

**LEARNING**

**HOW**

**TO**

**SEE**

with

**Brian**

**McLaren**

Season 6, Episode 5  
Seeing Nature as a Lover (Part 2)

feat. Miriam Smith

Brian McLaren: In our last episode, we met with an ecologist, a wildlife biologist who has devoted years and years of his life to preserving threatened species. And there are so many wonderful, amazing people in the world who develop a love for just one species, and they devote their lives along with many other scientists and activists and caring citizens to try to save an individual species from extinction. There are other people who fall in love with a place, a place that they see is threatened with destruction of its natural beauty, and that love for that place motivates them to not only invest their own time and energy, but to inspire other people to love that place as well. So that together, driven by love, motivated by love, moved by love, they can try to save that beloved place.

In today's episode of Learning How to See, we'll meet with someone who's been possessed by that love and I think you'll feel that it's contagious. My guest today is Miriam Smith. Miriam had a conversation with me from across the world. She's in East Africa, in the beautiful country of Kenya, and I'm so happy you're going to get to hear her story. You can learn more about her at her website. Eden Thriving, one word, edenthiving.org. Miriam speaks of cherishing seeing the world with the eyes of a lover, a lover who doesn't just want to use something but wants that thing to be itself and expressed in its fullness and to reach its full living potential. I know you're going to be moved by what she says.

Miriam and I come from a similar religious background and there was a hymn that I remember singing as a child. I'm certain that Miriam heard this hymn in church as well. It was a hymn called Fairest Lord Jesus, I loved this hymn because it was one of only two or three hymns that even mentioned nature. And like Miriam from a very young age, I just loved being outdoors and felt that whatever was good about life, I was encountering in those outdoor contexts. And the hymn had this verse, "Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands robed in the blooming garb of spring." And I remember when I would sing those words, "Fair are the meadows," it felt like we were praising the meadows and we were praising the woodlands and we were praising the glory of spring. And that felt so right to me.

And I didn't even notice what the next line was. The next line was Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer who makes the woeful heart to sing." And as an adult now, I look back on that hymn and I feel a pang of regret because it feels like we were only trying to praise the beauties of nature so that we could say that Jesus was better. In a certain sense, we were not cherishing nature for its own beauty and wonder, but we were using it for some other purpose. Now, I love Jesus and I agree with the sentiment of the hymn, the same beauty that we experience in nature, we experience in Jesus and in every other beautiful and holy and good and sacred human being. But I feel like the journey that Miriam has been on and the journey I've been on are a journey to seeing that it's all one love, it's all one cherishing, it's all one beauty and glory and holiness and sacredness. And so, I know you're going to enjoy meeting my friend Miriam Smith right now.

Miriam Smith, I'm so grateful that you and I could have this conversation on in different hemispheres in multiple ways. You being in Nairobi, Kenya right now. I wonder if you could introduce yourself to folks, tell them a little bit about your Genesis story and what it is that you do in the world right now, what your passion is and what your joy is in the work you do.

Miriam Smith: Well, first of all, let me say thank you so much for being able to have this conversation. I'm

looking forward to it. I am very privileged to have been taken, I guess, I could say overseas when I was two years old. My parents both left the United States to become evangelical missionaries in the central part of Africa, the country of Chad. And so, that was my childhood growing up there. And in so many ways, I feel that I had a unique and blessed and amazing childhood. I was able to run around outside all the time, climbing trees, picking mangoes and guavas off the trees, living without a lot of care in the world until a civil war broke out in Chad. And that became quite a fearful time in my life when I was about 10 years old.

Brian McLaren: And that would have a way of interrupting the joys of eating mangoes in Chad.

Miriam Smith: Yes. Yeah. And in many ways, that shaped my life and my way of seeing the world kind of burst that bubble a little bit. But I'm also grateful for that in the sense that I did have to grapple with things that maybe many kids don't. But it gave me a view of life that was maybe a reality check. And when I see stories of war and the pain of people in those situations, I feel it in my gut. I really feel that.

Brian McLaren: How old were you when that civil war broke out?

Miriam Smith: Somewhere nine, 10 years old because it got bad enough that my mom and we three children, I'm the middle of two brothers and we left. We left Chad and my dad stayed there and in fact, for five months, and that was probably in 1980, '81, somewhere there. And so, we didn't have internet. It was a very brave thing for my parents to have gone through, and yeah, it shaped a lot of what my growing up looked like after that.

Brian McLaren: What happened next?

Miriam Smith: We went to the United States for a short time, and then my dad came out of Chad and then we went to France after that. And then reentered, Chad and I stayed there until I went into high school. At which time, I traveled from Chad to Kenya for boarding school. There wasn't really many options in those days for high school where I was living. So that was another big transition, seeing more of the world, traveling with my brothers and another family and navigating some airports through Cameroon and Kinshasa and Bujumbura as about a 14-year-old.

Brian McLaren: Oh, my goodness.

Miriam Smith: Yeah, those were some times. And yeah, I think I was tough. I think in my adulthood, I am trying to become strong and less tough.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, I can hear what you're saying there. I'm imagining a young girl in Kinshasa or Bujumbura airport where I have been, especially back in those days. Oh, my goodness. Yeah, that would, you were a brave young woman at that moment. So, tell us what brought you from being in Kenya back then to doing the work you're doing now?

Miriam Smith: So, after college, I went to college. I wanted to be a doctor. I saw so much need growing up that I thought this was my way to serve in the world, and I never thought twice about the fact that I had to serve in the world. I don't know that it always came from the most aligned motivation, I would say maybe I thought I had to, but it was my path and I did not study

medicine. In the end, I studied community development and the preventative side, and that led me into transformational development work. And we returned after college, I got married. We went to Somalia and Djibouti, Eritrea, and finally landed in Kenya. And during all that time, I worked in non-profit work around missionary church, but also working in sustainable development.

And what I saw was that a lot of organizations focused on one thing. If you were in a health sector, you did health and medicine. If you were in education, you taught in schools. If you were in agriculture, you help people plant. And when I moved to Kenya, this had always bothered me. And I had a chance to strategize deep from the heart in a way that how could we address these issues that affect people's lives and create poverty or contribute to poverty? How can we bring these streams together? And I grew up loving being outside, loving nature. In college, a friend of mine who was also a missionary kid, we would pack up our backpacks and go backpacking during our spring break because there really wasn't anyone to go to or people. And we thought it is way better to be out there tenting, camping, backpacking. That gave us a deep love for nature.

And when I came to Kenya and had this opportunity to just really reset where I was going, what I was doing, it came together for me that the environment is something that holds us all. We live on this earth and I love it so much. And if there's anything that brings all those threads, health, education, agriculture together, it's our planet. It's where we live, it's our home it. And so, a friend of mine was working with street kids in Nairobi, rehabilitating them and had a home and knew many of the other homes. And we just started bringing kids out to go camping by a river, River Malewa outside of Naivasha where I live. And these kids come from downtown Nairobi. They would be totally confident on the streets after dark where I would be terrified, they weren't.

We brought them out to the nature camping, and they could hear the hyena calling, they could hear the tree hyrax sounds, they could hear, a buffalo would walk around, cape buffalo, and they were terrified. And it was just the beginning of the convergence of so many streams of what I was passionate about. One, taking care of nature and creation, and then education and spiritual formation in a way that connected kids and nature and God and didn't set those apart, which I feel like I had experienced so much of God was in church, trees were in nature, and never the two would meet. And I just knew deep in my heart that something wasn't right with that.

So, that was the birth of what we now call Eden Thriving, which started in 2010 and was really born out of a deep, deep love for being outside and being in the sanctuary of what that creates, how that changes my life, how that couldn't change other people's life, how that educates us, how that makes us well.

Brian McLaren: Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Oh, my goodness. So many layers of what you're sharing, Miriam and I know that folks who are listening are going to be thinking about all those different layers. First, your own story, your own love for nature from your childhood, your awareness of human suffering, your desire to find integrative solutions. And I don't want to put words in your mouth, but it feels to me like you kept getting a bigger and bigger frame. If you start thinking I'll be a doctor,

but then you think, well, why are so many people sick and unhealthy? And then you think of community health and then you think, before long you realize if the earth is unhealthy, people will be unhealthy. And I loved what you said that really the environment, this earth holds us all.

I also was really struck by what you said about the world of trees and nature and hyenas and hyraxes is sort of in one category and then the world of church is in another. And God is primarily in the church role, for you would assume, for a lot of people. Yet for so many of us, it's not that simple. And in fact, some of us would even say our deeper encounters with God happen in that first category of being outdoors. And to speak of being held by nature feels an awful lot of the way people talk about being held by God. Does that stimulate anything that you would want to say in response?

Miriam Smith: Yeah, this season of my life I've been really sitting with and soaking in this word cherishing or to be cherished. And when I am out walking, running, strolling, praying, talking, being out with nature, I feel cherished. And I am reminded of one of David Whyte's, I'm not going to quote it exactly, but in his book, what To Remember when Waking, he talks about how we're never alone, never have a pity party because the trees are watching you. You're never alone. You're being held by that. And I feel that when I'm there, and it just has caused me to just really, really go deep into what is this cherishing energy that I'm feeling?

And ultimately, I've come to conclude that that cherishing energy is another name for God and it isn't the God I grew up with. That was kind of a very different experience. But over this spiritual journey over my life, over time, nature has actually helped me to believe in a cherishing God. So, there's a lot more I could say about that cherishing, but not sure where you want to take that.

Brian McLaren: Well, no, that word cherishing is beautiful because what feels like happens is you have the experience of being cherished. I have to tell you, when you mentioned mangoes earlier, I have 14 mango trees and I love mangoes. And there are a few things that would make you feel cherished more than the gift of a mango from the universe to you, a beautiful ripe, not store-bought mango. But that sense of being cherished now has you in the role of cherishing and trying to protect. And one of your current projects and goals is a particular piece of land you're trying to cherish and protect. And it feels to me this sense that the cherishing goes both ways. It's something you feel and it's something you want to extend. Talk to me about how that all works.

Miriam Smith: I really think that it's almost impossible to cherish the outer landscapes until you explore with grace and compassion your inner landscape and walk through your own inner landscapes with a sense of cherishing all your experiences, the good, the bad, the difficult, the fears, the shadow side. And being in this world of sustainable development and NGOs and nonprofits for many, many years now, just more and more, I'm coming to believe that what we do outwardly, if it is not from deep place of the same inner work inside of us, there's not much we can accomplish outwardly. And as much as I am pro plant trees, let's do better in pick up plastic and let's regulate

some of this stuff and all the good stuff that's happening.

I don't know, maybe I think there's a bit of a missing piece with could we see ourselves, our inner landscapes, could we walk on the devastated landscapes of our planet and reflect on how is this like me and how can I heal inside? And in the presence of that cherishing energy of divine love, which I really believe is the sacred law of the universe, I don't think it's about being a good girl or a good boy or about what we, following the rules. That cherishment, if I can call it that, that love is there, kind of like gravity. Caroline Myss would say, "It's not personal." Meaning, it is going to be what changes our planet, what changes our hearts. It's the same law of love, it's the same cherishing energy, and I just think we need so many more souls, hearts and beating hearts. People who see with the eye of the heart, feel that cherishing, so that they can enact that or bring that about in the world.

And I think that's my experience with this piece of land that you're talking about. When I moved to Malawi where I currently live in 2009, it was a wilderness. It had eland and I would go running and walking and literally sometimes come back because of the wild animals. And then, a golf course developer came, bought the land, came with the bulldozers and started turning it into a golf course. And that in itself may not be so bad. My husband is an avid golfer. I'm not going to decry that necessarily, but it was literally viscerally painful for me to watch a 100-year old poto trees get cut down to watch a dam being constructed with ugly cement across a beautiful little stream and flooding out the only old indigenous trees on the property that were home to the Hartlaub's turaco. So many things. And I couldn't understand why am I feeling this so viscerally? Why am I walking on here crying?

And I realized because somehow this is a reflection of my own soul. This is a reflection of what happens to the divine all the time, what happens to especially the feminine. And I felt like my own experience throughout so much of my life was reflected in this beautiful piece of land being taken and destroyed and can I use the word raped, and all the topsoil and just it wasn't being cherished to become and to flourish and to become its full potential. It was being used.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Miriam Smith: And in my mind, when I have the connotation of that word cherish, it's like it's not transactional in any way is the way that I breathe in that word. It's like presence, paying attention. There's a Hebrew word, and I'm not sure I'll say it correctly, but it's like Shamar, to keep or to exercise great care over. Isn't that beautiful?

Brian McLaren: Yeah.

Miriam Smith: To exercise great care over, that's kind of to me what cherishing is.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Miriam Smith: So, that was in 2010, I think about 2010, this golf course guy came, he never finished the golf course, ended up passing away of a stroke. The bank reclaimed the land and it was left in complete devastation. And that was all these years, I have felt that this is meant to be something else. That the healing of this is directly connected to my own soul's journey and purpose and healing. And so, at this point in time, Eden Thriving as an organization, which

we're a 501(c)(3) in the US and our Kenyan affiliate here in Kenya that we work together with, we are on the cusp of being able to purchase this land. And I almost hate to use that word because I don't like the transactional nature of it, but I know that this is for cherishing it. This is for a sanctuary to bring back the animals, the flora, the fauna. If we're able to finish, we have about half the money needed. If we're able to get that, we'll be able to protect about six miles of the Malewa River, which feeds into Lake Naivasha, which is extremely important ecologically and economically.

But I think the bigger story here is just that inner and outer landscapes. And I'm absolutely beholden to one of my most beloved poet friends, John O'Donohue, not friends. I wish I had known him. But bringing that out for me, that our inner landscapes and how we treat that, how we interact with our inner landscape, which has a lot to do with our view of the divine, is how I think it's maybe the next future step in how we're going to heal our planet. And I think it's that word how we love, how can we love nature? How do we love the earth? It's almost like asking, how do you love yourself? I feel like there's the rub, there's the key. There's the key to our next calling, vocation towards our planet.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Miriam Smith: If we can't get to cherishing and loving inner and outer landscapes, I think all the work in the world, which is really good, it may not last or something.

Brian McLaren: Yes, I hear you saying we could pass laws and develop technologies, but if we don't go to the heart of the matter that if human beings don't cherish the earth in the way that the earth deserves to be cherished, it's not going to be good for the earth or for us. And suddenly, as important as I'm a huge fan of every scientist who's contributed to the invention of solar panels and every geneticist who's trying to help coral become more resilient to the harm that human beings are doing to the temperature of the oceans. I mean, every one of those actions is important. My guess is for an awful lot of those people, there's a cherishing going on that motivates their work.

But if that cherishing doesn't spread and become normative for the vast number of people so that we would never treat the earth in a way that we didn't treat a child that we loved or a lover or a parent that we loved, if that doesn't happen, I don't think we're going to, well, I think it's a very bleak future if that doesn't happen. And suddenly, that inner work that you're talking about that, then it's impossible not to express that for this beautiful world as you so powerfully described. I'll tell you something I'm hoping. I'm hoping that some other people who are hearing this will in their hearts say, "I want to help her cherish that piece of land." And we'll put information about how to get in touch with you for that in the show notes. Would you just say though, what is the one simplest website for people to contact to find out more?

Miriam Smith: Yeah, sure, [edenthiving.org](http://edenthiving.org), just one word, [edenthiving.org](http://edenthiving.org). There's a dedicated page on there for raising money for the land and a little more story about it. And also, all of our programs, which we have five or six programs ongoing all the time with environmental education and landscape restoration.

Brian McLaren: That's so beautiful. That's so great. I have taken away so much from this conversation

with you, Miriam. I don't even want to try to sum it up. I want to go back and listen to it again. And I'm so glad that other people are going to have the benefit of eavesdropping on our conversation. What we love, we protect. What we cherish, we save. And that's been the story of your life. And I know it is contagious because I feel how contagious it is to me. And I think the two of us together hope this becomes contagious to more and more people. Wherever it leads, it will involve some pain. I'm thinking of you walking on a partially completed golf course, weeping for the loss. It does complicate life, but it adds something that's hard to put into words, doesn't it? You just think how impoverished our lives would be without that.

I wonder if, just as a final comment, here, you grew up in a missionary family and you were drawn to a life of service for an awful lot of people, religion and mission and service. The circle really never closes or expands to deal with the sacredness and beauty loveliness, cherish ability of the earth. Any final thoughts on how that connects for you and what you would wish for other people?

Miriam Smith: I remember somebody telling me, "Why straighten a picture in a burning building?"

Brian McLaren: Oh, my.

Miriam Smith: And I think there is some damaging theology around that. What I love is that today's science, quantum physics is teaching us that energy. Matter is energy. And if we believe, as I've said, the sacred law of the universe, I believe is this law of love, which to me is love, light, life. It gives birth to life is an energy. And energy never disappears it just changes form. And so, I do not take for one second what happens, my actions towards another human being. My actions towards a tree, a baby bird, an elephant, a river, none of that is a waste of time. And all of it is held in the same energy as that cherishing energy, which we might call God. And I've had to do, of course, a little changing, journeying towards a theology that embraces life and cherishing in a way that feels forever. Can I say, like that love will never fail.

And I remember reading once that it means that it'll never fall from authority. It will be the final authority. We don't get to choose that. That is the reality. And my desire is to choose to align myself with that. So often when I'm on the land, I pray loves will be done. I just change that word a little bit because it takes me back maybe to too much of a sort of emperor kind of judge, God out in the sky, but love the energy of love, the cherishing of love. The I want that for me. I want that for you. I want that for suffering everywhere. And Eden's motto is cultivating thriving lives and flourishing landscapes.

How can we cultivate thriving lives and flourishing landscapes if we leave out the most powerful force and energy in the world, the sacred law that is not going to fall from authority? I feel like, man, let's get on that track. Let's choose that. And so, I kind of have this little motto now that I am working with is, "Live cherished and cherish life." And all of that is if I live cherished, and I know I'm held by that in every way because the energy of love, the energy of God is in a tree, is in a bird, is in the river. I mean can't, I'm never going to be away from it.

Brian McLaren: Yes.



Miriam Smith: I mean, it makes me smile. And how can I let that flow through and just say yes? Just keep saying yes, yes. Life, love, yes, yes, light and yes cherish. It's hard. Life is hard. We suffer. But it's also exciting. And I love that word about co-creating. And again, quoting David Whyte or his books must be that I was just listening to it, but the conversational power to co-create. So, as we have conversations even with nature, affirm, affirm that cherishing energy, affirm that this is forever, that this is good, that this is the beautiful, the good, and the true. No matter what's happening outside, this is life. This is meant to be, and I want to be a part of it and for myself, for our world, for wherever I am.

And I was thinking, what am I carrying with me when I go on a walk, my eyes learning how to see? Do I see that love, cherishment at work and flourishing in the landscape? Do I see that in myself? What am I carrying with me? And that would be, yeah, what I might leave that with and just say, I hope. I pray that I live like that because it opens my eyes to so much, so much joy.

Brian McLaren: Thanks so much for investing your precious time and attention in Learning How to See. I'm especially grateful to have you along this season as we learn to see nature in new and deeper ways. I believe a transformation in the way we see the earth and all her creatures will deeply enrich your life personally. And I also believe that our shared future and the future of our planet depend on more and more of us learning how to see nature in a new way. This change in seeing isn't just a matter of enrichment, it's also a matter of survival. As a result of our being part of this season of the podcast, I hope we will learn to see ourselves not only in relation to nature, but also as part of nature. I hope we will learn to encounter the spirit or presence or glory of God incarnate in nature to see the divine and all creatures and all matter and energy, including ourselves as part of one sacred web or cosmic dance of life.

I hope we will all be converted from destroyers or consumers of the web of life into its lovers and healers. If you're interested in learning more, be sure to check out the show notes for links to our guests and the resources they offer. And you may also be interested in my upcoming book, *Life After Doom, Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. Thanks as always to Corey Wayne, the skilled and kind producer of this podcast, and to the whole CAC community, staff, faculty, students, and supporters. If you'd like to leave us a question, brief message or story, you can write us an email or send us a voicemail and you'll find instructions in the show notes. If you enjoy this podcast, I hope you'll share it with some friends. Again, I thank you.