature's 'inner life,' a sense of those invisible forces—those divine forces of influx—that generated nature's 'living motion.'" (*George Inness and the Visionary Landscape*, 29–30).
60. See Marc, Simpson, ed., *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
61. Paul, Cezanne, *Letters*, ed. John Rewald, trans. Marguerite Kay (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 327.
62. Cezanne, *Letters*, 316–317. He also comments on his sense of the importance of optics: "Optics, which are developed in us by study, teach us to see," 317.
63. Van Gogh, *Letters*, 193–194.

64. Aldo, Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford, 1949), 149–150.