

# Pastoral Letter

## A fragment

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2004

Imagine an alternate dimension where  
dervishes are roaming around America  
sects of Swedenborgian hobos, etc.  
You're there camping in the cemetery  
long black hair in tangles ghostwhite face

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Sion County is remote, rural, and poor, and always has been. Around 1870 a breakaway sect of German Amish-type farmers—the Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the “Seventh Day Dunkers,” moved there from Pennsylvania and settled down in the river valleys of the county’s northeast.

In the mountainous northwest lies the small reservation of a band of Iroquois. The Indians and the Dunkers have always held to distant but amicable relations though nowadays the Protestants tend to disapprove of the bingo and fireworks concessions with which the tribe supplements its income.

In the 1960s a number of hippies invaded Sion County. At first there was some conflict with the locals, but by now the hippies have mellowed and settled down. Some of them joined a small eccentric split-off sub-sect of the Dunkers. Some practice permaculture or alternative agriculture; a few of their farms are very serious and self-sufficient; others work in “green” construction and trades, including black-smithing and carriage-building, since so many locals use horses rather than cars. And of course some grow hemp.

By the 1980s, the county had begun to rival the emerald Triangle, and the Feds were beginning to sniff around. Something had to be done! A “Combine” was organized among the hemp growers and smugglers, and an interesting political force emerged based on anonymous funders and a small libertarian faction of the local Republican Party. The Combine managed not only to infiltrate the Republicans but also to win control of the county, including the offices of sheriff, district attorney, judge, etc. The Combine also earned the support of the Dunkers by opposing “development” and transmuted under this weird Libertarian/Welfarist coalition.

Everything possible is voluntarized—but funded by the County. The one public high school in the region is privatized but taken over by a non-profit alternative education group funded by the County. Zoning is more-or-less abolished, but a Green Covenant is circulated, and any non-signers are boycotted or otherwise driven out of the region. An extremist vigilante group has vandalized or destroyed a few structures deemed ecologically offensive; somehow the Sheriff never manages to apprehend any of these mysterious eco-warriors.

The county capital, Sion City (pop. 18,000 or so), has the plastic rural highway fast-food sprawl and rundown 19<sup>th</sup> century backstreet gloom of any similar sad place in the bioregion—but in a way this is mere camouflage. The fast-food franchises have been bought-out by whole-food/organic collectives, which are funded by the County. Still they

use names like Taste Burgers or Salad Bar & Grill; the locals get a lot of amusement out of this sly nomenclature. The Public Library consists of four pink double-wide mobile homes, but contains amazing collections. It's as if the whole town was a disguise.

"The danger," says the Sheriff, "is that the place could become too damn picturesque. Dunkers in black hats in their buggies, a few Indians in traditional gear, spaced-out tie-dye types: a tourist trap, Woodstock! We don't like tourists around here, do we! And as Debord would put it, we don't want to work at the job of representing some quaint notion of authenticity just to become the Exotic Other for a media-poisoned shower of zombie voyeurs!"

Up-country, however, there's no presence of normalcy. The Dunkers are living in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; some of the hippies and Indians are heading back toward the Stone Age. The remotest valleys are given over to hemp plantations and/or bizarre drop-out cults. Over a third of the County has no electricity, other than a bit of solar, and no mail delivery. The Combine or the County own much of the wildest land in various forms, including parks and preserves.

The Sheriff told me, "Naturally, we 'deplore' the idea of funding utopia by crime. I admit that Sion County has some disagreeable aspects. But how can you hope to maintain even such a flawed and low-level utopia in a 'time of war' without some alternate economy? A Green Liberated Zone would be impossible; we all know it wouldn't be permitted. We try to think global—but we have got to act local."

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## Interview with the Sheriff

"Maybe you'd prefer some Jeremiah on thorazine stumbling out of the Time Magazine of your head—hollywood jerusalem grand guignol cheapjack prognostications of nuclear ho-hum & SciFi african plagues—Y2K, harmonic convergence, yuppie Rapture—a culture gets the armegeddon it deserves—fire ice whimper bang or eternal sitcom, no, it's all far more interesting than we deserve."

\* \* \*

Everyone's bewitched but no one cares  
we have one universal evil eye to share  
like flies beguiled by television's glare  
or three ugly sisters with their empty stares.

There's always a worldly world and one to flee  
into some desert no one else can see.

## (A Word from the Abbot)

A secret unknown to the wordly about the desert: it's a positive pleroma of pleasure compared to the arid death-scape of vespuccian/jerk kultur, that bleeding Babylon without the courage of its convictions—seduction without desire—the Universal Mall-safety rules, litigation, crash-worship, spleen, worldwide surveillance. Yes by comparison a dank cave, solitary pine barren, silent summer mountain—the "stupidity of rural life" (Marx)—seems like wallowing in luxury billions couldn't buy. The real ascetics are gritting their teeth in traffic jams, TV/PC screens bathing them in leprosy-light, other people's music, vicious boredom. Anyone who doesn't go postal deserves beatification.

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The Monastery of St. John-in-the-Wilderness was built in 1910 by a group of Anglican Benedictine monks who intended to proselytize the nearby Indian reservation. But after a dim career it burned down in 1963 and the Church sold the ruin and the land (hundreds of acres) to an investor who later sold it to the Combine.

The monastery gardens and greenhouses were taken over by the Society for the Interiorization of Lost Knowledge (SILK), a small group of Combine research “scientists” who began experimenting with ethno-botany and bio-assay work. They constructed a secret underground “alchemical” lab.

The ruined monastery and the ramshackle but habitable Abbot’s House or Abbey were turned over to another group that organized itself as the Monastery of St. John-in-the-Wilderness, Order of the Resurrection, Anglican Benedictine (Non-juring): the “Greenfriars.” The Christian identity is useful as camouflage, but some of the members are into it sincerely. They perform regular masses in the abbot’s Chapel, and in summer organize “Sacred Concerts & Festivals” in the picturesque and spruced-up ruins of the old monastery.

Some of these festivals are fuelled by the very potent liquors and concoctions of SILK, and some of the monks work in SILK’s gardens (for surprisingly healthy salaries paid in cash). The monks grow vegetables and keep a few chickens and goats, but are not involved in subsistence farming. Needless to say, the Order receives a grant from the County in return for leasing some of their remoter acreage to the Combine.

About half the brothers and sisters live in the old Abbot’s House, and half are scattered through the woods in various caves, Taoist huts, Franciscan oratories, or prefab yurts. Besides the monks themselves there is also a “tertiary order” of friends, associates, allies, relatives, regular guests, and correspondents—maybe 20 fulltime live-ins and 100 occasional “retreatants.”

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## Letter From the Abbot

The Rule of the Monastery is No Rule: anarcho-monachism. The monks have adopted a Benedictine identity only because the original foundation was Benedictine. But in fact, they’ve found some inspiration in St. Benedict’s Rule. Once the bits about chastity, obedience, humility, punishment, and excommunication were deleted, they still liked the basic idea. In the original text, they found a description of the “four kinds of monks” including the Sarabaites, which are the worst kind—unschooled by any rule. Their only law is the pleasure of their desires; whatever they wish or choose, they call holy. They consider whatever they dislike unlawful.” Half-jestingly, the monks claim to follow the Sarabaite Rite.

They’ve retained Benedictine titles and forms of organization: an Abbot, Canons to assist the Abbot, a Cellarer (logistics and supplies), Provost (ritualist), and Porter (security). They follow the rules of weekly kitchen service and weekly Reader, and also the Rule of One Hemina (1/4 liter) per day allowance of good wine. They wear, both sexes, an adapted version of the Benedictine habit—homespun green—at least on formal occasions.

But aside from monkish play and conviviality what hold them together are common interests. The first and all-embracing one is negation—a desire or need to escape from the vulgar materialist world; to retreat, whether for spiritual or political or even “military” reasons; whether permanently or periodically.

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When you’re beaten Von Clausewitz calls for retreat  
rather than senseless going down in defeat.

Query: have we retreated far enough?  
invisible yet? translucent? gossamer stuff?

Militant monks know when to head for the mountains for a century of boxing practice.

A monastic order founded and decreed  
in the hinterland beyond the emerald city  
the hidden Imam's jasper isle: a seed exempt from the gaze of the dead and their sterile pity.

Li Po could kick back and unplug the phone  
uncork some applejack, feel right at home.

Once I saw green moss growing inside a Dublin omnibus—like Dali's "Rainy Taxi." If  
science has conquered nature why does it keep beating the dead horse?  
The next stage: mail-order monasticism. Text itself as ectoplasmic reverie. Dear Reader:  
a message from the Abbe: to each their own cinnabar grotto or Egyptian cave.

Hocus Pocus means this is the body  
just as much puzzle as soul  
whatever New Age twaddle seems to work  
channeling the old black mole

We know our Blake and Paracelsus. Nobody here but us Nolans. Mushrooms and the  
voices of the dead: exfoliation of spirits  
According to Gustav Meyrink the nausea that overcomes us occasionally even in  
museums must arise from the fact that sooner or later everything made by humans begins  
to stink of the charnel house.

The conquistadors forgot that they themselves  
were animals not aristotelian elves  
"arguing with something Plato said"  
or tidying up their vast linnaean shelves

If only our bad karma would permit it  
I'd like us to be ornamental hermits  
not cranks who can barely keep their logs afloat  
or dionysiacs without a sacrificial goat.

There I see us bathed in light in rain  
hoping Romanticism didn't die in vain  
saying our beads or inviting each other to supper  
wreathed in clouds and overcoming pain.

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For various motives both practical and theoretical, the Greenfriars have adopted a neo-Luddite approach to tech that owes much to the nearby Dunkers—especially since the Anabaptists' shops and workshops provide the tools and skills needed for a comfortable low-tech life. Moreover, "Whole Earth Catalogue"-styled tech can be used to supplement Dunker resources since the monks have no religious injunctions to observe against zippers or can-openers. They even keep an old pick-up truck for emergencies, though they prefer horses.

SILK uses solar and other off-grid sources of electricity but the monastery and Abbot's House are un-powered and lit by candles and oil lamps. The Sacred Concerts and other monastic events utilize daylight or torchlight, etc. The basic rule of all Luddism, whether religious or secular, is to use only technology that will not "injure the commonality"—therefore they agree to have (on the premises anyway) no computer, no TV, no telephone, nothing to replace human contact and connection with mediated representation (as the Sheriff would say).

Perhaps there's something a bit precious and artificial about this luddery, since the monks are not self-sustaining like the Dunkers or the more successful permaculturists. They've made certain choices on the basis of pleasure and beauty. As the Abbot says, "We're not really renouncing anything...nice. All of us feel the absence of electricity as an immense luxury. Our velvet nights are set with more than stars." Some of the hermits have their own hot tubs.

On the positive side, the Order's common interests center on "lost knowledge." They believe that their research may help to inspire and even direct the growth of a global green spiritual movement. As Universalists, they nevertheless have no truck with any New-Age multi-culti interpretations of "tolerance"; as the Unabomber said, "You can do anything you want—as long as it's unimportant." Rather, they seek certain non-negotiable constellations within all spiritual human manifestations, and on these, they maintain strict intolerance and an unwillingness to compromise.

They're also very interested in secrets, which they define as anything not found on TV or the Internet. The Abbot says, "We should cultivate secrets against the day when the unknown might regain its power."

The brothers and sisters follow their own interests but regular sessions are held for discussion and development of group projects. One major interest for some lies in the "Western occult tradition," especially serious Renaissance hermeticism and alchemy. Other shared research includes Christian ritual, particularly chanting, which is practiced for its "psychedelic" effects (and as rehearsal for Sacred Concerts). Fancy gardening—flowers and herbs for tinctures and distillations—"spagyric medicine." There's a fad for calligraphy and copying manuscripts, which generates a bit of extra income as well. They spend most of their "grant" on books, although they also have an excellent 2-inch telescope that provides a lot of entertainment. This is an homage to Johannes Kelpius, the German Rosicrucian who founded "The Woman in the Wilderness" in Pennsylvania in 1694. He brought to America: the first serious telescope, to scan the skies for signs of the coming End!; the first harpsichord; one of the first printing presses. He admired the Indians' religion, and lived in a cave practicing alchemy and composing hymns.

Quilting bees are held on winter evenings with readings from literature and philosophy like the Benedictines—and monks are devoted to viva voce reading—or like the old anarchist Egyptian and Cuban cigar workers, or the radical tailors in 18<sup>th</sup> century London. Dining well is another shared obsession, at least with the group that cooks and eats in the Abbot's House, who claim inspiration from Rabelais, from Fourier's "Gastrosophy," and chapter one of Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*. By contrast, some of the hermits are strict vegetarians or raw foodists, etc.

It may be that some of the monks are engaging in "revolutionary activity"—but what exactly? since they could scarcely be preparing for armed insurgency ...who knows? Maybe they're growing mushrooms for the combine, or counterfeiting Euro-dollars, or providing safe caves for anti-global activists on the lam. Maybe they've made a breakthrough in occult science—say, the therapeutic use of hieroglyphic emblems to "de-program" human awareness from media/consumer trance? Or maybe it's all another layer of camouflage, like the famous ghost that haunts the monastery and keeps idle gawkers and tourists away.

The Greenfriars consider themselves committed to certain local things and people because they're living in a certain place and want to remain there. They maintain collegially close relations with some of the elders on the Reservation, and a few pious ecstasies amongst the Sabbatarians, but they also see themselves in the American Romantic tradition, as adherents of the "Religion of Nature" of the Transcendentalists and Hudson River School painters. And needless to say, Sion County is beautiful and relatively unspoiled, at least in the northern mountains. According to...

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In mourning for the idea of the woods  
psychic space/time pollution blues

almost as bad as being in love  
this thinking about distant mountains and money  
Seems you can't get one without the other  
no car no hunt club no socialism  
property tax on the taoist hermitage  
electromagnetism no peace no quiet  
Knowledge of mountains as source of pain  
but dreamy (an anaesthetic revelation)  
a numbness every bit as beguiling  
as real estate itself Atavistic  
the summer camp the tactical retreat  
astral travel on February nights.

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