

## The Soil of Spirituality: What Agrarians Can Teach Us About the Life of Faith\*

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### Abstract

This essay explores what bearing the Anthropocene context has on Christian faith and spiritual praxis. Concerned that some dominant expressions of spirituality are oblivious to the negative effects of an Anthropocene condition, this piece examines how people and communities might begin to uphold rather than undermine a wholistic and sacramental understanding of creation. The author argues for an agrarian approach, one rooted in the land and in the perspective of a God who only ever looks at the entirety of creation with love. This agrarian perspective advocates for cultivating the well-being of land and people together by fostering the virtue of humility and practices of confession, conversion, and repentance. The moving story of Don and Marie's journey of personal transformation which leads them to transition from industrial and commercial pursuits to holistic farming practices offers a concrete example of what it means to cultivate true agrarian hospitality. The essay concludes by arguing for an incarnate spirituality that views the world not with a myopic Anthropocene mentality but instead acknowledges and attends to the social and ecological aspects of God's creation as well.

### Keywords

Spirituality; Christian faith; agrarian approach; Anthropocene mentality; creation; virtues.

### Introduction: An Agrarian Approach

Earth system scientists tell us that humanity now lives in a fundamentally different world. They call it the Anthropocene, because in this world (some) people have developed the technologies and put in place the economic systems that are determining the character and the future of life on Earth. Ranging from the cellular to the atmospheric levels (and everything in between), there is no habitat or life form that does not in some way reflect the influence of human power. If in previous centuries people could assume Nature as the power that funded and dwarfed human possibilities, in the Anthropocene it is nearly reversed: the technosphere—that massive built infrastructure that holds our energy grids, food systems, transportation and communication networks, waste dumps, retail venues, distribution networks, and homes—now shapes decisively how nature expresses itself. Some argue, persuasively, that the term “nature” has itself become obsolete. In the worlds of biotech, genetic engineering, chemical invention, and climate change, there is little that is “natural” about our world and its life.

Does the advent of an Anthropocene world have any bearing on how Christians characterize the life of faith or how they orient spiritual quests? I recognize that this is an enormous question that bears

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on multiple matters such as the meaning of creation, the presence of God in our world, the purpose and ministries of the church, and the scope of salvation and redemption. In this presentation I will focus on a few key “spiritual exercises” that I believe to be essential at this time as people struggle to face and respond to our Anthropocene condition. My concern is that some (even dominant) expressions of the spiritual life are oblivious to our Anthropocene context and do not see why it matters for the life of faith. I believe this whole manner of thinking and living to be a theological catastrophe since it diminishes the creation that God has only ever loved. More accurately, it degrades the embodied contexts where God’s love is daily and intimately at work.

My approach to and characterization of these spiritual exercises will be agrarian. Why agrarian? Because Christians worship an agrarian God. I recognize that this is an unusual way of speaking, especially for people residing in cities that lack awareness of or sympathy for agricultural life. We need to appreciate, however, that the world of scripture is thoroughly agrarian in character. It is populated by people who understand that their livelihoods are entirely dependent on what God provides for them *through* their lands, water, and weather. Even those people not identified as farmers or shepherds understood that apart from ecological processes and agricultural practices their lives would come to an end. They made sense of God in these landed terms because the land was precisely where the love of God was first revealed to them in the forms of nurture, energy, dwelling, and beauty. What the people in Scripture knew of God, first and foremost, is that God *provides* and *cares* for material and bodily needs, and that God does this by creating and sustaining a welcoming and hospitable world. Their God is one whose eyes are constantly on the land (Deuteronomy 11:12) because in caring for the land God also cares for the many creatures that depend upon it. This is why God’s everlasting covenant is not only between God and people. It is between God, people, and the land. The health and flourishing of all life depends on this covenant not being broken.

The point that needs stressing is that the human condition has not changed from what we see in Scripture, and it will not change, insofar as we are embodied, biologically based beings. Recent decades of unprecedented and global urbanization notwithstanding, all people will continue to depend on healthy land, water, and air. Mouths, stomachs, and nostrils are the definitive, daily proof of that.

Before proceeding, a brief definition of agrarianism is in order. An agrarian is someone who works for the well-being of land and people *together*. The operative word is “together,” because the histories of human settlement witness to patterns in which human success has been premised upon the exhaustion, abuse, or degradation of the land. In the past, people often had the option to move from wasted lands to “virgin territory.” That option no longer exists. The future of humanity depends on forms of settlement that nurture the habitats and the plant, animal, and insect species that nurture us. My definition of agrarianism does not require that all people become farmers. What it does require is that all people, including urbanites, become advocates for economic policies and political priorities that feature the health and vitality of our lands as central and abiding priorities. That means they must learn where their food and energy come from, and understand the ecological conditions that are necessary for life’s flourishing. This is undoubtedly a massive educational effort. It is also a plea for transparent rather than anonymous economies, economies that clearly reveal the histories of things coming-to-be. An authentic agrarian

position centers on Robin Kimmerer's eloquent and succinct question: what does it take for humans and the land to be good medicine for each other? (Kimmerer 2013, x). We cannot be good medicine if we don't know the details of where we are or appreciate the eco-social conditions for vibrant life.

Scholars of our Anthropocene epoch regularly affirm that human domination of earth and creatures has rarely been good for forests, fields, watersheds, or plants and animal species. Placing humans (*anthropos*) at the center of deliberation and concern has drained and degraded the fertility, diversity, and fecundity of Earth. That is a hard truth that needs time to sink in! We are the direct cause of a great species extinction event, and we are precipitating unprecedented rates of soil and water degradation. Unsurprisingly, the more people learn about the damage dominant economies of our time are doing, eco-grief and eco-mourning, along with feelings of hopelessness and doom, are becoming default responses. How should Christians respond? What in their traditions of spirituality can be of help?

In my presentation I will focus on the virtue of humility and the practices of confession and repentance, since these will be crucial to an honest and viable spirituality for our Anthropocene future. To make my case I will first tell the story of Don and Marie Ruzicka, two Canadian farmers I met several years ago, because their experience casts a clarifying light on the challenges that face us (Wirzba 2022, 181-194).

### [The Story of Ruzicka Sunrise Farm<sup>1</sup>](#)

Ruzicka Sunrise Farm, located in central Alberta, Canada was founded by Don's maternal grandparents in 1910. Like so many European immigrants, they had moved west in pursuit of greater opportunity and a better life. They built a barn first (in 1913), and then a house (in 1916). The farm prospered. Some of the family stayed on to do the work. When Don and Marie bought the farm from Don's uncle in 1983, they delighted in the knowledge that they were building on a family history and commitment to this particular piece of land. But as Don recalls it, they were excited to know that as owners they could now realize their dreams on the land as well.

During the 1980s, the push in agriculture from bankers, government officials, and agricultural experts was to industrialize production and maximize yields by mining the land. All across the Canadian West, wetlands and sloughs were drained, bush and woodlots cut down, and native prairie plowed up, all so that as many acres as possible could be planted in grain. Don was no different from other farmers. He grew grain and raised as many cattle as he could for the commodities markets. Every year the pressure to increase yields in the face of dwindling profit margins mounted. To keep the farm going, operating loans for bigger machinery and (seed and fertilizer) inputs had to increase at the same time. It didn't take long for an enormous debt load to accrue. The stress of it all went straight into Don's body. In March of 1986 he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease.

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1. This story references communication between the author and Don and Marie Ruzicka.

By the fall of 1995, the year's grain harvest now completed, Don and Marie could no longer avoid these questions: Should we continue on this stressful journey of uncontrollable debt? Should we sell and move? Or should we try another way of farming? The first option didn't look very promising since it was, quite literally, destroying their lives and the fertility of the land. The second option was attractive because it represented a release from all the pressure. The third option was a bit unnerving. What would a different way of farming look like, and what would it require of them?

When Don went to pick up the mail the next day, an answer was waiting for them in the form of a one-page flyer whose caption read: "Would you like to get off the agribusiness treadmill?" It was an invitation to attend an information meeting to learn about Holistic Management. Don went to the meeting and discovered that Holistic Management is about farming in ways that restore land to health, while also affording farmers and ranchers a sustainable and decent way of life. Together, Don and Marie signed up for the eight-day course. In it they learned about ecosystem services, the value of riparian zones and native species, the dangers of pesticides and herbicides, and the importance of species diversity. In it they were also beginning to understand their complicity in histories that were systematically degrading and destroying the land. A crucial insight was dawning in their minds: as farmers, they do not simply live *on* the land, but *from* it and *through* it as members of one vast community of life.

The following spring Don and Marie saw their farm with fresh eyes. They now understood that they were going to have to *change their lives*. The patterns of their daily work, the range of their affections and sympathies, the metrics that measured success and failure, and what they imagined a good human life to be – all these needed to change if they were going to farm in this new way. It was not going to be easy. Twelve years of industrial methods had to be unlearned, and the pressure of banks and neighbors to continue in well-established and officially-sanctioned ways had to be resisted. It was an enormous risk. How would they pay their bills? Would they still be accepted by their community? The farm, a family history, and inherited ways of knowing, feeling, and working – all were on the line.

The following year, 1997, Don and Marie sold all of their grain equipment and 320 acres of cultivated land. The 600 remaining acres of cultivated land were converted to pasture, and the 200 acres of native prairie, wetlands, and woods were going to be treated with new-found respect. A system of rotational grazing was put in place for the broilers, turkeys, laying hens and hogs that were now a base of the farm operation. And cattle would be regularly moved through fenced-in paddocks so as not to overgraze pastureland or contaminate riparian zones. The method moving forward was going to be regenerative. The goal was to restore the land to vitality and health by giving it regular times to rest and replenish. By May of 1999, Don and Marie had paid down all of their debt. As Don puts it, "I am unable to clearly explain and do justice to how this removal of debt affected me. I felt as though I had been held hostage by the banking system, and now I was free!"

The freedom Don now felt was wholly unlike the freedom he felt upon first purchasing the farm. In 1983 it was a freedom to do with the land whatever he wanted, a freedom to work out his dreams of personal and family success by making the land produce. This is the heart of the freedom that creates an Anthropocene world. Sixteen years later it was a freedom to serve the land and to nurture it to health, a freedom to give

himself to the land (rather than to bankers) in practices of work that facilitate multi-species flourishing. To realize this new humble, self-offering form of freedom, Don knew he was going to need a lot of help. A lot of it came in the form of teachers – biologists, riparian and agro-forestry specialists, ornithologists, entomologists, ecologists, and range and wetland specialists – who gently and graciously offered their expertise. They helped him understand the damage that industrial methods had done to the land, and they showed him a better way. What followed was a complex, intensive management program that prioritized the protection of riparian zones, the replanting of roughly 100,000 trees, the reintroduction of native grasses and pollinator-friendly plants, and the creation of habitat for diverse wildlife species, all while raising domestic livestock in a humane and species-honoring manner.

Don describes his transformation as a form of conversion. He realized that his ways of farming were violating the land and its life. Grief and mourning were part of this experience. But so too was *confession* and *repentance*. He needed to acknowledge his own wrong-doing, and he needed to repent, change direction, and practice *metanoia*. Though he did not fully understand all that he was searching for, he eventually came to characterize his work as a quest to be forgiven for decades of harmful farming. But forgiven by whom? Can the land itself forgive?

Don traces his experience of being forgiven to May 21, 2000, at approximately 6am. He was out in a pasture moving his chicken shelters to fresh grass when he heard the unmistakable song of a Western meadowlark. Don considers this birdsong to be amongst the most beautiful sounds on the prairie. He had not heard it since the spring of 1989 when, for some reason, the birds stopped showing up at his farm. He missed their presence and their song terribly. And now, here it was. As Don remembers it, the first song made him stand up. Could it be that the meadowlarks had returned? The second song hit him like a trumpet blast. It reverberated through his body and sent him to the ground, weeping. In its song, he heard the land say, “I forgive you.”

Don recounts how this experience happened as part of a journey of personal transformation. He does not claim to comprehend all of it. What he recognizes is that his commitment to stop mining and abusing the land went hand in hand with a growing appreciation for the land and its creatures as *kin*, a morally inflected community of life. Over time, and with much newfound attention and effort, Don came into the presence of what he calls “the spirit of the land,” the sense that the land is not simply a piece of private property, but a being with integrity and sanctity. It had a life of its own that called forth wonder and respect. It could be harmed and violated, and it had a spiritual claim upon his life. One could say, the land came to have a face and a voice that communicates to those who have learned to humble and open themselves to its presence. Insofar as Don was committed, like fellow farmers, to “making the land pay,” the land was mute and reduced to a commodifiable object that had lost any spiritual or moral resonance.

To hear the voice of the land does not require that one be a mystic. What is required is that one learn to *come into the presence* of the land *as it is* rather than *as one wishes it to be*. This takes time, loving attention, and patient listening—all practices of the highest and most practical significance. Coming into the presence of another is not a spectator activity since what one is after is a perception of the liveliness of another and a participating in its unfolding life. Rather than asking, “How much can I get out of the

land?" Don now asked the questions he learned from Wendell Berry<sup>2</sup>: "What is here? What will nature allow me to do here? What will nature help me to do here?" As Don describes it, he needed to slow down so he could meditate on the life moving around him. The crucial effort was to shift from making his life an imposition on the land to making his life a conversation and a joining with the land. With the help of teachers, Don was learning what the land would be doing in his place if he was not forcing it to do what he wanted, and then learning to bring his labor into alignment with it. In effect, what Don needed to do was dedicate himself to the land's flourishing, and thereby rethink all his work as a form of husbandry, a difficult matrimony that must continually work out the demands of fidelity in contexts of ignorance and surprise, but also negligence and hurt.

Over months and years, Don and Marie were developing new habits of work that enabled deep resonance and fidelity with their land. One way to characterize these new habits of work is to note how Don and Marie transformed their work into a complex set of practices and skills that communicate *hospitality*. What I mean is this. The industrial methods of farming that mine and exploit the land are fundamentally inhospitable because they push native plant, animal, and bird species out. Their homes are destroyed or poisoned, so they either die or go away. But as Don and Marie eliminated the use of poisons, repaired their water systems, replanted native grasses, flowers, bushes, and trees, they also created a welcoming, hospitable habitat for microbes and insects, bees and butterflies, and birds and mammals to come back. Along with the meadowlarks that sent Don to the ground, Swainson hawks, Sprague's pipit, pileated woodpeckers, kingfishers, beavers, badgers, deer, and moose (to name just a few) have all returned to the farm. Their growing presence and population are material evidence that the Ruzickas have made their farm a welcoming, nurturing, hospitable place, a place where a multitude of creatures can feed, reproduce, and thrive. We can interpret Don and Marie's new farming practices as acts of confession and repentance, and we can interpret the meadowlark's song as the bird's declaration of forgiveness. Why? Because the return of the meadowlark communicates that it welcomes Don's welcome, that it does not see Don's presence as a threat, and that it is prepared to carry on its life with his. The event of forgiveness communicates that in the face of wrongdoing a life-sharing relationship can begin again, and thus also a hopeful life.

Don says learning what it takes to be attentive and listen to the land is an ongoing process. That so many creatures are now content to make their home in Don's presence and on his land is a clear communication to Don that he is doing rightly with his fellow creatures, or that he is at least on the right track of action, and that he need not let a history of shame prevent him from continuing in his new way of farming. In this listening, Don has heard that the land not only *forgives* him. It also *loves* him by providing for his needs. The land does not simply belong to him. He also belongs to it and is accepted by it as one who grows out of the ground and is nurtured by its life. The hope that Don now feels is not the result of what he has done. It is not something he has generated from out of himself. Instead, hope has grown in him as he has learned to make his love—his attention, energy, and skill—a participation in the divine love that creates and sustains the land and its many creatures.

The love and acceptance Don feels is not sentimental or romantic, because it is framed by the memory

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2. See reference page for specific works of Wendell Berry that influenced this piece.

of many wounds. The experience of it was prepared by Don learning to slow down and humbly open himself to, and express gratitude for, the sanctity of life going on around him. He needed to confess when he saw that his action precipitated harm, and he needed to repent by learning the science that informs the hard work of restoring riparian zones and reintroducing native species. When speaking to farm visitors of the new mission of Sunrise Farm, Don often shows pictures of a 17-acre area that was once home to several sharp-tail grouse nests. It was a lek, or breeding ground, where mating occurred. In 1987 he cleared the area to grow more grain and make more money. He has never seen a grouse since because once a lek is destroyed, it is highly unlikely that grouse will ever return. But Don has not given up. He describes his recent efforts to reintroduce native grass and tree species as making “reparation for his sins.” He says, “I may never create the habitat required for the sharp-tails to return, but hopefully other species will appear, and they have. Again, forgiveness is evolving by doing the best I can to make things right with the land. He proposes that we may need a new organization like “Ecological Sinners Anonymous” where people can tell their stories of mistakes made, but also of the repair work attempted, so that solutions for healing and right living can be shared with as many people as possible. The time is overdue, Don thinks, for farmers (and I would add eaters) to engage in practices of confession and lament.

### [The Virtue of Humility and the Practice of Repentance](#)

What I would like to do now is dig more deeply into the spirit of humility that animates Don and Marie’s transformation and their new way of farming. This spirit of humility, I believe, is closely tied with their acceptance of their *creaturely condition*, a condition that affirms the human need to gratefully receive from and generously give nurture to others. The story of Sunrise Farm, I believe, demonstrates how difficult it is for people to be true to their creaturely condition, especially if we define creatureliness as a person’s *vulnerability* and *self-insufficiency*. Whether out of fear, blindness, or hubris, an abiding temptation is for people to evade their *dependent* standing in the world. Rather than patiently and honestly living up to their *neediness* before others, the temptation is to deform need into fantasy, establish oneself as invulnerable, and then to remake the world to suit personal concerns. This is the impulse at work in our Anthropocene context. Rather than being grateful for the contributions others make to our well-being and joy – most basically through acts of companionship and nurture – people either neglect or destroy (often in the name of self-preservation) the very sources of life upon which they depend.

The denial of our need for relationship is of supreme significance because it deprives us of what Anne Dufourmantelle calls the wisdom and power of gentleness. “Gentleness,” she says, “is primarily an intelligence, one that carries life, that saves and enhances it...It is an understanding of the relationship with the other, and tenderness is the epitome of this relationship” (Dufourmantelle 2018, 14). What Dufourmantelle’s analyses help us appreciate is that creaturely life is always life together with others who are similarly insufficient, helpless, suffering, weak, fallible, irritating, disappointing, and sometimes stupid. The infrastructures of steel, concrete, and glass notwithstanding, we live in a wounded world populated by permeable, sensitive, and soft flesh, flesh that carries the histories of the traumas inflicted

upon it. This is why tenderness is so important, since it communicates an appreciation for our *shared* vulnerability, and a commitment to be a solicitous and protecting presence to those we are with. It takes attention, intention, and practice to cultivate a considerate and gentle intelligence.

As the opening of scripture makes clear, the cultivation of a garden and the care of plant and animal life are the ideal ways to develop the sensitivities and skill that foster gentleness. In Genesis 2 we are told that God creates the first *adam* (human) out of the *adamah* (humus) by breathing into the latter God's form-giving, life-giving breath. Along with other plant and animal creatures, human beings are soil divinely animated. Humanity's fundamental and abiding task is to serve and protect the garden that is its nurturing home. The point of this task is not simply to grow some food or flowers. It is to cultivate a detailed understanding of this world as *a vulnerable membership of life* in which creatures provide for the needs of each other, and then learn the skills necessary to fit harmoniously within this membership.

Humility is at the core of this task, not only because it is reflected in the etymological connections between human/humus/humility, but more fundamentally because humility communicates an overall orientation for daily life in which people keep the needs of others foremost in mind and heart. Put another way, when people embody humility, they witness to the truth of their humanity *as creatures* called to praise God precisely *in the honoring of this world and its life*. The world God creates is a vulnerable world susceptible to pain and suffering. To live well and beautifully within it, people must not only affirm the good of their need. They must also learn the skills of gentleness and compassion that are essential to life that is always life together. Humility takes us to the heart of a spiritual life that is faithful to the world as a place of belonging and responsibility. Here is the astounding thing. Humanity's gardening way of being is to be patterned after, and be a participation in, God's eternal gardening way of being, a way of being that nurtures and sustains life, and a way that Jesus reveals as fundamentally *kenotic* and *for others*.

The call to be humble is often framed by spiritual writers as a call to be *nothing*. Simone Weil, for instance, says, "We should renounce being something. That is our only good" (Weil 1963, 29). This is because in and of themselves, individuals can be and do nothing: "Everything without exception which is of value in me comes from somewhere other than myself" (Weil 1963, 27). Speaking this way, Weil reflects a tradition in which people seeking humility are regularly admonished to acknowledge their worthlessness and to esteem their powers as little more than rubbish.<sup>3</sup> Humility develops best, they are advised, in contexts where individuality is held to be of no repute.

Unsurprisingly, it is precisely the call to see oneself "as nothing" that has caused calls to humility to be met with resistance, even scorn. It is just too depressing, and it stifles human potential and achievement. Critics ranging from David Hume to Friedrich Nietzsche routinely deride spiritual writers who, in their calls to humility, refer to the sinfulness and contemptibility of the human race. Norvin Richards is representative when he asks, "if humility is low self-esteem, where does this leave the rather *splendid* among us...?" (Richards 1988, 253).<sup>4</sup> On this view, humility is a vice and a blemish on the strength,

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3. Bernard of Clairvaux (1987, 103) defined humility as "the virtue by which a man recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself." Bernard, who is here following Augustine in his definition, reflects a common view within spiritual literature.

4. Richards uses as his example Bernard of Clairvaux, who says (in *Sermon 42 on Canticle 6*), "If you examine yourself inwardly by the light of truth and without dissimulation, and judge yourself without flattery; no doubt you will be humbled in your eyes, becoming contemptible in



daring, ingenuity, and dignity that elevate us as a species. It is the surest and most miserable sign of self-imposed decadence, and therefore ought to be rejected as a valued character trait. We must, therefore, banish humility from a list of virtues since calls to humility will inevitably lead to forms of self-hatred and self-loathing that have clearly done so much personal and social harm.

What should we make of this criticism? Is humility finally a form of self- and world-hatred that has roots extending all the way back to Jesus' injunction that "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25)?

It would be puzzling, if not contradictory, to think that Jesus wants people to hate life or themselves when he also says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). It would also be incongruous given Jesus' daily commitment to heal, feed, exorcise, befriend, and reconcile personal bodies. Jesus' overall life is a rebuke precisely to those people who think this world and its life do not matter, and therefore can be ignored, demeaned, or abused. His ministries of touch and his compassionate presence to others witness to God's intimate and abiding love for each and every created being *in its creaturely condition*. If this is the case, then the call to be nothing cannot mean we should despise ourselves. Why? Because God never despises creaturely life, nor does God offer salvation as an escape from creaturely life. It is important to recall that creatures are not simply the *objects* of God's concern. They are the *embodied expressions* of God's creating and sustaining love, the *embodied sites* where God's love is daily at work, which is why God enters into covenant relationship with them, promising to be with them always as the Source, Nurturer, and Healer of their lives, and why Jesus spends so much time healing, feeding, befriending, and exorcising bodies. This means that humility should not be about loathing oneself but about coming to understand oneself *as a gifted and cherished creaturely being* that needs and lives through the nurture and love that others must provide. It is about living in ways that honor the divine power that animates our life together by sharing the gifts that God gives.

"Humility," says Weil, "is the refusal to exist outside of God" (Weil 1963, 35). The great mistake is for me to think that I can live on my own or that I can secure life for myself, even draw life from out of myself. This I simply cannot do. I did not create myself. To live, I must constantly *receive* the power of life from God as a gift. I must *participate* in a meshwork world where this divine power is constantly circulating through all the bodies and processes that intersect and pulse through me. The danger in pronouncing myself to be a self-standing, self-sourcing "I" is that I might separate myself from others and believe I can make it on my own. This is the Anthropocene illusion that is so destructive because the drive to secure and protect the "I" has the effect of blocking (by hoarding for oneself) the flows of life that I must receive and extend to others. The key is to understand myself not as a sovereign, self-enclosed, self-standing being, but as an enmeshed, needy, dynamic *conduit* or *vessel* through which God's life-creating love can freely move. As Weil puts it, "In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me" (Weil 1963, 30). Later she writes again, "God can love in us only this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him, just as he himself, our creator, withdrew in order that we might come into being. This double operation has no other meaning than love." (Weil 1963, 35). Each life is at its best when divine love flows

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your own sight as a result of this true knowledge of yourself ..." Richards observes that, outside of an allegiance to the archaic belief in original sin, this "depressing view is not obviously correct. In fact, it is difficult to see a reason to hold it" (253).

in an unimpeded manner through the breadth and depth of relationships that constitute it. When people appreciate that they live only through receiving the diverse gifts of birth, nurture, and companionship, then the call to be nothing can be understood as a call to remove from within myself any and all obstacles that would subvert or stall the action of God that moves *through* me (and others).

Weil's description of humility alerts us to the porous, vulnerable, and rooted character of a human life. To be human is essentially to be *open* to others like a seed that opens to its soil environment by extending roots that receive and give nurture in return (John 12:24). When people stall, stifle, or block God's love they not only hinder creation's ongoing development, they mistake themselves. The key to a right and honest understanding of a human creature is to know that the desire to assert oneself gets in the way of a true life which is life-for-others. Weil puts this point succinctly when she says, "I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves" (Weil 1963, 36). I believe Don and Marie came to understand this, which is why they transformed their farm work into an exercise of love for the land and its creatures.

## Concluding Remarks

As my brief accounts of confession, repentance, and humility should make clear, I am trying to make a case for a spirituality that is not aimed "up and away" but "down and among." This is not a mystical *ascent* but a *descent*, quite literally into soils and watersheds, but also into communities and neighborhoods. It is a spirituality of touch and tenderness that is premised on knowing where one is, appreciating how where one is makes our shared life possible, and committing to learn the practical skills that nurture the social and ecological environments that nurture us. It is the way of Jesus who in the ministries of feeding, healing, befriending, and reconciling made the love of God incarnate in all flesh.

This agrarian spirituality does not require that all of us become farmers. That is neither practical or advisable, since relatively few people have the intelligence and patience necessary to grow food. Instead, it is a spirituality that is clearly this-worldly as people, like God, draw their attention to the social and ecological contexts that make their living possible. It is a spirituality that, for example, studies neighborhoods, economic development, food and energy systems, home design, and educational policy, all with the aim of discerning the interventions that need to be made so that people and land can flourish together. This would be an incarnate spirituality in which people work actively to prepare homes for God to be with us, and thereby pay head to John's concluding vision of the new Jerusalem descending to Earth: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." (Revelation 21:3)

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