A spirituality of creation care

Susan Classen

Job reminds us that animals, birds of the air, plants of the earth, and fish of the sea all innately know something that we humans need to learn: that "in [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being":

> *But ask the animals, and they will teach you;*
> *the birds of the air, and they will tell you;*
> *ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;*
> *and the fish of the sea will declare to you.*
> *Who among all these does not know*
> *that the hand of the* LORD *has done this? (Job 12:7–9)*

Jesus used examples from nature to teach his followers life lessons. He pointed to birds and flowers, weeds and wheat, as he taught those around him to recognize God and respond in trust. Centuries later, Pilgram Marpeck, an Anabaptist leader, sensed God in creation when he wrote, "All visible creatures are placed in the world as apostles and teachers."[1] Creation teaches us that God is the source and the sustainer of life.

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Spirituality touches on the core values and beliefs that lie beneath the choices we make and the lives we lead. A spirituality of creation care, therefore, is more than reducing our consumption out of concern about climate change. It is more than recycling because we don't want to be wasteful, more than eating local food in order to reduce the use of fossil fuels. A spirituality of creation care recognizes creation as a reflection of our Creator. God's Spirit is present in all that exists, caring for us and teaching us how to live in harmony.

We respond humbly and gratefully by taking care of what cares for us. A spirituality of creation care invites us to respond to God's presence in the world around us.

Come and see

Creation beckons us to come and see God. Learning to see and respond to God in the world around us, then, is a crucial spiritual practice.

This past summer, at the end of July, I noticed a vine sprouting in the flower bed in front of the cabin where I live. It was growing in the same spot where an acorn squash had sprouted last year from the compost. The vine spread and formed fruit. One afternoon, a departing visitor called out that my melons were about ready to pick. "They aren't melons," I replied from the door. "They're acorn squash." After his car pulled out, I started wondering how he could confuse melons and squash, so I went to the plant and really looked at it for the first time. Sure enough, big round melons were beginning to turn from green to tan. I stood there shaking my head, amazed that I could have been so blind. A passing visitor had spotted what I had missed: for weeks, melons had been growing right outside my front door, and I had never looked closely enough to identify them—because I just assumed they were squash!

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Assumptions keep me from seeing, but curiosity opens my eyes. The one saving grace about the incident was that, after the visitor pointed out the melons, I was curious enough to go and look for myself. We often overlook the spiritual value of curiosity. But it was curiosity that got Moses to step off the path to see God in the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). And Jesus' first disciples began to follow him because they were curious about who he was and where he was going (John 1:35–42). Jesus invited his disciples to come and see (John 1:39), and they did.

Children are role models for curiosity. Everything is interesting to a young child discovering the world. We would do well to spend time with children, as we seek to respond to God's invitation to come and see.

An invitation in every moment

Thomas Merton once wrote that "every moment and every event of [our] life on earth plants something in [our] soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in [our] minds and wills…. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because [we] are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love."[2] God's presence in and around us constantly invites us to respond.

One day the simple task of building a fire inspired these reflections:

> *It's a cold, wet November morning in Kentucky. I'm sitting in Grandma's old rocker, wrapped in a royal purple afghan crocheted by my niece. The afghan somehow holds my niece's love and creativity, and I draw it close. A fire glows in the woodstove.*
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> *Last night, I carefully prepared the kindling so that the fire would light easily this morning. Pulling wood scraps from the kindling box, I was reminded that each piece has a story. The long, matchstick-like pieces were shaved off boards used for my cabin floor. I gratefully remembered the woman who donated the boards, which were left over from the house she built. The larger pieces of rough, weathered wood were scraps left from remodeling one of the retreat center cabins here. Those boards came from eighty-seven-year-old Mr. Kemp, who is glad that someone is interested in the old boards piling up in his lumberyard, which (like its owner) is fading. I set aside some thick slabs of oak from a tree that fell in a storm by Mary's Lake, so they would be ready to use once the fire was hot.*
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> *I feel settled by the memories inspired by the rocker, the afghan, the wood scraps. They are tangible reminders that everything holds a story, that everything is more than what it seems on the surface, that I'm a small but important part of that "something more."*

On the surface, I'm describing something as inconsequential as starting a fire with scraps of wood. But underneath the mundane task, I sense the Spirit inviting me to live with the awareness of God's presence in every moment, in everything, in everyone.

The psalmist describes the pervasive presence of God's Spirit. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Ps. 139:8). The writer of this psalm identified the highest and lowest places he could imagine. Today we could describe the span of God's presence far more broadly. Think of God's grandeur expressed not just in one galaxy but in the approximately one hundred and forty billion galaxies we know exist! And imagine God's presence in something as minute as human genes. I was awed when I read that the instructions contained in our genes in a single DNA strand would fill a thousand books of six hundred pages each. And those strands are present in each one of our billions of cells![3] God's transcendence and God's immanence are beyond our comprehension.

It's a challenge to live the truth that God is both transcendent and immanent. Sometimes we emphasize only God's transcendence. God is "up there" somewhere, a being who set the world in motion and then withdrew except for occasional interventions. I recently heard a friend say with urgency, "We've got to get God out of the sky!" Our understanding of God as distant from the natural world, as apart from, as over and above, contributes to our tendency to see ourselves as apart from rather than a part of creation. If God is in the sky, ruling over the earth, then we too can exercise power over the rest of creation. But Paul told the people of Athens that God is not far from us: in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The world around us becomes the place where we search for—and find—God.

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Several weeks ago, I heard an Episcopal priest describe his efforts to promote a faith-based response to the environment. He has found that most people have had a significant experience of

God's presence in nature, but not even one in twenty has talked about that experience in church. I was astounded. What might happen in our congregations if we asked each other how we have experienced God in nature? What might open up within us as individuals and as communities of faith if we told stories of life lessons learned from pets and gardens, from sunrises and storms?

Seasons and rhythms

God is present in the details of every moment, and God is present in the broader seasons and rhythms of life. I need to live close enough to nature to absorb a healthy understanding of time as season.

I recently read an article that pointed out the influence of nineteenth-century philosophers on the priority Western culture places on extracting profit. Stanley Jevons (d. 1882) wrote, "Value depends entirely on utility."[4] I initially felt smug as I thought about those who extract profit from natural resources, and about the destruction that results. "*I* appreciate beauty and don't have a utilitarian view of creation." But then it hit me. I try to extract profit from time. Time is only useful if I use it productively and make every minute count. Of course, I'm the one who determines what is efficient and whether the minutes count. I judge according to my criteria.

I get impatient with the time it takes to nourish my roots, and I resist dying back. Gardening helps me remember to honor the seasons of my own life, fallow and fruitful, and to trust that the time for fruit will come.

When I write about God's Spirit within creation, I have to write about it with great humility and with the heartfelt question, what does creation teach me about time and efficiency? Nature reminds me that I'm small, that my life will fade like a leaf (Isa. 64:6), that my understanding is limited, and that God's ways are as far beyond my grasp as the heavens are far above the earth (Isa. 55:9). Who can look at the grandeur of the mountains and feel big? Who of us can think we are in control in the middle of a snowstorm? Even something as minor as hoping it doesn't rain on a picnic is a reminder that I'm not in control!

Creation makes visible the wisdom of Paul's counsel to the Romans "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought,"

because you are only one member of the body, and all the members have their functions (Rom. 12:3–4). Creation teaches me that size doesn't matter, that standing out is no better than being essentially invisible. What would happen to the earth without bacteria to break down waste? Yet I don't see bacteria. I don't think about what they do. I'm only somewhat aware of them when I check to see how well the compost pile is breaking down. So why do I think I need to do with my life something that I see as big and important?

I make myself too big when I think that my perspective is broad enough to determine the efficient and productive use of my time. When Peter tells his readers that for God a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day, he is reminding them that our increments of time are scarcely relevant to God (2 Pet. 3:8). Time in creation is marked by cycles and seasons, not by hands on a watch.

Late last summer, in the midst of the tomato harvest, I found myself wondering, why do I think I should live my entire life as if I were in the midst of harvest time in August? I know that tomatoes have their season of harvest, which comes after a long season of growth and will be followed by a season of dying back. But I get impatient with the time it takes to nourish my roots, and I resist dying back. I somehow think something is wrong if I'm not constantly producing bushels of visible fruit in my life. Gardening helps me remember to honor the seasons of my own life, fallow and fruitful, and to trust that the time for fruit will come naturally if I nourish my roots.

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Grateful living

Gratitude is the foundation of a spirituality of creation care, because it reminds me that life is a gift I receive from God with every breath I take. It helps me remember that I'm small and important at the same time. I'm not the only person who receives life from God with each breath. Humans are not the only beings that receive life from God with each breath. We are part of an intricate web which is sustained by God, the giver of life. Psalm 148 is a rousing call for all creation—the sun and the moon, the shining stars, moun-

tains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, young people and old—to praise God. Everything that has life and breath has the capacity to praise the one who created us.

When I'm aware of God's presence in creation, I respond with gratitude, and gratitude inspires action. When I was living without running water for twenty years in Central America, I hoped that on my return to the U.S., I would remember to be grateful whenever I turned on the faucet. Unfortunately, I often take water for granted, but at least sometimes I allow the act of opening the tap to remind me to be grateful, to help me remember that many women in the world spend hours every day hauling water by hand, and that children die because they lack clean water to drink.

If I follow the water in my house back to its source, I'm aware that Kentucky is rich in flowing streams. And as I think about those streams, I'm appalled that they are being destroyed, as coal companies dynamite the tops of mountains to extract the coal, and then dump the debris into valleys and waterways. Gratitude for clean water inspires me to reflect on how to take care of what I'm grateful for, and gratitude inspires me to respond to those who don't have access to something so basic to life.

My former neighbors in Central America are my role models for living gratefully and generously. Daily life reminds them of two basic truths: we aren't in control, and we need one another. They know that they are dependent on God and one another, so they take nothing for granted. They celebrate as a gift things I tend to overlook or expect as a right.

As I prepared to return to the U.S., I worried about not having neighbors to remind me that I'm not autonomous and in control. Then I realized that creation teaches the same truth. I'm grateful that at this point in my life I can live and work close to the earth, because it helps me keep me in touch with God's wisdom embedded in nature. But I know that God's Spirit is present everywhere, not just in the rural landscape where I now live. Wherever we are, whatever we do, we can ask for an increased awareness of the ways creation reflects our Creator's wisdom.

God's desire to be found

The Spirit of God invites us to come and see that creation is more than a source of natural resources for human consumption. God is

present and calling out to us in creation. I'm deeply moved by Isaiah's expression of God's desire to be found: "I was ready to be sought out.… I said, 'Here I am, here I am'" (Isa. 65:1). But the people are not looking for or listening to God:

> *I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,*
> *to be found by those who did not seek me.*
> *I said, "Here I am, here I am,"*
> *to a nation that did not call on my name.*

God is calling out to us, "Here I am, here I am!" in the beauty of the sky, in the intricacy of a flower, in the grandeur of a mountain. God is calling, "Here I am, here I am!" as earth's resources are being depleted, as species become extinct, as the vulnerable suffer from drought and floods. When will God's call, "Here I am, here I am!" be heard by a people who are looking and listening—and who respond with gratitude?

Notes

[1] William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and ed., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 56.
[2] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), 14.
[3] Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 125.
[4] Walter J. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," *Church*, Winter 1989, 15.

About the author

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