

Into the Common

A Journal
in Eighteen Essays

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Introduction

I have long been drawn to the work of the American painter Maxfield Parrish. Because much of his art was commercial or illustrations for books, he has not been taken seriously by art critics. And it took a while for me to understand what draws me to his work. In his lithographed advertisement posters, there is often an attractive young model in the foreground (“a girl sitting on a rock,” Parrish once quipped). In the standard advertising method, this of course is the object of desire dangled in front of the viewer, bait for the product being promoted. Parrish rendered the foreground well enough. But my eye is quickly drawn to the *background*. Rocky cliffs, deep forests, or green valleys overwhelm the foreground with expansive grandeur, enriched by Parrish’s mastery of stipple.

A particularly striking example is his illustration of the story of the frog-prince. A beautiful maiden and a very large frog contemplate one other in the foreground. But in the background beckons a twilight primeval forest of giant trees with epic, gnarled roots. Parrish’s scenic backgrounds subvert the object of desire and the product promoted, or the ostensible focus of a story. My attention is drawn from the lightbulbs his posters often advertised to the play of light and shadow in the background.

Reflecting on Parrish slowly increased my awareness that I have always been drawn by the background, rather than the thing everyone seems to be talking about or going for. In sports, I found it difficult to focus enough on competing and winning, because the more general dynamics of the game and the group were more interesting. I struggled in personal relationships because I was often distracted by the larger affective currents swirling around us. I was initially drawn to study in the biological sciences, expecting to become a scientist, but found that I was really more attuned to the natural world as “a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects,” as the deep-ecologist Thomas Berry describes it. Then in ministry, the sense of the group as a whole was more important to me than trying to accomplish goals

with them. And in general, I have been arrested by my sense of the macro-forces flowing through the world around me, more than the micro-forces of personal and interpersonal psychology.

I have searched for intellectual tools for understanding those background dynamics. From college days, the Hebrew prophets and their reading of their times enthralled me, especially in light of modern socio-historical biblical research. Later, I found Hegelian and Marxist dialectical interpretations of history complementing what I had learned from the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. Together, these resources enabled me to forge new interpretations of early Quaker history. In more recent times, I discovered the now-forgotten religious philosophy of personalism, which insists that the individual person is created through dialogue and dynamics in community; and in turn, communities are key agents of wider social change. And the new field of affect theory, which focuses on affective currents in cultures, has proven useful in interpreting the *zeitgeist* dynamics shaping liberal Quakerism in America over the past century.

After more than forty years of pastoral, teaching, and writing ministry among Friends, from coast to coast and in England, I was able to retire back to my home state of Indiana in 2018. I had made no provisions for retirement. I am just able to make ends meet on Social Security and subsidized housing among seniors and others with diminished capacities. This experience has awakened me to the category of the “common.”

Actually, I had first been introduced to the concept in 1970 when I read Garrett Hardin’s article, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968). A biologist, Hardin described how the common spaces and resources of the planet are being recklessly exploited and polluted by modern industry and rapid population growth. He was pessimistic that people would ever put the commons – and their common destiny – ahead of personal interests. Many years later, I began reading the recent work of Marxist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on commonwealth as the antipode to the present global capitalist regime. But the common is not just a remodeled communism. Businessman Peter Barnes presses the urgent need for a reconfiguration of capitalism, through the establishment of a commons sector alongside the private and public sectors of the economy. Meanwhile, Elinor Ostrom’s research has countered Hardin’s pessimism. Over many years, she studied a wide

variety of groups around the world who have successfully managed grazing lands, fisheries, and other commons cooperatively, in some cases for centuries. Environmental activist David Bollier has contributed other insights to an integrative vision of the natural, cultural, digital, and other commons and their shared use. (These sources are cited in “The Adoration of the Lamb.”)

These readings resonate with my present experience. I began to understand the common as the ultimate background, the low hum behind the more noticeable music and noise of natural and cultural phenomena. I began reflecting in new ways on my reclaimed home state of Indiana: very flat, very common, playing background to the more “happening” places in America. It’s one of the “fly-over states” for coastal types who prefer to go where the action is. (I’ve lived on both coasts and I like coastal types too. We have a lot in common!) And of course, Indiana is my own background.

Whether understood theologically as divine omnipresence, or more ontologically as the ground of all being, the common is so “commonplace” we struggle to perceive and respond to its all-embracing affinity. Various practices of contemplation and meditation can help us look past the forms that normally foreground our attention. Over the past two years, I began rereading the gospels with fresh impressions of the sayings and actions of Jesus. I began to understand his Galilean ministry as an emergence of the common. These fresh biblical understandings gave me new perspectives on my own odyssey through American society over the past half-century. That work has been recently published as a memoir, *Life in Gospel-Space: A Testimony* (January 2020).

The common comes into view in certain situations and moments I prefer to call *apocalyptic*, in the root sense of the Greek *apokalypsis*, a revelation, a removal of the veil of appearances. Apocalyptic moments are those in which a sudden clarity *ends the world* as we had previously known it, and offers a new vision of reality, with a new range of action. Unfortunately, the apocalyptic language of late Old Testament and New Testament texts is opaque and off-putting to most liberals and misappropriated by fundamentalists. But true apocalyptic moments are more like the events in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories. For example, in “Revelation,” Mrs. Turpin receives a vision of the people she has long despised as “common,” *beneath* her – all of them entering

the kingdom *ahead* of her. Her vision proves both humbling and liberating. The common has been revealed to me in similar ways these past two years, in community with my marginal “Hoosier” neighbors.

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This collection of essays complements *Life in Gospel-Space*. The essays record my struggle to recognize and understand the common within and around me. These attempts are far from conclusive or adequate, but they are the best I can muster as a contribution to our common task today: hence the title of this collection, *Into the Common*. It is my hope that these essays may help others tune into the common from their own experience. Like the background in a Parrish painting, it becomes the most arresting vision, bestowing upon every foreground its true dignity and worth, whether it is a unique person or a mass-produced product.

We begin with “*Richmond, Indiana: 1968 and 2018*” (2018). As I wandered around Richmond during my first year of retirement, I began to note the “psycho-geography” of the town and to explore some of the history behind it. The essay probably ignores features of Richmond others would feel important to include. But the aim is a broad-strokes view that makes more visible the common life below particular features of this “rust-belt” college town. Along the way, it led me to ponder the resonances between a major explosion in Richmond and my own experience of calling to ministry, both in the apocalyptic year of 1968. The essay ends with a 2020 addendum, an overall analysis of the generative dynamics of Richmond or any town, against the background of the common.

“*The Adoration of the Lamb: Figures of the Common*” (2019) takes the van Eyck altarpiece in the Ghent cathedral as its point of departure. The vision of multitudes converging from the four corners of the earth at the altar of the Lamb has drawn me for many years. This essay explores Revelation 7, the source of the van Eyck painting, and reframes the early Christian movement as an eruption of the common amid the Roman Empire: that is, an interruption of the stalemate between Rome’s imperial universalism and Jewish religious particularism. It then describes some current Quaker initiatives in

spiritual renewal and social activism, less from a sectarian standpoint than as figures of the emerging common today. Finally, the essay reflects upon a story from Israel's wandering in the wilderness to ponder the challenges ahead.

"The Axis of Revolution: A Confederation of Commons" (2020) is my fullest theological reflection on the common. Many layers of my early scientific studies and subsequent biblical and Quaker theological reflection underlie the way this piece is written. Trying to excavate and explicate those layers would only confuse readers. I'll just say that it has something to do with the Foucault pendulum, Deuteronomy, the Sermon on the Mount, and Quaker faith and practice. It is densely written. But the overall structure is more important to follow than particular sentences. It offers a *heuristic*, a demonstrational model for viewing different aspects of the common life integrally.

"COVID-19, What Does It Mean? A Virus Goes Allegorical" (2020) was written in the first week of April, during the first wave of the pandemic. Like most people, I was "sheltering in place" as much as possible, following the news day by day, and with lots of time for reflection. We tend to think of allegory in simple terms, as in the case of an Aesop fable: this character represents that personality trait. But in the classical Christian tradition, allegory has multiple levels, not just one-to-one identifications. And at its highest level, the apocalyptic, it opens out into a vision of the history around us. In this age, especially during a crisis, we tend to be enthralled by the latest information. And the interpretation of that information tends to be dominated by the technocratic and managerial authorities that govern postmodern society, as conveyed to us by the media. This essay rises to another level, to glimpse the common, and to offer an allegory for our life in it.

"Called into the Common" (2020) returns to the realm of lived experience as it explores the meaning of calling in one's life. It begins with the premise that "each of us, in one way or another, experiences a call by the One into the life of the common." The essay is grounded in my own experience of following the One's call into the common and utilizes some biblical stories of men and women following a call in order to illustrate some dynamics of living into a call. In the modern, secular world, few people openly claim the experience of perceiving and following a call. If they do, they usually understand and follow it

within a religious framework, as I have done. This essay reorients the call and the singular life it produces in relation to the common. It also makes brief use of the modern Enneagram of nine personality types to suggest how different personalities will perceive and live into the call in different ways.

“The Form of This World Is Passing Away” (2020) reflects on Paul’s comment in terms of current issues arising from the Corona virus pandemic, the struggle for racial justice, and the dilemmas of global capitalism. These issues find fresh perspective within this book’s framework of the common.

“Everlasting Sabbath and Communist Economics” (2020) engages with current proposals for commonist economics, finding parallels in the Sabbath codes of ancient tribal Israel, the early Christian movement, and among early Quakers. Since history is a temporal dimension of the common, it should not be surprising to find useful precursors from the past. No doubt a wider array of examples could be found and described. This essay simply draws upon my own years of biblical study and Quaker experience.

“The Hope of the Common” (2020) reflects on the current divisive, unhopeful climate in America and elsewhere. Various moods of optimism or pessimism blow through sectors of society, but a transcendent sense of a common hope is acutely lacking. This essay looks at the New Testament thematic of hope, in particular the cosmological framing of hope found in the Ephesian and Colossian letters, with implications for our situation today.

“An Apocalyptic Life” (2020) offers reflections on the personal experience that underlies the outlook of these essays. My life experience has never felt narrowly personal, but an interaction of a singular person with the cultural and natural commons. Apocalyptic experience is what New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann called “crystalized cosmology.”

“Love: The Affect of the Common” (2021) considers the affective force that binds the cosmos together in the One’s good will. It examines the testimony to that love in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, then confronts the challenging levels of polarization and hatred in American politics in 2020 – 2021.

“*Peace on Earth: Covenant, Constitution, Technology, and Economics in the Common Life*” (2021) expands from the affect of love to the ways covenant structures love and blessing in the common life. It explores the historical development of constitutional theory, science and technology, and capitalist economics out of the covenantal theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These four elements can work in either generative or degenerative directions, as seen today.

“*Atonement into the Common: Reparations Ancient and Modern*” (2021) plays out in two essays. *Part 1* looks at atonement/reparation in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and then in subsequent Christian theology. *Part 2* examines the issues today, particularly in terms of reparations to Native Americans and African Americans, after centuries of racist genocide, enslavement, and marginalization. Within the framing of the common life, atonement takes on fresh, urgent meanings.

“*The Beauty of the Common: Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics*” (2021) is an essay I had not imagined writing. But I began to notice significant communist experimentation today emerging from artists and their communities. This essay utilizes Hegel’s dialectic of art, religion, and philosophy to explore the aesthetics and anti-aesthetics found in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It then goes on to look at recent artistic commoning in Europe and even my own Indiana environs.

“*Some Assembly Required: Leadership and Organization in the Common*” (2021) considers the “leaderless” dynamics of some communist movements today, drawing upon the perspectives of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, George Lakey, and Paul Hawken.

“*Beyond Counting: The Indeterminacy of the Common*” explores the advances and the limitations of quantification, social management, and “big data” in today’s society. As with the other essays, it examines dynamics of counting and indeterminacy in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, then considers modern chaos theory and the phenomenon of “strange attractors” in mathematics and our planetary destiny.

Finally, “*I Am in Common*” first explores *chiastic* structures in biblical literature (already mentioned in relation to strange attractors in the previous essay). It then explores chiasm as I discerned it at a key turning-point of my life, in resonance with larger shifts in the world around me.

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The subtitle to this collection of essays describes them as a “journal.” This is obviously a clash of genres. Journals are usually personal narratives while essays are typically more discursive. But in this case, the essays “occurred” to me over time as a set of perspectives on the common, mostly during the COVID pandemic, early 2020 to mid-2021. So this book does not present a thesis to be advanced and defended, or an agenda to be enacted. It is rather a series of “moments” in the two senses of the German *Moment*. They unfold in *time* (the journal) as different *aspects* of the common (the essays). The resulting collection has the character of a theme and variations, such as Beethoven practiced. Each variation (essay) develops a certain structural aspect/component of the theme (the common). The theme, the common, is known through its variations, much as the One who is the source of such variety is known mainly through our faithful enactments of the common through time.¹

Most of what’s written about the common(s) today is by authors much more socially engaged than I am. My perspectives come from a more retired, contemplative place. But there is a certain vantage-point therein. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote in 1964:

The contemplative life is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one’s back on the world with its sufferings, its crises, its confusions and its errors . . . To forget or to ignore this does not absolve the monk from responsibility for participation in events in which his very silence and “not knowing” may constitute a form of complicity . . . This is not to say that the monk is obliged to partisan commitment, and that a contemplative should take this or that specific political line.²

Merton’s comment prefaces a set of deeply discerning essays and letters on issues of racial justice, war, nonviolence, and the church’s “diaspora” in a rapidly secularizing world. In an earlier essay, “Solitude Is Not Separation,” he suggests,

True solitude is the home of the person, false solitude the refuge of the individualist. The person is constituted by a uniquely subsisting capacity to love – by a radical ability to care for all beings made by

God and loved by Him. Such a capacity is destroyed by the loss of perspective. Without a certain element of solitude there can be no compassion because when a man is lost in the wheels of a social machine he is no longer aware of human needs as a matter of personal responsibility.³

In my experience of the common, contemplation is first of all objectless, an immersion in the divine (“the One” in these essays). But as that immersion/communion is established, perspectives emerge on persons, places, and the indeterminate common life. These essays express the vantage-point, the limitations, and the existential commitment that can say with Abraham, Moses, and Mary: “Here I am.”

This book is a theological reflection that posits the common life of all commons, in light of a transcendent One. It combines current commons thought, socio-economic theory, biblical history, and reflection on my own life trajectory. Any attempt at such a broad integration is bound to be flawed and inadequate in many respects. And at times readers will encounter rather commonplace remarks. But the aim of here is to note the interconnections, to grope a way into the common life. So please bear with me.

I also recognize that readers may desire more basic background in the concept of the commons. Garrett Hardin’s groundbreaking 1968 article can be found online. For more recent thought, I recommend businessman Peter Barnes’ *Capitalism 3.0*, environmental activist David Bollier’s *Think Like a Commoner*, and Charles Eisenstein’s *Sacred Economics*. All these are cited at various places in this book

All of these essays combine history with current concerns, time with space. The common is not just a present reality. It has always been the present reality. And it will be in the future, either as our common weal or our common woe, proving Garrett Hardin either wrong or right.

¹ This reflection on theme and variations draws upon Fredric Jameson's *The Hegel Variations: On The Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 20-26. Hegel and Beethoven were born the same year (1770). Jameson explores an affinity between Hegel's dialectical method and Beethoven's approach to composition.

² Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1964), pp. xi-xii.

³ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions 1961), p. 53.