

THE ART OF CREATURELY LIFE: A QUESTION OF HUMAN PROPRIETY

Norman Wirzba

There appears to be a law that when creatures have reached the level of consciousness, as men have, they must become conscious of the creation; they must learn how they fit into it and what its needs are and what it requires of them, or else pay a terrible penalty: the spirit of the creation will go out of them, and they will become destructive; the very earth will depart from them and go where they cannot follow.¹

Human beings have lost their creaturely nature; this has been corrupted by their being *sicut deus* [like god]. The whole created world is now covered in a veil; it is silent and lacking explanation, opaque and enigmatic.²

In 1988 Jean-Luc Nancy convened a group of leading French philosophers around the question, "Who comes after the Subject?" Nancy wanted to assess the status of human subjectivity after much reflection upon it by thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Bataille, and Wittgenstein, but he also wanted to explore what such reflection looks like in the wake of a century punctuated by war, fascism, Stalinism, the camps, decolonization, the birth of new nations, American economism, and the proliferation of (increasingly un compelling) signs.

Norman Wirzba, *Research Professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life, Duke Divinity School, Box 90967, Durham, NC 27708-0967. E-mail: nwirzba@div.duke.edu*

1. Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill," in *The Long-Legged House* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004 [1969]), 193.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 3), ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 126. Subsequent references will be in the text as *CF*.

Far from pursuing a nihilistic exercise in the obliteration of subjectivity or the self, Nancy wanted to see how our thinking about subjectivity might be opened up to fresh thoughts and new possibilities. Given numerous philosophical critiques and a century of horror, there could be no simple “return to the subject.” We need to move forward to someone. But *who*? The question was how to name, narrate, and receive this “someone.”

In this essay I argue that, from a Christian point of view, it is *creatureliness* that comes after (and before) the subject. I maintain that creatureliness is a more faithful and compelling rendition of human life than are modern characterizations of subjectivity that have often been uncritically absorbed by Christians. What it means to name and narrate human life in terms of its creatureliness, however, is anything but simple. In part this is because humanity’s sinful condition—what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as our striving to become like god (*sicut deus*)—marks an abiding rebellion against creatureliness.³ But it is also the case that theologians have often missed opportunities to develop the doctrine of creation for its anthropological insights.⁴ My fundamental presupposition is that creatureliness goes to the heart of human identity and vocation, illuminating *who we are, where we are, and what we are to do*.

My account of creatureliness will begin by developing an agrarian picture of creaturely identity by engaging several key elements of Genesis 2, the oldest creation story in Scripture. As I develop this account I will appropriate Bonhoeffer’s suggestive theological commentary on this passage that he presented at the University of Berlin in the 1932–1933 winter course “Creation and Sin.” I will also put this commentary in conversation with writers who have been critical of the construct called “the modern subject,” all with the aim of opening a space for a reconsideration of the human *as* creature. I will conclude by outlining three marks of human propriety that follow from my account of creatureliness.

3. Speaking of sin, Bonhoeffer observes, “The word *disobedience* fails to describe the situation adequately. It is rebellion, the creature’s stepping outside of the creature’s only possible attitude, the creature’s becoming creator, the destruction of creatureliness, a defection, a falling away [*Sturzen*] from being safely held as a creature” (CF, 120).

4. David Kelsey’s magisterial two-volume *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) is a notable exception to this tendency. Kelsey observes, along with Gustaf Wingren, that the doctrine of creation does “remarkably little work” in modern systematic theology (160). Admittedly, a considerable amount has been written about humanity made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). What is striking about many of these accounts is how much they rely on philosophical characterizations of capacities such as reason or language or the soul that do not have their inspiration in biblical depictions of creation and creatureliness. For a lucid treatment showing why these accounts are theologically unsatisfactory, see Ian McFarland’s *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

OUR GARDEN CONTEXT

It is of profound theological and anthropological significance that the earliest biblical creation story places human beings in a garden. Why this agrarian setting as opposed to some other? Bonhoeffer suggested the setting represents a fantasy: for the Israelites, living as they did in an arid region, what could be more magnificent than a garden with rich soil, abundant water, and trees laden with beautiful and delectable fruit? The garden imagery of this story, he thought, needed to be translated into the language of today's technical world (CF, 81–83). We should ask, however, if Bonhoeffer's judgment is not itself a reflection of a modern, urban forgetfulness of and bias against agrarian ways of understanding human identity and life, ways that were common to most of humanity in the last ten thousand years and that were presupposed by the writers and hearers of Scripture.⁵ Is not the rebellion against creatureliness that Bonhoeffer powerfully describes mirrored in humanity's long-standing rebellion against the land? Perhaps the agrarian, garden setting, and the practical sympathies and sensibilities it makes possible, is crucial because of its unique ability to illuminate our condition.

What does the garden scene in Genesis 2, particularly its reference to the creation of the first human being (*adam*) formed out of fertile soil (*adamah*), say about creaturely life? Most basically, it says that creatureliness is inescapably marked by need and by dependence on fellow creatures and a creator. It is easy to overlook the significance of what is being communicated here: the need and dependence that mark human life, though clearly having social and political dimensions, are first and forever experienced in bodily attachments to material bodies that are unavoidable because it is *through* them that we live at all. Genesis 2 describes human life, but also plant (2:9) and animal (2:19) life, as fundamentally and inextricably bound to and dependent upon soil. Soil is the recombinant and regenerative matrix out of which all terrestrial life comes and to which it eventually returns. As Wendell Berry, the foremost agrarian writer of our time, puts it, "The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it

5. Ellen Davis has developed the agrarian context for understanding Israelite history and its theological traditions in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

we can have no life.”⁶ To rebel against soil, even to neglect it, is to take a stance against creation.

Genesis 2 further shows creaturely life as ultimately dependent on God’s life-giving creativity, creativity that takes an intensely intimate form as God’s own breath as the breath within our own, lifting soil to an animate and *adamic* form of life.⁷ Soil is never simply dirt or dirty. It is the bearer of the divine breath of life. Creaturely life, as David Kelsey says, breathes a “borrowed breath” from God. According to the Psalmist, the day God withholds this divine breath is also the day creatures die and return to lifeless dust (*‘aphar*). But: “When you send forth your spirit/breath (*ruach*), they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (*adamah*)” (Ps 104:30).

The dependence described in this story is not abstract or optional. It is embodied, smelled in every breath and tasted in every swallow and bite. Appreciating it presupposes active engagement and skilled work. This is why God enlists the human creature to till and keep the garden (Gen 2:15)—because it is through the tending and serving of fellow creatures that *adam* practically probes and potentially learns to appreciate the range, depth, and responsibilities of interdependent life.⁸ According to this story, it is crucial we keep our hands familiar with soil so that we don’t forget our need and dependence, but also our responsibility to care for the bodies we live through. Human creaturely identity and vocation come together in the work of gardening. Moreover, given that God is cast as the First Gardener (2:8), we are led to think that human participation in the work of gardening is also a growing in the understanding of God’s creative, attentive, patient, and nurturing ways. Gardening, in short, is

6. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 86.

7. Scripture leaves it open as to whether or not the divine breath that animates *adam* also animates plant and animal life. The King James Version made a clear distinction between human and nonhuman creaturely life by saying the former became a “living soul,” as compared with animals who are “living creatures.” The Hebrew, however, does not allow this neat (and entirely advantageous to us) bifurcation, since it names humans *and* animals as *nefesh chaYäh*.

8. The New Revised Standard Version translation of Genesis 2:15 as “till and keep” clearly resonates with the horticultural context of this passage. Davis argues that the root verb “to work or till” can have a variety of meanings, ranging from working the land to working *for* the land (as a form of service to it, and perhaps even worship to God). The verb “to keep” also has the meaning “to observe” (as when the Israelites are told to observe God’s commandments), suggesting that “keeping” presupposes personal alignment or attunement to what is going on and expected in the garden. Davis suggests the translation, “And YHWH God took the human and set him in the garden of Eden to work and serve it, to preserve and observe it” (*Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 30). This translation highlights how *adam* needs to develop the very practical skills of attention, patient work, and respect for limits and possibilities. The human creature must show humility as one who draws its life from humus. For further treatment, see my essay “The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness,” *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2008): 225–44.

the complex activity that leads us into a deeper encounter with and understanding of creation, creatureliness, and the Creator's life.

My interpretation of Genesis presupposes an appreciation for how gardens are indispensable places in which insights about creatureliness can be learned.⁹ Here, amid water, soil, plant, animal, weather, and sun, gardeners work to understand as precisely as possible the character of the relationships and responsibilities that make eating and drinking, and therefore also the many quotidian elements of our life together, possible. Here people discover that the sources of health and vitality are never simply "resources" awaiting our procurement, but are instead the fruit of a mysterious, fresh, enlivening power that transforms death into fertility and seed into fruit.¹⁰ In gardens, life is daily witnessed and felt to be vulnerable and fragile but also surprising and miraculous. We become good gardeners insofar as we learn to work with the powers of life that exceed our comprehension and control, even as we engage them to meet our needs. If we are attentive and honest, we begin to see that human

9. It is important to underscore that gardens are built environments to the extent that they are the coming together of wild/natural forces with human design and skill. But unlike other built environments (a shopping mall, for instance), in which *human* ingenuity, technology, and ambition dominate and are continually reflected back to us, gardens are places in which people are more readily compelled to see the variety and complexity of creatures and life processes *beyond* human design or control. The philosopher David Copper describes the deep meaning and attraction of gardens as residing, in part, in their ability to reveal "the relation between the source of the world and ourselves" (*A Philosophy of Gardens* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006], 150). Speaking of the great variety of gardening traditions around the world, he stresses that attention to the "source of the world" brings us face to face with the mystery of things as present and somehow given. "The Garden, to put it portentously, is an epiphany of man's relationship to mystery. This relationship is its mystery" (145).

10. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes in Sonnet 12 of *The Sonnets to Orpheus: First Series*, trans. A. Poulin Jr., *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus* (New York: Mariner, 2005), 107:

*Selbst wenn sich der Bauer sorgt und handelt,
Wo die Saat in Sommer sich verwandelt,
Reicht er niemals hin. Die Erde schenkt.*

Though he works and worries, the farmer
never reaches down to where the seed turns
into summer. The earth *grants*.

Wendell Berry speaks similarly in a Sabbath poem from *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998), 18:

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled

By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.

agency sometimes destroys the health of gardens and their creatures, and so needs restraint and correction.

As those who work closely with soil can testify, the power of life witnessed in gardens is a “dark” power because it so often leaves gardeners in varying states of incomprehension. Gardens are places of inexplicable fecundity and freshness, but also danger and death. Here human ingenuity and ambition are frequently revealed as floundering, contentious movements that lead to failure rather than fruit. Gardening is a form of work that perpetually undoes our knowing and unseats the gardener as the center of primary significance. It demands forms of attention, patience, and humility that, for good reason, parallel the ascetic movements of mystical quests.¹¹ Berry puts it this way:

Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch. And to come to that understanding it is necessary, even now, to leave the regions of our conquest—the cleared fields, the towns and cities, the highways—and re-enter the woods. For only there can man encounter the silence and darkness of his own absence. Only in this silence and darkness can he recover the sense of the world’s longevity, of its ability to thrive without him, of his inferiority to it and his dependence on it. Perhaps then, having heard that silence and seen that darkness, he will grow humble before the place and begin to take it in—to learn *from it* what it is. As its sounds come into his hearing, and its lights and colors come into his vision, and its odors come into his nostrils, then he may come into *its* presence as he never has before, and he will arrive in his place and will want to remain. His life will grow out of the ground like the other lives of the place, and take its place among them. He will be *with* them—neither ignorant of them, nor indifferent to them, nor against them—and so at last he will grow to be native-born. That is, he must re-enter the silence and darkness, and be born again.¹²

To enter into the knowledge of their creatureliness, people must live and work with the dark, that is, with an honest appreciation of their ignorance and impotence. They must learn to calm the ravenous and rapacious intellect that wants, through its knowing, to comprehend and control the world. It is through darkness that the creative light that nourishes the world can be beheld. It is in the quiet that another can finally be heard.¹³

11. I have developed this theme in “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” in *Christianity and Literature* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 253–74.

12. Berry, “A Native Hill,” 207.

13. O bent by fear and sorrow, now bend down,

Leave word and argument, be dark and still,
And come into the joy of healing shade.
Rest from your work. Be still and dark until

You grow as unopposing, unafraid
As the young trees, without thought or belief;
Until the shade Sabbath light has made
Shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf

(Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, 31).

When the Genesis 2 story is read alongside other creation stories it becomes apparent that scripture understands human life as finite, bound, and limited. Our dependence on the Creator and on fellow creatures means that life is never our own or within our conceptual grasp. Who we *are*, our ontological status, is to be in need of and in relationship with a bewildering array of others, constantly receiving from them the many forms of bodily nurture and imaginative inspiration that make everyday life possible. Nothing is more indicative of this fact than our daily need to breathe, drink, and eat. To be a creature is to be incomplete, in-breathed, un-self-sufficient, unable to rise and stand on one's own. Our identity is open, varied, and unfinished because it is always being worked out with the creatures we meet and the relationships we live through.

My reading of Genesis 2 shows that creatureliness means that we are always already and viscerally (through lungs and stomachs) implicated in and in-formed by others—bacteria, worms, butterflies, chickens, cows, gardeners—all of which together depend on the wild power of God as their source. Though creatures can be centers of agency in their own unique ways, nevertheless God is intimately and mysteriously present in the liveliness witnessed in their activity. Creaturely life is always life *received* from God and *inspired* and *nurtured* by others. To “be” is to be dependent and vulnerable, daily faced with the incomprehensibility of ourselves and the world in which we move. It is to be marked by potential but also always by *need*.

REFUSING CREATURELINESS

Bonhoeffer's commentary on Genesis 2, though not focused on the agrarian dimensions I have outlined, is important because it developed an understanding of creatureliness centered on need, finitude, and limit. Referring to the placement of the tree of life *and* the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the garden's center, he observed, “*The human being's limit is at the center of human existence, not on the margin (Die Grenze des Menschen ist in der Mitte seines Daseins, nicht am Rand). . . . The boundary that is at the center is the limit of human reality, of human existence as such (Daseins schelchthin)*” (CF, 86). In other words, a limit is not an obstacle or challenge that lies before us as something to be overcome and then left behind. If it were, it would be at the periphery of our lives as the domain *not yet* appropriated and internalized. Theologically understood, limit goes to the core of our being because it marks us as ones who must constantly go to the tree of life and receive life as a gift from *beyond* our own power. Ecologically understood, limit describes our condition as embodied creatures that daily draw on ecosystems and ecosystem processes for life. Limit encompasses the whole of being (*das gesamte Dasein*) and every

possible disposition and manifestation of human life (*das Menschsein in jeder möglichen Haltung*). Adam recognizes and realizes himself not by overcoming the limit but by embracing and gratefully receiving it as the blessing that animates and nurtures him through life. "Adam does not know the boundary as something that can be transgressed; otherwise Adam would know about evil. Adam knows it as the given grace that belongs to his creatureliness and freedom. Adam also knows, therefore, that life is possible only because of the limit." (CF, 87).

According to Bonhoeffer's interpretation of this story it is crucial to understand that limit and need are perceived by Adam not as deficiency but as good because he thereby acknowledges that he lives by grace rather than through the power of his own might. "The limit is grace because it is the basis of creatureliness and freedom; the boundary is the center. Grace is that which holds humankind over the abyss of nonbeing, nonliving, not-being-created." (CF, 87). The prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not at first a temptation. As far as Adam is concerned, the prohibition pertaining to this particular tree is part of the grace of creaturely life that is already understood to be marked and enlivened by limit.

As is well known, Adam and Eve transgress the limit.¹⁴ They appropriate and internalize it in a most graphic way: by eating. In this eating they precipitated death—as God had said earlier to Adam, "For in the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall die" (2:17). What does this "death" mean, particularly if we understand that creaturely life—granted as a gift rather than grasped as a possession—was marked by mortality from the beginning? Bonhoeffer is clear that the death spoken about by God is not cessation of biological existence. Instead it is a dishonest and damaging way of existing. It is dishonest because it denies that we daily depend on others and upon God for life. It is damaging because it transforms a world of grace into an arena of competitive grasping and self-glorifying manipulation, that is, a place for the exercise of multiple idolatries.

Genuine, creaturely life is marked by the humble, grateful reception of life as a gracious gift from God and is witnessed in the responsible care of fellow creatures. Deathly "life," the existence that disrespects and violates limits, is marked by the obligation to live from *out of oneself*, and is witnessed in the exploitation of others (others matter to the extent that they can support one's living out of oneself). But this is an impossible, frustrat-

14. Bonhoeffer proposes that prior to the transgression Adam lives in respectful obedience to the grace of life. His obedience made possible a unified, singularly focused form of life in which the two-sidedness of good and evil—that is, the prospect of an option that diverges from obedience—had not yet emerged. The possibility of good versus evil, therefore, only emerges *in* the transgressive act. This is why Bonhoeffer thinks Adam first lives "beyond good and evil" (CF, 87). The option is not between good and evil but between a "life obedient to God" and "a life of good and evil."

ing obligation and a fundamental self-deception, because no creature is the source of its own life. Wanting to live from and in terms set by itself, the self nonetheless recognizes—the moment it eats!—that it depends on others. Frustration leads to the rebellion that results in the death of others because their integrity and sanctity are denied in their being appropriated by Adam. In the effort to secure life and make it susceptible to his decision, Adam puts himself in opposition to the animation and nurture of God. He is unable to acknowledge and appropriately respect his life as lived *from, with, and through* others. Adam refuses grace, denies his life as a blessing, but must continue on as one defined by need. Death means “no longer being able to live before God, and yet having to live before God. It means standing before God as an outlaw, as one who is lost and damned, but not as one who no longer exists” (CF, 90). In seeking to secure life on his own terms, by trying to live from out of himself, Adam shows his rebellion against creatureliness and the creator. He sets in motion a history of humanity that is set *against* limit.

It would be an enormously complex task to demonstrate the many ways in which modern characterizations of the subject represent the fulfillment of this rebellious spirit.¹⁵ What is instructive, however, is the extent to which several postmodern critiques of subjectivity are attuned to and help illuminate the formal dynamics of the Genesis story as described by Bonhoeffer. Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, writes, “The question [who comes after the subject?] therefore bears upon the critique or deconstruction of interiority, of self-presence, of consciousness, of mastery, of the individual or collective property of an essence.”¹⁶ Nancy’s reading of the modern philosophical tradition, a tradition he thinks summarized by Hegel, posits a subject that appropriates to itself, in a *a priori* and (given modern technological powers) practical fashion, a world of exteriority and strangeness. Modernity moves according to a metaphysical picture

15. Carolyn Merchant has described one dimension of modern subjectivity as the scientist who interrogates, even tortures, nature so as to extract its secrets and bounty. She quotes Francis Bacon: “For like as a man’s disposition is never well known or proved till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shapes till he was *straitened* and *held fast*, so nature exhibits herself more clearly under the *trials* and *vexations* of art [mechanical devices] than when left to herself” (*The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* [San Francisco: Harper, 1980], 169). Rather than being the servants of creation described in Genesis 2, humans are now narrated as the masters of a feminine, constrained, slave-like nature. Pierre Manent, in his examination of modern political thought, casts the gospel of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau thus: “In the beginning, the world was without form and void, without laws, arts, or sciences, and the spirit of man moved over the darkness” (in *The City of Man* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], 183). Modern humanity has become historical, which means it flees God, nature, tradition, and established law. It is a form of constant rebellion in which the only acceptable law is the (arbitrary) law the human being gives to itself.

16. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction,” in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 4. Subsequent references will be in the text as WCAS.

of Being as appropriation. Others, to use theological language, do not signify as a grace received. Instead, they appear as things waiting to be appropriated by us. In place of this appropriating subject, Nancy asks if we might envision a “someone” who is not master of itself and others but instead “comes indefinitely to itself, never stops coming, arriving,” thereby suggesting an identity marked by openness to a genuine other, a genuine limit (WCAS, 7).

In similar fashion, Michel Henry reflected upon the technological character of modern culture. “Technology consists in the unconditional subjugation of the Whole of being, which becomes the Ob-ject, to man, who becomes the Subject—the Ob-ject of the Subject, then, dis-posed before him and disposed of by him, at his disposal therefore, having no other end than this being at the disposal of, subject to tallage and corvée as the serf of this new Lord” (WCAS, 158). For Henry it is Kant who best summarized the modern Subject as the transcendental self who appropriates all beings to itself through various acts of representation: “For the subject is nothing other than this: that which in making appearances appear, in this same gesture, makes be everything that is” (WCAS, 163). To re-present another is to bring them within a horizon of meaning and significance that is determined at the outset. Henry insists that there is dishonesty and deception involved here because this subject, though perhaps responsible for the appearing/signifying of all others, cannot bring about its own existence. The subject that actually exists in its world does not exist as the result of its own representation of itself. What is needed, thought Henry, is a way of characterizing the post-Subject as “someone” appearing in an ek-static movement—a coming from beyond that is also a witnessing to the transcendence of others—that takes him or her beyond the security and sameness of representational consciousness.

This postmodern desire to open the self to the one who is genuinely other was further reflected in Jean-Luc Marion’s response to Nancy’s question. In *L’Interloqué*, Marion offered an analysis of an encounter with a genuinely other person. In this encounter the subject’s self-mastery is destabilized and decentered by a claim that is made. As spoken to or interpellated by another, the first appropriate response is “This is me!” It is a response made without the mastery or confidence normally assumed by the modern subject. “I experience myself being claimed, that is, called upon in the accusative—interpellated as suspect and not as subject, named in the accusative and therefore dispossessed of any nominative function. The interpellated *me* marks the absence of any constituting *I*, under the—in this respect, totalitarian—authority of the claim” (WCAS, 243). For Marion, the claim of the other upon me spells the “disaster” of the I.¹⁷

17. Jean-Louis Chrétien’s description of the “call and response” structure of human existence is an essential supplement to Marion’s account of the *interloqué*. Before we speak we are always already called by and joined to another. “We speak for having heard. Every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice”

Nancy, Henry, and Marion each worry about the self's desire to secure itself and the world in terms established by itself. As autarchic and autonomous, the self is not genuinely open to or receptive of a genuine other. It acknowledges no limit at the center of its life. It can only perceive limit (temporarily) at the margins and as a reality to be overcome.

If we return to the Genesis story we can see that the rejection of limit is ultimately a rejection of God. Consider Eve's encounter with the serpent, who asks, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen 3:1). Bonhoeffer has no interest in assigning blame to the woman. Nor does he think it fruitful to ask where the serpent comes from (the Bible, he says, does not aim to explain something like the origin of evil). What he focuses on is the new, decisive possibility that the serpent's question raised within the human being: "through this question the idea is suggested to the human being of going behind the word of God and now providing it with a human basis—a human understanding of the essential nature of God" (CF, 106). For Adam and Eve the serpent's question becomes a "godless question" not because it is a question *per se*, as if questions were impermissible, but because Adam and Eve now place themselves in the position where they are the judges over how questions are to be answered. There are questions that are in the service of loving and learning. But there are also questions that aim to establish the self as the authority by which others are to be judged and understood. Bonhoeffer thinks that the encounter with the serpent brings about this latter kind of questioning and response. Adam and Eve do not respond by saying "Here am I," thereby opening themselves to the other. Instead they ask "Did God say?" thereby establishing themselves in a position of power and mastery. Rather than submitting to God's word, they exalt themselves to a position *sicut deus* (like god), and now live in open rebellion against God. "Humankind is now *sicut deus*. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator. . . . Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness" (CF, 115).

For Bonhoeffer the authentic human creature is the one who accepts life as an encounter with others and as a grace that comes from beyond the power of human knowing. For Marion the *interloqué* is the one addressed (*der Angesprochene*) and claimed by another. Several features of the *interloqué* bear noting: this self is not autonomous because it is always already compelled to be in relation;¹⁸ this self lives through

(*The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004], 1). Insofar as our response is constituted by love, "Our task is not to give an answer that would in some sense erase the initial provocation by corresponding to it, but to offer ourselves up as such in response, without assigning in advance any limit to the gift" (13).

18. Berry observes, "There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence" (*The Unsettling of America*, 111).

surprise rather than through itself; and this self is always subject to the judgment of the other.

The *interloqué* provides the beginning—the most basic, hence the first, determination—that abolishes the subject: selfhood is initially wounded by the very fact that, before the self can constitute itself, the claim has already exiled it outside its “mineness.” The wound that originally tears selfhood obscurely manifests the origin itself—the *interloqué*. Before ever knowing by what or by whom, the *I* surprises itself, as *interloqué*, and has always done so. (WCAS, 244–45)

Nancy, Henry, and Marion present critiques that, in various ways, characterize modern subjectivity as an imperial, totalizing presence in the world. In the work of annexing and appropriating the world—what Bonhoeffer described as humanity’s sinful rebellion against creatureliness—others are repeatedly transgressed and violated. Though continuously active, this is a self that, according to Emmanuel Levinas, is nonetheless asleep (might we not also say, following Bonhoeffer, “dead”?) because not alive and responsive to another in its singularity and transcendence.¹⁹ For Levinas “the very life of the human” is in the unsettling of the mastery of the self in the approach of a genuinely transcendent other who calls and inspires the self to a life of responsibility.

EMBRACING CREATURELINESS

The Genesis story we have been following indicates that human creatureliness is worked out in care and companionship. Besides being invited to take care of fellow creatures by “tilling and keeping” the garden, God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:18). Bonhoeffer observes that elsewhere in the Bible God alone is designated as a partner and help to human beings. We should, therefore, be astounded that animals, perhaps because sharing the same soil-based body and divinely breathed vitality, are presented to Adam as potentially fulfilling this position. “At the point where God wishes to create for the human being, in the

19. Levinas asks, “Isn’t the liveliness of life excessiveness, a rupture of the containing by the uncontainable, a form that ceases to be its proper content already offering itself in the guise of experience—an awakening to consciousness in which the consciousness of awakening is not the truth, an awakening that remains a first movement—a first movement toward the other of which the intersubjective reduction reveals the traumatism, secretly striking the very subjectivity of the subject? Transcendence” (WCAS, 215). Answering his own question with transcendence, Levinas makes clear that the fundamental question is how to live in the face of limit without transgressing and appropriating it. Genuine life is excessiveness and amazement before what comes to me from beyond myself.

form of another creature, the help that God is as God—this is where the animals are first created and named and set in their place” (CF, 97). Adam names the animals, thereby establishing a relationship with them, but none of these relationships attain the level of a genuine partner and helper.²⁰ Why this is so we are not told.

God then causes a deep sleep to come over Adam, during which time God removes a rib and creates another human creature from it. This creature is presented to Adam, who calls her woman (*ishshah*) because she comes physically from him (*ish*) and is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). According to Bonhoeffer it is significant that this woman is created while Adam is asleep because this reinforces that she exceeds his expectations and preparation. Though fashioned from his flesh, the woman is decidedly neither an extension of him nor the result of his decision. She is a limit, a creature with its own integrity that emerges out of the darkness of sleep. “That Eve is derived from Adam is a cause not for pride, but for particular gratitude, with Adam. Adam does not infer from it any claim for himself; instead Adam knows that he is bound in a wholly new way to this Eve who is derived from him. This bond is best described in the expression: he now belongs to her, because she belongs to him” (CF, 97). Though the woman is clearly a limit to Adam, she and he exist in a needful and necessary relation to each other, a relationship described as mutual belonging and the sharing of one flesh. The two do not merge or blend into each other so as to abolish their individual creaturely identities. The belonging that characterizes their life together is based precisely on their being different from each other.

Mutual belonging and the companionship it makes possible reveal a profoundly important way of living with limit. This way of living Bonhoeffer calls love. Prior to the creation of the woman Adam related to limits with the understanding that they were to be received as God’s gracious gifts. Adam received the gift of the other with faith but not yet with love. “The Creator knows that this free life as a creature can be borne within its limit only if it is loved. . . . The helper who is a partner had to be at once the embodiment of Adam’s limit and the object of Adam’s love. Indeed love for the woman was now to be the human being’s very life (in the deepest sense of the word)” (CF, 98). The woman is for Adam a unique other or

20. Bonhoeffer succumbs, incorrectly in my view, to a history of interpretation in which the naming of animals is equated with mastery over them. He says of the animals, “They remained a strange world to Adam; indeed they remain, for all their nature as siblings, creatures subjected to, named by, and ruled over by, Adam” (CF, 96–97). Clearly there are forms of naming that do establish hierarchies and systems of domination, but the biblical text does not in the first instance warrant this interpretation. Adam’s naming takes place before sin has entered into and distorted relationships. It makes more sense to say that naming makes possible relationships the precise character of which is yet to be determined. Naming one way or another simply lays out different ways of relating to others (for example, naming a plant a “fruit,” a “flower,” or a “weed” evokes different responses within us).

limit because she is made from his body and so is intimately related to him. This intimacy, however, entails a reciprocal love by her for him because she knows herself to be drawn from him, indeed carries his body within her. The reciprocal love of the man and woman is foundational because it makes possible a life that can bear limits. It is love that will keep the human creature from transgressing, violating, and appropriating another because it is love that enables the lover to make room for the beloved to be itself. Love creates the space and the freedom for another to be. Without love there is the danger that the other will be perceived as a threat or as something to be hated. When this happens, shame enters the world.²¹

Erazim Kohák has shown that the belonging that characterizes the relationship between Adam and Eve is not confined to the human realm. Living on the land, patiently and with affectionate regard for it, gradually produces the sense that just as the land belongs to us we also belong to it. (It is not insignificant that agrarian traditions describe the bond between human beings and the land and its creatures by using the marital language of “husbandry.”) Eating food grown on one’s place, heating oneself by its energy, allowing oneself to be inspired by its potential and beauty—all occasions that join our flesh to the flesh of the world so that it can rightly be said that we become “one flesh” with it—reveal a fundamental deception in all claims to possess land outright. Kohák argues that the concept of possessing operates at a formal level that often denies the life-giving bonds that exist between us. “The bond of belonging that grows up over years of life, love, and labor is the most basic truth of being human in a world.”²² Labor, rather than contributing to an accumulation of land understood as private capital (as John Locke thought), leads to an appreciation of the sanctity and grace of the world insofar as this labor is inspired and directed by love. To say that another belongs to me is not to make a possessive claim. It is, rather, to indicate that without him, her, or it my life would be diminished. Recognizing the other’s value and integrity is therefore also an invitation to commit to this other’s well-being.

21. Bonhoeffer describes shame as expressing the fact “that we no longer accept the other as God’s gift but instead are consumed with an obsessive desire for the other. . . . Shame is a cover in which I hide myself from the other because of my own evil and the other person’s evil, that is, because of the dividedness that has come between us” (CF, 101). One can compare Levinas in this regard, who describes shame as the freedom that has become murderous (*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 83–84).

22. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 107. Kohák continues: “The living truth of having is belonging, the bond of love and respect which grows between one being and another in the course of seasons. The claim to having is as strong as all the love and care a person gives, and only that strong. It is crucial to have no more than we can love, for without love the claim to having becomes void. Loveless having, possessing in the purest sense, remains illegitimate, a theft” (107–8).

After describing the man and the woman's life as the love of mutual belonging and becoming one flesh, Scripture adds, "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25). Bonhoeffer interprets their nakedness to mean their innocence before and their obedience to each other. In their primordial state the man and woman do not face each other with fear, remorse, or as a threat because their life together is one in which the integrity of each other is affirmed and served. "Where one person accepts the other as the helper who is a partner given by God, where one is content with understanding-oneself-as-derived-from and destined-for-the-other, in belonging-to-the-other, there human beings are not ashamed" (CF, 101). The ultimate meaning of nakedness, we can say, is to be found in the act of self-offering to another, an offering in which nothing is hidden from the other and nothing is kept for oneself except insofar as it might be shared. Once shame appears, once the pornographic desire to objectify and control the other takes hold, it can only be overcome by the forgiveness that restores unity and communion with others. Forgiveness acts as a kind of "unclothing," removing suspicion, hatred, envy, and alienation, and so restores people to a reconciled condition in which they can stand naked before others without shame.²³

Bonhoeffer's interpretation of this story shows that creatureliness is not something to be endured, perhaps only temporarily (and while awaiting escape to some other-worldly heaven).²⁴ We can say this because creaturely life at its most profound realization leads to the loving embrace of the other, an embrace that does not stifle or diminish others but instead nurtures them to more fully become themselves. In the belonging to and service of others love is revealed as the hospitable gesture that takes from what one has received (even one's own body) and offers it to another. Human creaturely life, life that is without shame, presupposes that I can relate to others in such a way that my life—what I need, desire, and enjoy in life—makes no sense apart from the belonging and fellowship of life *together*.

23. Bonhoeffer develops this theme in *Ethics* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6), ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 306–7.

24. In *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8), ed. John de Gruchy, trans. I. Best, L. Dahill, R. Krauss, and N. Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) Bonhoeffer wrote, "One only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself . . . then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the sufferings of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is *metanoia*. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian" (486).

 HUMAN PROPRIETY

Having briefly outlined the contours of human creaturely identity, we can now turn to some of the practical implications that follow from this account. Responses to Nancy's question, "Who comes after the Subject?" showed that we cannot think about human identity without also thinking about human propriety. To ask about *who* we are is also to ask about *how* we are to live *where* we are. The question "how?" compels us to think about propriety, about how we "fit" and comport ourselves within the world. In other words, the question "who?" is not theorized in the abstract. It is worked out, discovered, and revealed in patterns of life practiced in the world.

As Nancy and colleagues examined the records of modernity they saw humanity's inability to fit harmoniously within a world of others. Violence, exploitation, subjugation, appropriation, neighborhood neglect, conspicuous consumption—these were the patterns of life made evident in histories of war, colonialism, sexism, fascism, and ecocide. Had they been attuned to the analyses of Bonhoeffer, they might have concluded with him that we have yet to appreciate and implement the sort of relationships that respect, serve, and cherish the mystery and the grace that others are. The desire to be autonomous and autarchic, the decision to live from out of oneself, appropriating the world at will—all movements characterized by Bonhoeffer as the desire to be *sicut deus*—have led to an unrelenting violation of others and the steady, systemic degradation of the world.

We should pause for a moment so I can be clear about what I mean by "world." Reading Nancy, Henry, Marion, and Bonhoeffer, it is clear that they are preoccupied with the social world, a highly urbanized world at that. When they speak of a limit to the self and an opening to the other, they are almost always referring to a personal other. What has been overlooked by them, and by vast stretches of our philosophical and theological histories, is the sense of limit that is fundamental to a breathing, eating, and drinking body. Whereas social limit refers us to political structures and *de jure* forms of dependence, embodied, ecological limits point us to *de facto* forms of dependence that are fundamental, necessary, and inescapable. Of course, political structures quickly shape the forms ecological relationships take (consider the various ways property and land management have been configured across time). But in overlooking the material world of creation we will end up with an impoverished understanding of human creatureliness and creaturely responsibilities. It is no accident, I would argue, that the myopic focus by philosophers and theologians on strictly inter- and intra-human affairs has led to degraded fields, forests, waters, and sky. To conclude this essay I will therefore

briefly develop what I take to be three essential marks of creaturely propriety, marks that join us to other people *and* to the soil on which we all depend: the acknowledgment and embrace of the goodness of limits; the reception of life as a gracious gift; and hospitable service to others.

First, creaturely propriety begins with an acknowledgment of the goodness of limits and the refusal to attempt a life *sicut deus*, a life unfettered and unencumbered by limits of any kind. The embrace of limits, rather than simply their toleration, is crucial because it makes possible an honest estimation of ourselves as embodied, communal creatures belonging to, living within, and nurtured by a vast membership of creatures ranging from bacteria to bees to beekeepers. Individual life is a contradiction in terms. Individualism is a violation of propriety. To acknowledge others as limits is to realize that we must exercise restraint in our relationships lest we become rebels upon the earth. To appreciate limits as good is to affirm that life is a miracle having its source and vitality in powers that exceed our expectations and control. Insofar as we sense the miraculous character of life, we learn to face the twin temptations of hubris and despair: hubris, insofar as we think we are the source and center of life; and despair, insofar as we think we are meaningless accidents appearing only momentarily in a random universe.²⁵

To describe life as a miracle or as a mysterious grace is to call into question the modern project that would comprehend the world as a mechanism and a resource to be manipulated at will.²⁶ Besides leading to a feeling of human alienation from the world (Kohák describes how a scientific picture of an essentially dead and valueless world requires us to bracket our embodied and life-giving relationship to earth, which in turn leads to a philosophical picture of humans as strangers “thrown” into a world),²⁷ a characterization of the world as a machine trains us to

25. Berry describes how in many cultures it has been important for the journey to adulthood to also be a journey through wilderness so that people might come to an appreciation of their place within creation. “Seeing himself as a tiny member of a world he cannot comprehend or master or in any final sense possess, he cannot possibly think of himself as a god. And by the same token, since he shares in, depends upon, and is graced by all of which he is a part, neither can he become a fiend; he cannot descend into the final despair of destructiveness. Returning from the wilderness, he becomes a restorer of order, a preserver. . . . He embodies the passing of human time, living and dying within the human limits of grief and joy” (*The Unsettling of America*, 99).

26. Numerous historical accounts that chart the modern development of the metaphor of the world as a machine are available. One can begin with Collingwood’s classic treatment in *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960 [1945]), and then move to Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* for a brief overview.

27. “Both in principle and as a matter of historical fact, alienation sets in when humans lose their awareness of the presence of God and persuade themselves to view the cosmos no longer as a creation, endowed with value in the order of being, a purpose in the order of time and a moral sense in the order of eternity, but as a cosmic accident, meaningless and mechanical. Then nature comes to appear as absurd and we ourselves as futile within it. In fact, we first desanctified nature by exiling God into the ‘supernatural’” (*The Embers and the*

presume that it is also explainable, predictable, and within our control. What this characterization fails to do is note the fundamental incomprehension that circulates throughout our living, an incomprehension Henry Bugbee described as the inescapable wildness at the center of our being: "The more we experience things in depth, the more we participate in a mystery intelligible to us only as such; and the more we understand our world to be an unknown world. Our true home is wilderness, even the world of everyday."²⁸ To know this home, however, presupposes that we have become active, patient, and humble participants within it. For humanity to live appropriately and well, *adam* must remain close to *adamah*, constantly keeping the soil in mind and in his hands.

It was not inevitable that we should reduce life and creation to the predictability of a machine for, as Thomas Carlson has shown, thinkers at the origins of modernity were also known to be captivated by the world's and the creature's incomprehensibility, and by the human being's inability to take secure possession of itself. Pico della Mirandola, for instance, argued that human agency and creativity in the world revealed our fundamental indeterminateness insofar as we are understood to be makers made in the image of an incomprehensible God.²⁹ Pico reflected a long mystical tradition that presupposed a world that exceeds conception because it is made by a God who exceeds comprehensive grasp. Though God is revealed in what is made, the ground of creativity itself remains incomprehensible. The consequence of that

Stars, 183). Kohák argues there is no acknowledgment more primordial than the embodied experience of being held and nurtured—"at home"—in a life-supporting world. Daily life demonstrates that we belong in creation. Our belonging, however, does not render our created home as comprehensible or as always convenient and comfortable. A problem with so much modern science and technology is that they deny our experience of belonging and replace it with a theoretical, objective construct that ultimately renders people bored or apathetic. What I mean by this can be seen in the rise of persons who describe themselves as "apatheists" rather than theists or atheists. *USA Today*, in a news story on growing spiritual apathy among Americans, quotes Ben Helton, a high school band teacher in Chicago, who says, after considering what modern science teaches about evolutionary psychology, "we might as well be cars. That, to me, makes more sense than believing what you can't see" (January 3, 2012, 9A). This view of persons as cars, a view perfectly suited to (and perhaps made inevitable by) a consumerist world, presupposes that we are fundamentally without value, isolated, and finally incapable of love.

28. Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999 [1958]), 76. Bugbee maintains that our experience has been rendered shallow by being packaged and stylized by scientists, philosophers, and marketers: "Experience is a tissue of meaning grossly misinterpreted by representation in the image of the object. . . . Experience is our undergoing, our involvement in the world, our lending or withholding of ourselves, keyed to our responsiveness, our sensibility, our alertness or our deadness" (41). In a spectator, consumerist culture, "experiences" are "events" to be consumed.

29. Thomas A. Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29. Subsequent references will be in the text as *TII*.

realization is that we do not know who we are or what the world finally is. For Giordano Bruno, an infinite God entailed an infinite creation.

As creatively active within the infinitely dynamic tissue that constitutes and exceeds the self, this relational self lives and moves always by means of a vision or knowledge that implies blindness and unknowing. Its knowing and doing will never exhaust the tissue of the real, but as productively participant in that tissue, such knowing and doing imply an infinite responsibility. (*III*, 117)

When we acknowledge the miraculous, wild, infinite, and incomprehensible character of life, we also open a space in which amazement, enchantment, and renewed questioning can take hold.

Second, creaturely propriety entails the reception of life as a gracious gift. A great deal has been written about the meaning of a gift and whether or not a gift can ever be given or received. Robyn Horner, in her philosophical and theological study of the gift, shows that treatments of the gift, especially those influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, refer to the aporetic character of gift giving. For instance, if a gift is part of an exchange called into being by obligation, guilt, a desire to influence, or payment for services, then it is no longer a gift. Moreover, the moment a gift is identified, it seems to have become something else—a commodity, a prized possession, a trophy, or a reminder of a debt. This is why Derrida says, “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt.”³⁰ Horner is right to conclude that the Derridean aporia of the gift does not mean that giving has therefore come to an end. Rather, it is to come to the recognition that we can never comprehend a gift as such, nor can we ever fully understand what we are doing when we offer a gift.³¹

As we have described it, to be an embodied creature is necessarily to find oneself placed within, nurtured by, and responsible to a world of others that come from beyond our planning or control. It is to appreciate that life is not a possession but a membership of receiving, sharing, and offering again. That we eat, drink, and breathe means that we must constantly receive, dimly perceiving that every bite, gulp, and breath implicates us in life and death dramas that exceed our best efforts to understand.³² Though we may call food a “gift,” this in no way entails that we have comprehended or exhausted the significance of what we so

30. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12. Derrida continues: “For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as a gift” (16).

31. Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 18.

32. Concerning the sense of mystery and awe that accompanies eating, see my *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

name. That we name creation, even life itself, a gift does not mean that we are in a position to fully understand what we mean.³³ What we are communicating with gift-language, however, is that we do not live alone or from out of ourselves. We are creatures bound to soil and fellow creatures, altogether in need of the grace of life. The language of “exchange,” though useful in a business world of self-possessed consumers negotiating commodities, is not appropriate in a creaturely world because this world—the world defined by need, embodiment, limit, eating, death, pain, beauty, and warmth—moves not as a series of business transactions but as a sphere of mutual belonging and responsiveness.

The creation story in Genesis 2 showed us that Adam needed to learn to live with limits. He needed to understand that limits are good rather than a threat, and that the most authentic realization of creatureliness is demonstrated in his love for another. This love we described as Adam’s nakedness before Eve, his offering of himself to her. It is appropriate to call this self-offering a form of giving, but we need to see that the context of his offering is born out of vulnerability and the incomprehension of being inspired, informed, fed, and met by countless others. He does not comprehend whom he is giving himself to, nor does he have possession of himself. What he glimpses is that he is marked by need—need for breath, need for food, need for companionship, need for help: a fundamental need for life—and that the blessings and the pains, the responsibilities and the meanings of his needs can only come to light as he gives himself to the becoming of one flesh with Eve and one flesh with his nurturing place. Adam’s most fundamental and abiding creaturely task is to be a witness to the wide scope of his need. It is to demonstrate with the offering of himself that he lives only because he always already receives.³⁴ It is to testify to a world marked by membership and belonging, but also mercy and forgiveness.

It is important to stress mercy and forgiveness because it is in terms of these that we more fully understand a third mark of creaturely life: the hospitable welcome of and service to others. Hospitality to others is rooted in mercy because without forgiveness work done for others might have the effect of binding them to us. Forgiveness, as the parable of the master/servant in Matthew 18:21–35 shows, releases people from crippling debt and liberates them to experience the fullness of life. Hospitality informed by such forgiveness makes room for another to grow and

33. See Mark Manolopoulos, *If Creation Is Gift* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) for a treatment of the gift aporia in light of ecological degradation.

34. This giving of oneself is not a giving that follows from obligation or debt, because the very idea of debt presupposes a ledger in which credits and debits can be clearly delineated. The depth, breadth, and mystery of creaturely membership exceed what any such ledger could possibly contain. Horner is correct, therefore, to say, “If I give, it can only be because I feel I have been gifted with the capacity to give, not because I feel that I must give back” (*Rethinking God as Gift*, 183).

become itself. To appreciate what this means, we can return to the garden, for it is in gardening work that the practical dimensions and responsibilities of hospitality come into view.

Recall that Adam's gardening work is not simply for the providing of food. By immersing his hands in soil, by committing himself to the growth and flowering of others, Adam is both learning who he is as a member of creation and how he can best live where he is, that is, in ways that are a blessing rather than a curse to fellow creatures. Remembering that God is the primordial gardener who creates the world through gardening, Adam, by learning the skills of gardening, is learning to participate in God's life-giving, life-sustaining, life-celebrating ways with the world. God creates by "making room" and by creating the conditions in which others can freely become themselves. The whole of creation can thus be described as a performance in hospitality.³⁵

Though gardening is clearly marked by active engagement—soil is prepared, seeds are planted, plants are watered and protected, plots are weeded—gardening is also marked by the gardener's withdrawal and restraint. A gardener cannot simply impose her will upon the garden. She must be attentive, patient, humble, and so learn to attune her desire, her expectations, and her work to the needs of the garden. A gardener, in other words, gives herself to the garden so that the garden can flourish. The pattern for this self-giving, says Rowan Williams, is none other than the triune, creating God: "the God who creates a world of freedom, a world that is itself, is a kenotic God, a self-giving, a self-emptying God whose being is for the other." Insofar as creatures are wise, they participate in this divine life of self-offering: "to live in wisdom is to live in and by this energy of dispossession and outpouring."³⁶ Just as God the gardener withdraws to make room for the world, all the while nurturing it, so too hospitable creatures withdraw to make room for the other as a welcome guest, all the while offering nurture and help.

Love as the hospitality that makes room for another is extraordinarily difficult. To move into it requires an imagination and set of skills that multiple traditions of thought and work, tuned as they are to control, prediction, possession, and comfort, actively resist. Recalling the naked vulnerability out of which Adam offered himself to Eve, who today wants to offer himself or herself to a world punctuated by violence and abuse? Recalling the naked Jesus hanging on the cross—Jesus the new Adam, the

35. In "Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation" (in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997]), Robert Jenson, drawing on the insight of John of Damascus, develops the theme of creation as the work of a hospitable God making room for others within the triune life.

36. Rowan Williams, "Creation, Creativity, and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence," a lecture delivered April 23, 2005, at the St. Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality in Oxford (<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2106/creation-creativity-and-creatureliness-the-wisdom-of-finite-existence>).

one who shows us human creatureliness in its fullest and most abundant form—who wants to empty himself or herself to the point of death? The Gospel witness puts the matter succinctly: the hope of life rests on life's perpetually being given away. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

A life of self-offering opens a new relationship to the world, a relationship that seeks to engage creation on *its* terms rather than our own. This is why those who embark on a path of creaturely wisdom must learn the particularizing skill that refuses to take another for an abstraction and resists the exploitive desire that reduces others to a moment within a self-serving plan. Berry puts it well when he writes,

The human necessity is not just to know, but also to cherish and protect the things that are known, and to know the things that can be known only by cherishing. If we are to protect the world's multitudes of places and creatures, then we must know them, not just conceptually but imaginatively as well. They must be pictured in the mind and in memory; they must be known with affection, "by heart," so that in seeing or remembering them the heart may be said to "sing," to make a music peculiar to its recognition of each particular place or creature that it knows well. . . . To know imaginatively is to know intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection.³⁷

A gardener's imagination represents one of the deepest kinds of immersion into the world. In this movement we put ourselves in touch with the pain and suffering of the world.³⁸ In the work of hospitable gardening we are enabled to see where the work of care and justice is yet to be done. Insofar as we learn the disciplines of creaturely propriety we join, hopefully harmoniously, with the vast membership of fellow creatures, sharing in the divine hospitable work that nurtures, protects, and liberates creatures into Sabbath rest and delight.

37. Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 137–38. Berry elaborates: "I don't think creatures can be explained. . . . What we know about creatures and lives must be pictured or told or sung or danced. . . . The arts are indispensable precisely because they are so nearly antithetical to explanation" (113).

38. Kohák argues that it is important to alleviate the pain of others insofar as we can. But it is also crucial for us to learn to live with pain as a learning to live within limits. "Pain borne and shared . . . teaches the human his own insufficiency, his own need and, with it, gentleness. It opens him to receive, in empathy, the gift of the other, not in censure but in gratitude and love" (*The Embers and the Stars*, 46).