

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 6, Episode 6

Seeing Nature as a Doctor (Part I)

feat. Debra Rienstra and Melanie Griffin

Brian: My dad passed away about 10 years ago now. But he was a doctor. He loved being a doctor. He would come home from a day at the hospital, and over dinner we would get a rundown of all the patients that he'd seen that day. As a result, we often talked about things at the dinner table that normal families don't talk about, but my dad always tried to teach me about what he called differential diagnosis. You keep narrowing down the possible number of diagnoses until you get down to the one that is most plausible or the two or three that you need to now do further tests for. To achieve a differential diagnosis, you would ask questions, you would perform different checks, you would actually touch the part of the stomach where there was discomfort or you would feel the bone to see if there was a break. You would measure things, you would test things, you would develop hypotheses, and you would test your diagnosis to see if maybe it was inaccurate.

My dad, in practicing good medicine, was putting into practice an insight from the great African American philosopher and activist, James Baldwin, who said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed that is not faced." Facing reality is trying to get down to a diagnosis, even if the diagnosis is unpleasant. A doctor knows we can't spare the patient anxiety by sugarcoating the diagnosis, we have to speak the truth, speak it clearly, be as accurate as we can. Only after coming to an accurate diagnosis can you develop a prognosis, an understanding of what the future might hold, and then you can come up with treatment, a therapy plan, what needs to be done.

When we look at the natural world today, the fragile ecosystems of our planet that are under such great threat from human activity, we need to do some careful differential diagnosis, then we need to come up with a sensible prognosis, an honest prognosis, and then we need to get involved with our treatment or therapy plan. Learning to see like a doctor is one of the great gifts that I received from my childhood. And we'll share today in that way of seeing, learning to see like a doctor.

Listen as I read from Life After Doom. This is a short reading from chapter two of my book, Life After Doom. In this chapter, I will summarize the best current thinking on our current situation, a term I use often in the coming pages, to refer to the complex reality we find ourselves in. I'll assume that you feel as I do when I go to the doctor. "Give it to me straight, doc. Don't hold anything back or sugarcoat anything."

First, the diagnosis. Our global civilization, as currently structured, is unstable and unsustainable. Ecologically, our civilization sucks out too many of the Earth's resources for the earth to replenish and it pumps out too much waste for the earth to detoxify. Economically, our civilization's financial systems are complex, interconnected, fragile, and deeply dependent on continual economic growth. Without continual economic growth, financial systems will stumble toward collapse. But with economic growth, we intensify and hasten ecological collapse. In addition, our global economic systems distribute more and more money and power to those who already have it, creating a small network of elites who live in luxury and share great political power while billions live in or near poverty with little political power.

Speaking of politics, as we face increasing ecological and economic instability, social unrest and conflict will also increase. As a result, our democratic political systems will be strained to or past the breaking point. Like a person of my age who transitions from stability and

health to sickness and decline, our civilization will become weaker and more expensive to maintain. In all of our scenarios for the future, the primary problem is not the environment, the primary problem is us. Humans don't have an environmental problem, the environment has a human problem. And we might add we humans have an energy problem.

We have built a fast-growing, complex, expensive, unequal, resource-hungry, fragile, fractious, and weaponized civilization that is a threat both to the environment and itself. As long as we suck resources from the earth faster than the earth can restore them or pump out wastes faster than the earth can detoxify them, we exist in a condition called overshoot. Whenever our combined human footprint overshoots the Earth's long-term carrying capacity, we are living on borrowed time and jumping on thin ice. Unless we recalibrate fast, a doomed scenario of some sort is inevitable. Overshoot, we might say, is civilization's original sin.

All of us who care about the state of our beautiful, fragile, beloved earth are familiar with one of our main challenges, and that's climate denial. There is a whole industry funded, not surprisingly, by the fossil fuel industry to keep people in denial about the reality and seriousness and action required by the climate crisis in our world. A lot of people aren't aware that there's an equal and opposite problem. We might call it climate despair. Many people, when they begin to understand the gravity of our challenge, they find themselves being sucked into despondency, despair, a paralyzing despair. And I think you can see that both denial and despair take people out of the game when we really need them to be involved.

All of us who've faced some of that climate despair in our lives find out that one of the treatments for this malady is to get involved, to get involved with other people and to work together to try to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. And I'm so happy that you're going to meet two amazing women today who are recruiting people to be part of the solution, one recruiting people largely at the early end of life working with college students, and one working with people over 60 taking that immense resource of time and intelligence and energy for senior citizens and getting them involved as activists in our world. Climate denial, climate despair both can be paralyzing. And in this episode of Learning How to See, we want to find some inspiration and insight to help us not be paralyzed but to be set free.

Welcome, everybody, to this episode of Learning How to See. I feel each of you who's listening, you're very, very lucky because you get to meet two wonderful people, a college professor and author, and a global troublemaker, an activist, and an inspiring human being. Let me invite each of you to introduce yourselves first. Debra, please.

Debra: Hi, Brian. It's really great to be here. I'm honored to be in this conversation with you and Melanie today. And I teach English literature at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I've been there for, well, going on 30 years now. I teach mostly undergraduates. My field is British literature and I also teach creative writing. And in the past maybe eight or so years, I've undergone what Pope Francis calls an ecological conversion; that is to say I've started to read a lot about climate change and eco-theology. And that has served to revitalize my teaching, my scholarship, my writing, and in a lot of ways, my life.

Brian: Fantastic. And I've been a beneficiary of your most recent book. Would you just tell

everybody a little bit about Refugia Faith?

Debra: Sure. My book is called Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth. It's published by Fortress about two years ago. And it's a combination of nature writing, memoir, and theology. I tried to sneak the theology in there between the nature writing and the memoir, make it go down a little easier. But it's really an exploration of the question what does it take to adapt our faith and practice? And I'm speaking as a Christian here. What does it take to adapt our faith and practice for a climate changed planet?

Brian: And that sets an important stage for our conversation today. Thank you so much, Debra. And Melanie Griffin, you and I go way, way back. I can't wait for you to meet all the folks who will be listening.

Melanie: Thanks, Brian. Yeah, we are aging well together and causing trouble well together for many years. I am Melanie Griffin. I am based in DC and grew up here in Maryland. I spent 30 years in a career at Sierra Club. I was a lobbyist for about 20 years. I worked on all different issues, but my main focus was public lands. That's my main expertise. And then I also then began a partnerships program, which was the Sierra Club's first effort at really trying to diversify the base of environmental support. And so I worked with all different constituencies and different kinds of people and worked on environmental justice issues and also with people of faith and hoping to engage them more in protecting creation.

I did that for about seven or eight years, and then I retired. And I guess I was retired for 11 or 12 years; I was doing a lot of gig work stuff. And then I just couldn't stay retired, it was just with the planet on fire and me sitting here saying, "I gave it the office. I don't have to do anything else." I couldn't do it as much as I wanted to be in denial with everybody else so I ended up at this job. I went back to school, I got a master's in creative nonfiction, which was really fun, but that didn't do it either because I needed to do more. I need to be in the streets with protest signs at least once a year or I'm not happy.

I went to work for a Third Act, which is a new group. It's about two years old. Started by Bill McKibben who started 350.org, which was the first global climate change organization and grew like crazy. And Third Act has also grown like crazy. The thing is, Third Act is based in America primarily. There's a few people other places that engage. But we organize folks over 60 to work on climate and democracy issues. And so that's an interesting niche. And I've learned a lot about it and am really enjoying it. There are a lot of incredibly experienced and talented and good-hearted people, volunteers at Third Act. We've got about 70,000 supporters now in just two years and working groups in close to 30 states and some affinity groups as well, including a faith working group, a lawyer's working group. Really growing by leaps and bounds and just belying the fact that most elders are sitting out on the golf course having a good time. A lot of people are worried about what's going on these days, and I'm excited to be involved and engaged with them.

Brian: Oh, it's so good. It's so good. Well, in this series of Learning How to See, we're talking

about learning how to see the natural world, learning how to see nature. I'll let both of you in on a little secret I really haven't mentioned, but I have been using the word nature a lot more than the word creation, which might surprise people. I'm a little surprised myself. I did it by instinct, but then I realized I had a reason, and here's why. I have a feeling that for some people, the natural world doesn't matter unless you bring God into it. In other words, it's inherently worthless and we shouldn't even worry about taking care of it unless we can give a theological religious ecclesiological reason for it. And I've come to think I understand why that's the case, but I think that's a sign of how much damage religion has done to the world. To say it's only important if you have a religious dimension to it feels to me like it's a concession that I don't want to make.

And in fact, I'm starting to feel more and more like the reason God should matter to us is because creation is so wonderful and amazing and necessary and profound and mysterious and deep and life-giving that that's what has to make us think about God in the first place. I actually think we all know we could find some Bible verses that might back up that fact. And so what I'm hoping can happen for me and more people is that the spiritual life and the life in nature become important in an interconnected, entangled, inseparable way, not one for the other or one first and the other second, however that works.

But both of you at some point in your life have come to care about this. And I'm going to guess Debra that for you, when you talked about that conversion, this was a more recent phenomenon in your life. But Melanie, it goes way back for you. And in fact, you were working for the Sierra Club, I'm pretty sure, a long time before you ever heard of climate change. Is that true? I wonder if you could tell a little bit about first how you first got involved in environmental work, why it mattered to you, and at what point learning about climate change became significant there.

Melanie: Yeah, I'm actually writing. I'm working on a memoir right now called *The Soul of a Lobbyist* talking about-

Brian: I love it. Oh, that's great.

Melanie: ... my spiritual journey through politics and working on Capitol Hill on environmental things. And so I've been looking back on my history of understanding, recognizing climate change. And it wasn't a thing when I started at the Sierra Club in 1982. In fact, I remember in my environmental textbook in college, it mentioned the greenhouse effect, which is what it was called at that time, but then it said that maybe particulate pollution was going to offset it and cause enough of the sun to go backward so that it wouldn't warm the planet. It was like a box. It was the paragraph. That wasn't ancient history.

But yeah, I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional home, as I know a lot of people did as I come to talk to people. But I escaped outside into nature. We weren't a religious family. I didn't have particularly any affiliation with any religion or anything, but I just found... Like you were saying, I discovered peace and security and comfort in nature. In Florida, we had a huge pond in the backyard, and so it was like you, Brian,

it was fish and turtles and snakes that brought me around.

And so when I went to college, I wanted to... I remember writing in my journal, I want to speak for those who can't speak for themselves. I was sitting by a duck pond, and I was watching these ducks and just thinking, what are we doing to this water and this air? And I was naive enough to think that if I could just educate decision makers about it, that they would change their ways and stop producing so much pollution and so on. That's why I decided I wanted to be a lobbyist, because I was going to single-handedly save the planet.

Yeah, I just wanted to work for Sierra Club because they were very effective and very large. And so I started working on the Clean Air Act in the '80s and early '90s, and there wasn't really much. I remember somebody talking about carbon at one point, but it wasn't a real conversation. But I do remember our energy lobbyist going to a briefing on climate change I think in '84. And some scientists had come. And he came back, his eyes were big as saucers, and just said, "Oh my gosh, you guys, we got to stop working on everything and work on this right away." And that was in 1984. And sometimes I wonder what if all the major environmental groups had said, "Boom, this is it. We're only going to work on this," once they first noticed it. But the IPCC hadn't even come around the, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

And so you just watch it over time on the back burner, and then the denial and the fossil fuel industry just launching this multi-million dollar campaign to billion dollar campaign to just negate the whole idea that it even existed, and then of course that it was human cause and all that. But that was paid for. That whole PR campaign was paid for by the same people that paid for the tobacco industry and did the same thing; stalled us for so long and lost so many lives because of it. That still motivates me. Man, we lost a lot of time in a very intentional way.

Brian: Yes. And some full disclosure here, Melanie and I met when I was a pastor and she began attending my church. And something we connected on was a love for the environment and a concern about ecology. And we were both all in and really committed and really concerned without even knowing about climate change, very much about it. And in fact, in my upcoming book, I tell the story, and I imagine you were there this day, Melanie, but I gave a sermon at Cedar Ridge Community Church where we knew each other about our spiritual responsibility to care for the earth and all the rest.

And a woman came up to me afterwards and said, "I'm a college student, and I've never heard a sermon like that before. And I'm an environmental studies major, and I was surprised you didn't say anything about global warming." And I had never heard the term. And this was in the late '90s. I had never heard the term. And this is for a guy who cared about the environment. I must've had a puzzled look on my face, and then she said, "Go home." And this was late enough that most of us had some form of the internet, although you remember it was dial up, all those crazy sounds that we dealt with back then. And she said, "Go home, look up the word sea level rise and arctic ice melt," or something like that. And I went home that afternoon, I looked it up, and I remember it was a piece of ice melted down my back. Like that fellow must have felt in 1984, I thought, oh my gosh, if this is real, my life just changed understanding this. Debra, you've been through a similar experience.

Debra: Yeah. For me, unsurprisingly, it starts with books, reading books, and primarily Bill McKibben, unsurprisingly. He came to Calvin University in 2018, and so to prepare for that, I was reading his books. And then also Kathleen Dean Moore, who's a moral philosopher and nature writer now retired from Oregon State, and it was actually her book that introduced me to the idea of refugia, which maybe we can talk about later.

It was definitely through books late in life, I guess. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was also a kind of recovery of love for place that I've always had, in particular for the beautiful freshwater coastal dunes of West Michigan where I grew up and now live. I've always had this real attachment to the lake shore and to woods and waters. And your soul feels at peace when you're in these landscapes that are meaningful to you and that somehow mysteriously match your inner landscape or something. Getting in touch with that again led me to understand, I think, that we are, as human beings, wired to be connected to place, and that our alienation from place is a kind of function of modernity that leaves a hole in our souls.

And at the same time I started reading, okay, back to books, reading Eco-Theology and realizing there too there's a kind of recovery of understanding past that dualism that you were talking about a minute ago, Brian, the spirit matter dualism that goes so deep into human culture and not just Christianity, although it really took hold in Christianity in ways that we can talk about, but that dualism, that spirit matter dualism. Going back to the scripture and even somebody like Hildegard of Bingen who was thinking about this in the 12th century and saying "That dualism thing, that's not right." That kind of infusion, that spirit matter infusion that you were referring to I think is the actual ontological state of things.

And it's our mental constructions that have hidden that from us. That to me was a, "Whoa, where have I been? Have you been all my life?" This idea. And so I was able to go back and start to read that back into the history of Christian theology and into the scriptures. And that to me was very exciting. It felt like a missing piece. I've been a person of faith all my life. I've been educated, a lot of Christian education, gone to church all my life, all of it, and still felt like, "Whoa, this was a missing piece." Just like you with where have I been with climate change? It's like, where have I been with eco theology? I've missed it. I'm relishing learning about that.

Brian: That's beautiful. I noticed how you mentioned your love for Western Michigan and that ecosystem landscape. And Melanie, you mentioned Florida. There've been some other very important landscapes in your life too, right? Tell me about some of those places that are especially important to you.

Melanie: So many, but really, I think my heart home in many ways is up in New Hampshire where my grandmother had a house. It's my house now. And it was built in 1782. We have 40 acres up there. It's hills and meadows and woods. And when I was a kid, I used to walk around those woods and meadows all the time. And that is the first place that I ever felt God as someone or some being or some force that I could talk to that saw me and I could connect with God, and so I did. And I used to just talk to her.

And at one point, I was sitting in the woods at a little place I called Paradise place and

surrounded by these huge pine trees and moss and ferns and that beautiful New England scenery in the woods. And it was my special spot. And when I came back the next year, the trees had all been cut down and the ferns had died in the sun. And that was just regular logging operations in New England, but to me, it felt like just the end of the earth, that this place could be so beautiful and so sacred to me and then just be gone. And so I still think about that as a real turning point in my life to just say, "There's something that I'm connected to that is just so important and so integral to who I am." And that's really my special place that I still go back to think about.

Brian: Melanie, when you describe the horror of seeing that beautiful paradise not quite paved into a parking lot, but something like that, I think it reminds us all that we're living in a world that is under assault. And it's been under assault for a long time. For whatever reason, we considered that assault normal and we acted as if the world was a limitless resource so we could assault it forever. And now more and more of us are waking up to this sense that, oh my goodness, this poor world has been subjected to mistreatment for so long.

And climate change is this emergency issue that we have to grapple with, but even apart from that, there are so many others, whether we wanted to talk about topsoil or ocean acidification or coral reef bleaching or overfishing or the replacement of all wildlife with domestic wildlife. And so you put all of these together and we say there's this sickness in our world. It's not that the world has done anything wrong; the world is a victim of bad environmental health of human beings. And that puts us in this mode of thinking like doctors. Okay, there's a disease. Something's wrong. How do we treat it?

And it seems to me that the two of you are working together in Third Act, but you have interesting specialties you're involved with as well. Melanie, you're right now trying to bring, in a sense, an emergency medical corps of older people to bring their energy and time and money and intelligence to bear on our situation. You're trying to recruit people to be part of the medical corps for this emergency. And it strikes me, Debra, that you, as a professor, you're constantly working with the new generation of young people getting educated. And then through your writing, you're also trying to speak to people in the theological world. You're trying to do some theological doctoring. And I wonder, Debra first, if you could talk about that work. What is it like to be working with young people? What do they need? Where are they? How many of them get it? What do you see can happen to help them?

Debra: Well, it's privilege to work with young people, and it's one I'm very grateful for. I, in particular, tend to be in contact with people who've been raised in Protestantism, not exclusively, and often evangelicalism. And many of them from the US, but we also have quite a lot of international students at Calvin University, so they're from all over the world. I would say do they get it? Yes. They are worried, they are scared, they're angry. Of course, this is a generalization. I'm not talking about sociological data here, I'm just talking about my experience from the conversations I've had and the courses I've taught. They're worried, they're scared, they're angry.

They're confused too because they have a hard time understanding why so often the people in their religious communities are either apathetic or dismissive about this. And when that gets really bad, they feel betrayed by these people who have raised them and seem to not care about this existential threat That seems to them very real. I also find they're not very

well-informed. They have this vague dread, but they're not necessarily in the trenches getting information and following the news about climate and so on. It's almost worse that they just have this vague, helpless dread than it would be if they were more informed.

I think most people, when you start to become informed about climate change, as you say, there's so many aspects to it, not to mention the environmental injustice aspect to it. There are so many aspects to it, it feels really overwhelming, depressing, so it's very easy to fall into doomism. And I think young people are tempted by that anyway, even religious young people, because they do... We live in this time of such upheaval. And I look back at myself at age 18, and I was so naive, and the world felt very stable, even though there was a lot going on that I was naive about. But this generation, they have never been naive about stability or any sense of what the future promises them. The future, even economically, does not feel as secure for them. It's like they don't expect the game to stay the same. I think as a young person, I thought, well, at least the game will be the same however I managed to play the game, economically I mean. They don't expect that. They're trying, but they don't expect that.

I find it really helpful to be a fellow Christian, an older person who says, "I know where you're coming from. I know how you're trying to make sense, make some kind of connection between faith, a faith that's been handed to you without any connection maybe to what's going on with the climate. You're trying to make a connection between faith and this fear that you have. And I've been through that, so I can give you a clear-eyed view as much as I understand it and also help you think about those really fundamental theological ideas that are driving what you have experienced in your faith communities."

Sometimes there's just a sort of innocent ignorance about theology and about climate change. But as you mentioned too, Melanie, there's also a lot of misinformation out there and a lot of spiritual distortion and dysfunction that is fall... It is part of this too. Just to be able to talk with students about that, I find it very exciting to see them start to grapple with it and think about it and maybe get at least some sense of clarity and relief that that clarity might offer.

Brian: I'm so thankful that they have a professor like you on the faculty that they can come to and that will help them in that way. Mel, you're working with folks over 60, and they wouldn't come to you if they didn't think there was a problem. They're coming because they know something's amiss, and so now you want to help them know how to make a difference. Tell me what you and Third Act are doing for folks.

Melanie: It's so exciting. I am loving this job. It feels like the perfect fit for me, partly because I am closing in on 70 here in a couple of years and thinking about what have I done? What was all that about being on Capitol Hill talking to lawmakers. That's not where the action is. It's where the money is, but... I am just loving meeting all these people who, if we think about healing, we think about the divisions in our society, you think about this epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and the pandemic brought that. I think elders are more prone to that anyway, and depression and what was this all about kind of thing? But the pandemic really brought it out. And so many third actors I've talked to were just, "I just couldn't sit around." They have grandchildren. They're thinking about a legacy.

I would say I agree about young people's fear and dread. And with elders, I think it's maybe more sadness, grief. Maybe not full-blown depression, but just the grief. And being in community together, working together for positive things and doing things they've never done before, I am loving seeing people in their 80s and 90s doing things they never thought they'd do. We had a day of action back last March, and I met this 90-year-old woman who had never been to a protest before, never been. And she was outside waving signs up in Massachusetts. And she said, "This is the best day of my life," and the fact that Third Act got to give this 90-year-old the best day of her life.

And also, part of our working principles is to have fun and be joyful and be kind. And I love that. It's about bringing more people in and empathizing and listening and connecting, which is so important to older people. And I'm loving watching all of this. And they're super creative, like bringing rocking chairs. We're doing a lot of protests in front of banks because banks are bankrolling the fossil fuel corporations to the tune of trillions of dollars, and so we're bringing rocking chairs out in front of these banks and sitting down with signs. And here's all these old grandparents sitting in their rocking chairs with their protest signs, clean up your act. And it's just so fun to watch the creativity and so on. And also the energy, oh my gosh, they write tens of thousands of postcards to voters in swing states and beg them to vote because their grandchildren depend on it. This is very heartfelt, and I think that's really healing.

Brian: Oh, my. Forget marches, we want to have rocking chairs. Rock-ins; I guess that'll be what it's called, rock-ins.

Melanie: They're calling it the Rocking Chair Rebellion.

Brian: I love it. I love it. Oh my gosh, that's just so great. Melanie, something's going on said here that I want to try to articulate. And I'd love to hear you correct what I'm about to say or affirm it, whatever, nuance it, whatever. But I think a lot of people, when they understand the harm that we human beings have done to the earth and they want to try to help, a lot of us have been told, "Well, then reduce, reuse, recycle," and a whole lot of very individual responsible things. And I am for doing those things, I think those are good things to do, but I think those of us who get more involved realize that we're not going to reduce, reuse, and recycle our way out of this mess we've gotten ourselves into that, that it's going to involve much deeper change, and that change right now involves democracy.

And because it involves voting for politicians who understand our real situation and who will have the courage to educate and to legislate and try to develop policies that will help us improve what needs to be improved as fast as it possibly can because of the short timeframe that we're on. And so involving people in political life, as that 90-year-old who was carrying a picket sign, suddenly we realize that's not just for civil rights anymore, that's the kind of effort that's needed to bring healing to our planet. Did I hit that balance okay, in your opinion? Or would you nuance it a little bit, Melanie?

Melanie: Yeah, I think so. I think that we do have personal responsibility, I'm talking to myself here as much as anyone, to try to heal these divisions that are going on. I am so angry and I'm just taking it out on the "other side," quote, unquote. Sometimes politics is just going to be... It's going to bring out the ugly us, it's going to bring out the anger. And that's not what's

needed. I really feel like this climate, this whole thing is a spiritual problem. It's greed and it's arrogance and it's selfishness and othering of people. And the solution is not going to be more othering, and so I'm just... I think that's a personal responsibility that we all have when we're thinking about even just thinking about it in our hearts but also talking about it.

But otherwise, yeah, I think that that's the system we've got right now. A lot of people don't want to be involved in politics and all because it's broken. It is broken, it's terribly broken, but it's what we've got. It's the only thing we've got. The only levers we've got are Washington and Wall Street, and so that's why Third Act focuses on the financing and the democracy and making sure that more and more people have access to voting instead of less people because there's so many state legislators that are trying to cut access to voting one way or another, particularly in low income and communities of color because they don't like the way they might vote. And so getting engaged in that, you can really make a difference.

And one thing also that Third Act is engaged in right now is public utility commissions that are, they're quasi government. They're different in every state. But they regulate consumer rates, they regulate what energy choices we can make, what mix of energy sources we have; really influential and important. And sometimes they're run by utility companies, sometimes they're run by politicians. And so our folks are getting involved at the local level and saying, "What are you five people doing making these huge decisions? And we want to be a part of it and bring democracy into our energy policy at the local level." Yeah, politics at every level.

Brian: But I really think you knew on something there really, really well, and let me try to restate it. When I said the word politics, what for a lot of people that means is only the electoral shenanigans and political games playing and all the rest, which we have to be involved with because, as you say, it's at risk right now. And we're trying to keep it intact because something even worse could be in place if we aren't vigilant and active.

But you made the comment of Wall Street, not only the White House, but also Wall Street and this sense that our world is increasingly run by a small group of oligarchs with outsized power and influence, and that if we think that affecting traditional politics is going to make all the difference, we don't understand that the world's a little more complicated than that, and that we have to find ways to deal with banks and insurance companies and utility companies and all the rest. And so maybe bigger than the word politics is this word activism, action, loving, healing action in the world. And Debra, you write about this and you're involved also with Third Act, but you're writing about inspiring people to action in the world at this critical moment. I'd love to just hear you reflect on that.

Debra: Yeah. I think one of the things we discovered, at least in this country in 2016 in the aftermath is that citizenship is so much more than voting. And one of the things I really admire about the Youth Climate Movement, maybe unlike some of the fringy things that were going on in the 1960s, the the Peace Movement, which could be full of protest but ineffective in making real change, one of the things that I really appreciate about the Youth Climate Movement now is that these young people are savvy about working the systems and getting smart about how policy is made, as you say, on the local level. It's the utility commissions, it's the zoning boards. And so much of that can happen at the local level. Something like 99% of all elected officials in the United States are local and state, mostly local. It's 1% is that ridiculous theater that happens on the news every night, and yet we obsess about that.

Not that it's not important. The stuff that comes down from the federal level can have a huge impact, as we're seeing with the Inflation Reduction Act. But yeah, the involvement on the small scale and the large scale at the same time is really crucial.

And that's actually true in ecology as well. And this is what I tell young people who are like, "What do I do?" And I say, "Well, first of all, get involved with other people. Don't just be one person." Standard thing. "But do something really practical, really hands-on at the local level."

At Calvin University, we have this initiative called the Plaster Creek Stewards. And they are healing this creek in our watershed, the watershed that Calvin University is in. And my home is in that watershed as well. It's a very polluted creek. It was polluted by industry in the 19th century mostly through gypsum mining. And it has become so toxic that you really shouldn't even touch it with bare skin.

Well, this group on campus has been doing research, education, lots of community partnerships. My colleagues call it reconciliation ecology. It has this deep theological aspect to it as well. This is not just reconciliation between human beings and the creek, the water, but also the sociology, the sociological history that has enabled this kind of thing to happen and the environmental injustice that has come along with this, so this reconciliation is this big picture.

But this is so local. It's like getting down in your knees in a bunch of mud and planting a bunch of native plants. That's how practical it is. But at the same time, we want to do that understanding that this huge transition that we have to undertake as humans all over the globe, it's a huge undertaking. And we're talking about global systems. We can't just let ourselves be overwhelmed by that. The way I talk about it in Christian terms is we have to be in this circle of the resurrected community, Jesus saying, "You are my friends." At Calvin University, we talk about it as preparing students, equipping students to be agents of renewal in the world. It's not like you're running the whole thing, but you're an agent of this big purpose. And it's a purpose of healing, and that has to be expressed in very local, very particular ways.

Brian: That's beautiful. I wish we could double the amount of time we have available. We just have time for me to ask you, Debra, if you could share that beautiful idea of refugia from your book, *Refugia Faith*, and then I'll have a final question for Melanie too.

Debra: Yeah, sure. Thank you for that. Refugia is a biological term. It comes from paleobiology. And it was basically an answer to how did anything survive the ice age? And the answer was because even under huge disturbance, huge situations of disturbance in nature, there are little shelters where things survive. Refugia are these places where biodiversity can retreat to and persist in and maybe expand from under conditions of really extreme disturbance.

Being an English professor, when I first learned about that concept in Kathleen Dean Moore's book, *Great Tide Rising*, I immediately thought what an amazing metaphor for what we should be doing as people of faith in particular, but really everybody, and that is to say, "Find and nurture these life-giving places. Even amid times of huge disturbance, find these very particular places where capacities rebuild, where life renews itself." And I mean

this literally, but also figuratively in culture and spiritual communities. Find those places or make those places. Focus on these small places and let that be our posture, not forgetting that this is a huge global enterprise. But it's always expressed locally.

That concept has just given me a lot of hope and purpose because it makes this huge global things seem more manageable and real for an individual who's not a particular expert and doesn't have... I don't wield massive power in the world, I'm not running Citibank or something, but I can find and create and nurture and join with others to create all kinds of refugia. And the great thing about them is if they work, they spread and they connect and they grow. All of us doing this refugia work have to create these corridors, they're called, in nature, these corridors among us, and that starts to create a network, and that starts to heal whole ecosystem. If we think about this spiritually, culturally, that's what we have to do. We have to keep experimenting even under conditions of low resources or under conditions that seem really bleak. It's that refugia idea that has given me a sense of purpose and hope.

Brian: "By a few surviving another day, it keeps unlimited possibilities alive." As I read that beautiful image in your book, I just kept thinking of Jesus' words, "Wherever two or three of you gather in my name," it's just a little refuge of sanity and love and joy and peace.

Melanie, I want to give you the last word. I want to tell you, I've known you for a long time, and I know you feel a lot of anger about what's going on in the world, as any sane person would. Anger is an absolutely appropriate emotion, but I have experienced you for decades as a joyful person and as a creative person and as a love motivated person. I'd love to just hear in closing some thoughts about how healing the world requires joy and requires love and requires anger, yes, but things that go beyond anger. I'd love to hear from beyond that.

Melanie: Oh, wow. I do believe in some way we're made in God's image. And I just love the idea of the creator creating. And it's so beautiful and so joyful and so effusive. And here's a little change in a feather over here, and here's some phosphorescent algae over here and here's an opposable thumb right here. It's like, "Oh my gosh, this is so fun." And trying to protect that and save as much as we can and build it up, it just feels like a joyful act in itself. And when you get to do that with other people, what could be more fun than just tackling the giant and saying, "Uh-uh. No." You're not going to get away with this. I only have so much time here, but I'm going to use it to make a difference. And can I read it an excerpt from a poem?

Brian: Yes, that would be beautiful.

Melanie: Okay. It's Jack Gilbert, and the poem is called A Brief for the Defense. And this is just an excerpt. "We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight, not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice, the only measure of our attention is to praise the devil."

Brian: Oh. Oh, oh, oh.

Melanie: I know. Perfect, right?

Brian: What beautiful words to close by. I'm so grateful for your time. Thank you so much. Thank

you for the good work you do. I hope others will be inspired to join you and support this good work and that each of us will find in our own little refugia our own work to do as well as linking through those corridors with people around the world. Amen. Amen.

Melanie: Amen. Thank you. Thank you for all you do, Brian.

Debra: Thanks, Brian. Thanks, Melanie. It's been a joy.

Brian: 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 the 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.