

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 6, Episode 7
Seeing Nature as a Doctor (Part 2)

feat. Theresa Martella

Brian: In our last episode of Learning How to See, we talked about seeing nature as a doctor, trying to diagnose and prescribe, come up with a therapy or treatment plan when nature has been wounded by human activity and needs our help now to bring healing. Sometimes the doctor has to get involved in what we might call public health, changing the conditions of how we humans live so that our behaviors stop harming the beloved natural world, as we're doing now.

Today, we're going to meet someone who spent much of her career working in the federal government to bring protection to vulnerable places on the earth, places that have been diagnosed as under threat. Of course, today it feels like the whole world is under threat in so many ways, but I think you're going to benefit from understanding how it's not only scientists and ecologists and conservationists, but it's also people who are involved in government who play a key role in helping us see how precious this world is so we can save it and protect it and love it and cherish it.

When I was a little boy, I remember, especially in the spring and in the summer, whenever our family would take a long drive, especially in the late afternoon or early evening, our windshield would be covered in the remains of little splattered bugs. A couple of years ago, I noticed I just don't see that many bugs anymore. I don't see that many bugs anywhere. I realized that I've lived long enough and the change has happened gradually enough that I didn't even notice that there's been a huge loss in just the biomass of insects around the world.

A lot of scientific studies are being done about this, so it actually can be measured now, and it's staggering. That inability to notice gradual changes, it relates to certain kinds of bias that we've already talked about in this podcast, Learning How to See, but there's a special bias, some people call it baseline bias or constancy bias, that whenever you are born, you set a baseline of what's normal and that becomes a baseline that you have for the rest of your life to make comparisons to.

For children born today, having relatively few bugs on their windshield is their baseline. That is normal and they have no idea how abnormal it really is. That's one of the subjects I'll talk about today with Theresa Martella, who is a scientist and ecologist and environmental specialist who's devoted her life to helping us human beings live in a less destructive, more sustainable, and now more regenerative relationship with the earth.

Welcome, everyone, to this episode of Learning How to See. A lot of people don't know that the word ecology has only been around for roughly 100 years. We didn't have a word for ecology because I don't think we thought about the world as a set of interconnected systems. We had been so busy taking the world apart into pieces that we didn't have much practice putting it back together and seeing it as a whole once again.

I'm so happy that our conversation today is with Theresa Martella, who is an environmental scientist. She spent her career looking, trying to see the world as integrated systems and integrated communities of life. Anyone who looks at the natural world today immediately has to bring their knowledge of ecological crisis and especially climate change to bear on what they see. It tinges so much of our love and joy in experiencing the natural world. It tinges it with a very real grief.

Theresa and I met through The Living School here at the Center for Action and Contemplation, and as soon as we met and I learned about her background, I had the nerve to ask her if she would read the manuscript of the book that I was writing on this subject called *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. I'm so glad she agreed to be my conversation partner today.

Theresa, welcome. Thanks for being part of Learning How to See. Could you give everybody a brief introduction to yourself?

Theresa: Sure. Thank you, Brian. I'm honored to be here. I'm an environmental scientist. I just retired from the Environmental Protection Agency after 36 years. I am a Spiritual Ecologist, and a lot of people will question what does that term mean? For me, it really means a way of seeing where matter and spirit are two sides of the same coin. I started on this path early in the 1990s when I went to Genesis Farms, which was running earth literacy courses based on Thomas Berry's work.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Thomas Berry, he was a cultural historian and also a passionate priest. He has done more, I think, in my lifetime to push forward this idea of spiritual ecology than anyone I know. I was fortunate to study at Genesis Farms and did my master's degree with some of the research based on Genesis Farms, which it is owned by an order of Dominican nuns. They had one of the first community-supported agriculture projects in the United States.

I was just immersed in this idea that what quantum mechanics supports is that we are both matter and spirit, but how to reconcile that as a scientist was a struggle.

Brian: Yes.

Theresa: Yes, very much of a struggle. I went on to be the Director of EPA Center for Sustainability, which was a wonderful time in my career. That program was eliminated after five years because of some new administrations coming in. Then I went on to work as a scientist in the Chesapeake Bay federal program of many partnerships. What we used the term back then was it's the most productive estuary in the United States, one of the most productive in the world, and even that term productive has in its essence extractive, capitalistic, extractive economy terminology.

Then I moved out West in the early 2000s and continued to work on climate change issues. We really, at EPA, especially over the last 10 years, we didn't accomplish a lot because the issue of climate change in America is so politicized. It's not in the rest of the world. I would say that it's the US and Australia that still have issues. That's a whole nother podcast to talk about that. I really felt that I needed people that spoke my language of the deep grief I feel over the state of our world.

And so, I attended The Living School 2021 to 2023 during COVID. I would say what The Living School did was it gave me a language and it gave my soul a way of really feeling the grief, but because I'm grounded in a contemplative practice, it's given me courage. As Richard Rohr, as Father Rohr would say, this idea of this tragic sense of life that he talks about in *Falling Upward*. I think that's so much about what your book is about. How do we stay grounded, joyful at this time and in this era?

Brian: I'm curious, Theresa, when you were a child growing up, did you have a very religious upbringing, and did that stay with you or did that desire to deal with these deeper elements of your work hit later in life?

Theresa: The answer is yes. From a very young age, I felt that I communicated with birds. I think Teilhard puts it this way, where I felt like I was bathed in the atmosphere of love. For me, that love the immanency, the closeness of God, whatever your God language is, nature, higher power. But for me, the imminence, the closeness of God was found in the natural world. I was raised Catholic, very literal child, extremely literal. I think that when I lost my literal faith in my late teens, early 20s, it was so painful.

My mother died when I was in high school, leaving behind three younger siblings, and my father left. My late teens and early 20s were filled with a lot of suffering. I have to say, the loss of my literal Catholic faith was incredibly painful. I had a Spiritual Director, Sister Claire McNichol, who's a sister of Saint Joseph, and she stayed with me during a five-year period and let me deconstruct my Catholic faith. I still am very much of a Catholic and in the Father Bohr way, in the mystical way.

The Living School really gave me language. It gave me my people in a lot of ways. I meet every month with three other women who've attended The Living School over the last 10 years. You talk a lot in your book about how it's a lonely path when you're dealing with climate change, grief. If I could un-see the truth, Brian, I would. I understand. I have compassion for people that don't want to see it, but I can't un-see. That is the reality. I think if I could just mention your book again, it's given me a roadmap on how to help other people because I am finishing a program in Spiritual Direction at Benedict Hill Monastery with Benedict and Nuns.

The beautiful part about being a Spiritual Director, and we can talk more about this later, is that I've been taught to listen with the ear of the heart of God. I mean, think about that, the ear of the heart of God. It really is very freeing in so many ways between The Living School and being a Spiritual Director now. It's giving me a way to have some peace and joy, and I feel freer at this stage of my life and more joyful than ever. I think your book leads us. It provides that roadmap, and I'm very grateful.

Brian: Well, that's so encouraging to hear. Theresa, I'm curious, you were an environmental scientist, so you were involved in environmental concerns probably I'm guessing, before you understood climate change. Is that true? When did climate change start to become first, probably a little part of the picture, but very quickly a very big part of your understanding of our relationship with the environment?

Theresa: I would say the late 80s, early 90s, there was some chatter about it out of our Washington DC EPA office, but it was discounted like, "Oh, how are we going to get people to care about that? How are we..." It was almost denial because the issue was so, so big, and at that time we called it global warming. It was an awakening that came from deep listening, and the deep listening was to the natural world. It was also to the state of our culture and seeing over the last 30 or 40 years, a deep unhappiness in our current culture related to accumulation and exploitation.

I would say that it was about the time that I was studying under Thomas Berry's work in the early 90s. At that time, in 1992, it was a great time of hope in the environmental movement. The United Nations had the first conference on sustainable development, and out of that came several calls for changing the way that we approached environmental protection. The main thing was this concept called sustainable development, which is still used in parts of the world and in UN nomenclature, but it was this idea that our economy, our society, and the environment are all interrelated.

I really felt the truth in that, and I loved running EPA Center for Sustainability. It was just working with incredible nonprofits and local governments. There was just so much hope in there. The other thing that the conference on sustainable development called for was, amongst many things, protection of biodiversity, habitat prevention, and then the idea of the precautionary principle, which always fascinates me. I think a lot of people in America don't know that in the United States, we regulate.

Let me go back for a second. Since World War II, we've introduced about 80,000 synthetic manmade chemicals into the environment, and just a small fraction of those, I would say maybe five to 8,000 of those chemicals have we actually studied for human health and environmental effects. In the European Union, they enforce what they call the precautionary principle where a company has to show that a chemical is safe before it's introduced. You think we're swimming in this atmosphere of manmade chemicals that we don't know in a lot of cases what they're doing, hormone disruption. We know we rate them based on their ability to cause cancer, suspected known carcinogens.

I was amazed that that's how we regulate. I have to say over the years, what hit me was all the environmental regulations that we've passed, and we work so hard, so hard, because you believe in the work. And yet, it became really apparent to me that without changing the story of what it's to be human or as Thomas Berry said, we need to live in mutually enhancing relationships with the earth.

Brian: Yes, beautifully said. Theresa, you use this term to describe your work as a Spiritual Ecologist, and I think that captures some of what we're talking about. The outer ecology reflects our inner ecology. Inside we're driven by greed or fear or whatever it is. That inner ecology gets expressed in the outer world. I'd love to hear you just talk more about how that word Spiritual Ecologist, what it means to you and what it allows you to explain to people about how you see life and how you see the natural world.

Theresa: For me, spiritual ecology, and there's lots of terms and people may bad about what's good about it, what's bad about it, but for me, it's a different way of seeing. Moving through life in a mystical way, mystical in the sense that you are immersed in environment, the environment is you. I think a lot about depression and anxiety in our young people right now, and the inner reflection of what they see happening in the world, in our culture, in our environment is reflected in some of the violence they turn against themselves, which is expressed as depression and anxiety.

For me, spiritual ecology basically helps me be more compassionate with humans, but much more compassionate than maybe a typical person would approach towards the world as we see it. It does give me a grounding, and I think if I could say anything about spiritual ecology, it does give you practical tools too on how do you literally stay grounded in the earth. I'd like to tell this story. When I was in The Living School, there's this saying I think Mike talks about all the time that it's a curriculum of your life will show up when you're in The Living School.

I had a period during The Living School where I had a beloved family member who I had to leave my home in Colorado and go to a cold city in the winter, and this family member was suffering, and I was suffering terribly watching this person suffering. I had no trees around me. I felt the loss of that grounding. I finally went in the middle of winter and I got some pussy willows. Several times a day, I would touch those pussy willows to my face or to my hand as a way of grounding me.

It got me into that present moment, and it showed me I wasn't alone in this world. I think spiritual ecology also, you talk about the book Bittersweet by... Is it Susan Cain?

Brian: Yes.

Theresa: Yes. I was reading her book when I was going through this stage and I thought, oh my gosh. She gets it. She gets it. In some ways, as a Spiritual Ecologist, I'm a melancholic optimistic. It's a deep connection with the world, and you don't have to be in the middle of a national park to be a Spiritual Ecologist. It can be your houseplant. It can be this idea that kind of an I vowel relationship.

Brian: I just think that's a very evocative term. When you talk about being a melancholic optimist and someone who feels is sensitive not only to human pain, but to in some sense the pain of our world under its mistreatment by our species and especially our species, current civilization, the emotions that we begin to grapple with as you and I know are not a small thing. This reality of what people are calling climate grief, which would be a subset of the larger ecological grief as we watch more and more paradises be paved into parking lots and as we watch extinction of species and just the balances that are so sacred and precious and dynamic, be disrupted.

Not just disrupted, but broken. I wonder if you could talk about your own experience of climate grief.

Theresa: It's near and dear to my heart. I'll give a rather dramatic example. We had a family cabin, just a tiny old cabin that was in Northern Colorado outside of Rocky Mountain National Park. In 2013, there was a terrible flood along the entire front range of Colorado. To go and see these landscapes that had... I'd been through hurricanes and other things like that, but this was, the rivers had changed their courses, huge landforms, natural landforms weren't where they once were. It was very dramatic.

Some of our neighbors there were airlifted out by helicopters. I mean, it was something. It took several, like three or four years, for the area to be rebuilt. There was such grief about that, about all of that. I still wanted to live a little bit in denial. I wanted that place where I could go and get away from it all, where I could be with the natural world and not have

to worry about gas-powered lawn mowers and running around my house all day, which is where it seems to be what happened.

Then in 2020, we had the Cameron Peak fire here. The Cameron Peak fire turned into the largest wildfire in Colorado's history and people were evacuated. It was literally in my town, ashes falling. We were told four times that our cabin had burned. And the highs and lows of going through that. This wasn't just like a one-time thing. This lasted for several months, this up and down. After it was all over, and our cabin was still there, I went through a great period of grief of coming to this conclusion that it's not going to get better up there, that these forests are going to continue to burn.

I was angry. I was angry that I couldn't have the life the previous generation before me had where they could go up and enjoy the resource and not worry about all of this. I was angry, I was depressed. You go through those stages of grief. I did come to two conclusions that we're not supposed to be there. And so, we sold the cabin. It was a very hard decision for me. I think what was also sad was I couldn't really tell people couldn't hear the truth of that. They didn't want to hear it. That's the loneliness of climate change grief.

The last thing I want to say, and also there was also this sense of who are we to have a place there? I live in a smaller house now, and this idea of the loss, the loss of those animals, I mean so many moose were killed, and bear, and they've all migrated over. When you see that plume and that fire... I carry a list of your cognitive biases. I carry them because I refer to them all the time. The human mind can't take in this. We've never seen this before, so there's a rejection of the reality of where we are. It's self-protective. That's an example.

The only thing that I can tell you that helped me and what I use in my spiritual direction practice with people that are struggling with climate change grief, is I started getting back into being around barns and being around animals and riding horses. The smell of a horse, the way it appeals to your senses, it's like the Catholic mass. It's great theater. The smell of the incense, the beautiful stained-glass art. It's the same thing with... I immersed myself in the natural world even as I was pulling out as a human.

Brian: Theresa, I think for you and I, who we've been down this road for a while, I think some folks won't understand. I think a lot of folks when they hear about climate change, their first thought is, "Oh, someone will fix it. It's not that bad. Technology will fix it. The government will fix it." Although, I think fewer people have confidence in that because of our politics or it couldn't be that bad, or other people have a theological feeling, God would never let something like that happen.

Others of us see that those forms of thinking can very often increase the likelihood that bad things will happen. There's a way that we, through our biases, we protect ourselves from unpleasant possibilities that actually make the least pleasant possibilities become more likely. There's a whole group of people that don't understand why some of us are so upset. Then there's other people who feel like, yeah, it's hopeless and in a certain way it almost gives some people, not all, but some people permission to just stop caring and to say it's hopeless, and they just sort of think...

The way I say it is it's very easy to go back to your previously scheduled apathy and

complacency, but living in that dynamic tension where we care and we're going to stay in the fight, and yet we also do not underestimate how much trouble we're in the way we're living with the world. As you know, that is a big part of the way I tried to shape the book I wrote about this. You had mentioned that there are a couple of elements from the book that have been especially helpful for you, and I wonder if you could share what a couple of those would be in the few minutes that we have left.

Theresa: In the book, you've divided it into letting go, letting be, letting come. Then the last is setting free. Under each of those sections, there's really different ways of seeing that are not dualistic, that are both/and rather than either/or. You have a section on minding your mind, which I think for me is key. You talk about really learning to speak our mind and also practicing contemplation. The idea of speaking your mind, telling the truth and being authentic, that's hard for me because in some of the circles of my family, extended friendships, people don't want to hear it, they can't hear it.

Bringing compassion into that and understanding and taking an opportunity to also make sure we're couching it in what Hildegard Bingham was saying, even when the world is being shipwrecked, be brave and courageous. I think that's what you call for in your book, that there is great purpose and meaning, and our young people really want to see people that are their elders telling them that it's going to be okay, and not that it's going to be okay because it's not.

The world is going to look very different, but that it's going to be okay in the sense that let's be brave. This gives us purpose, this gives us meaning, and that's where I get to the contemplation. If I did not have a contemplative practice, which I am not perfect at all, but that it helps me... And contemplative practice isn't just like a Christian thing, it's meditation, it can be a walking meditation, it can be all different types of forms of contemplative practices.

That anchors me to the reality and it gets my ego out of what I want it to be because I want to go back to it's going to be okay. We can fix it. Just real quickly too, I just wanted to say another chapter you have in your book is that we're not the first ones here, and it's one of my favorite chapters because in some ways the world has always been ending. What I mean by that is the culture. You can go back to the first century of when the temple was being destroyed by the Romans. That's what revelations is a lot about, that there's an apocalypse coming. You look back to the year 1000 and people thought the world was going to end.

In some ways, it's always been ending, and we have these guides that have lived before us, some of which are still alive, that can guide us through this. I do a ton of reading of those that have come before us to help strengthen me in this path. It can be, and as you talk about in the introduction to your book, it can be a lonely path, and you have to have community, which is what you recommend too. There's different types of community. I think it's the deep forum. I'm going to get this wrong. Let me just look this up.

Brian: Deep adaptation.

Theresa: Deep adaptation. That can be a place for people to go. Michael Dowd, who I loved and passed away this past year, I got to talk to him in the early 90s. For some people, deep

adaptation is not where they can put their head. I choose to focus on the people that have gone before us that talk about courage, equanimity, and then in some ways there's so much joy that can come into your life when you accept the uncertainty.

That's what I deal with both as a scientist and as a Spiritual Director and Spiritual Ecologist, is there's uncertainty. We have models. We have different scenarios, but the truth is none of us know what's going to happen exactly. We know it's not going to be the same, but to live with uncertainty, having a contemplative practice of some type is so crucial.

Brian: So well said. Yeah. When a 1,000-year storm start happening every several years, we begin to get a feel for the sense that the world that we knew is being shaken up. If we don't find a deeper source of stability and virtue and character, and a will to live and a will to beauty, and a will to goodness and a will to truth, if we don't find those things somewhere inside of us, the structures we were depending on will let us down.

I think you and I have both experienced some of that at different points in our lives as we came to a greater understanding of our interconnectedness with this beautiful world, and just how rare and fragile and beautiful the earth is. It's this little layer of life on its skin, so to speak. I always feel a special affinity to people who have spent their careers in the work of trying to protect this earth that is so beautiful and is so sacred.

I just want to say thank you for your work. Thank you for your continuing work as a Spiritual Director, a Spiritual Ecologist, and thank you for your encouragement to me with this book. I think when I sent it to you, you were one of the first people who read the manuscript, and it was very encouraging to hear a person who had your scientific background and spiritual background to find a resonance with what I was seeing and experiencing too. I hope a lot of other folks will feel that listening to you and listening to this conversation, so thank you. Anything you'd like to say in closing?

Theresa: I just would like to just take, if this works, and it may not, I loved your definition of climate change grief in the book. You talk about grief, the feeling of loss. It has 1,000 dimension, this time of doom, grief for the simplicity of the old life before doom moved in. Boy, I got that. Grief for the old normal. We assumed our economy was innocent, benevolent, and sustainable. Grief for the loss of our confidence in politicians, institutions. Grief for the paradises paved up to put up parking lots. Grief for beautiful creatures becoming endangered, were extinct.

Grief for the loss of wild and green places. Grief for our children because of the unstable climate we're leaving them. Grief for what we could have done but didn't. And grief for all the beauty that will be desecrated between this point and the end point. So much grief. With all this, as everything, spiritual is paradoxical. There is hope, and not fake hope, that everything will be okay. It'll be, "We can fix it." I fall into two camps. Sometimes I'm in that we can fix it, and then I fall into the other camp of we're an overshoot and our biological systems camp can't handle our lifestyle, our human way of doing things anymore.

In the end, I have a lot of faith in finding meaning and purpose in the days to come.

Brian: Those of us who cannot just glibly say everything will be okay, and I don't want to disrespect

people who are natural optimists and I'm grateful for them, but people like you and me who feel we have to take these challenges very, very seriously. One of the gifts we bring is that we understand to be a human being doesn't mean we have to be human beings of the kind we currently are. We have other possibilities. There's new ways we could discover of being human beings. That's the opportunity, I think, in these challenging times.

And that's having the courage to go deeper and imagine very different ways of relating to the earth, very different ways of relating to each other, very different conceptions of what real value is, not just measured in things like GDP and growth and bank accounts and so on. That's where people who are able to integrate a deep understanding of the science and a deep understanding of the human soul, the human spirit, human values and meaning, I think will have an important role to play going forward. I'm glad for your partnership in this. Thank you so much for this time.

Theresa: Thank you so much. It's been an honor, Brian.

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. 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. 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. (silence)