

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 6, Episode 10

Seeing Nature as a Gardener (Part 2)

feat. Cassidy Steele Dale

Brian: In our last episode of Learning How to See, we considered how we see nature, this beautiful natural world of which we're part. How we see as gardeners, people tending and caring for the earth.

In today's episode, we're going to continue that theme, but we're going to hear from a futurist who in his studies of the future, has come to the conclusion that there are really only two ways to see the earth, to see our role in this world and to see our future. One is as a warrior or a knight who's out to do battle, and one is as a gardener who's out to nurture life, nurture health, nurture, well-being. So I invite you now as we consider how to see nature, we'll go even deeper in seeing nature as gardeners.

I have a blessing in my life I could wish upon everybody, and that is to have a friend who's a futurist, someone who's a professional, who's done advanced graduate studies in trying to understand how to have foresight when we look at the future. I actually have a few friends in my life who are futurists, and today you're going to get to meet one of them. He describes himself as an optimistic futurist, and that's especially helpful to somebody like me who can be a little bit gloomy and pessimistic sometimes. I'd like to read you something he wrote recently. He said, "Be the calmest person in the room. Be the most stable. Be the quietest at first. Be kind. Be hopeful. Never give up. Make sense. Have a helpful perspective. And have the ingenuity and ideas to get everyone out of the impossible jam. And if you don't, point people toward someone who does."

That is some great advice from a futurist named Cassidy Steele Dale. I'm so glad you'll get to meet him today on Learning How to See.

Welcome everyone. I'm so happy to have an old friend and good friend, Cassidy Steele Dale with us today. Some of you will have heard a conversation I had recently here on Learning How to See with two of my adult children, both of whom are involved, getting their hands into the earth, caring for this earth and relating to the earth as gardeners. One, very gifted vegetable gardener, and the other restoring a patch of prairie on her land in the Midwest.

My friend Cassidy Steele Dale has many, many talents. He has been a professional futurist for about 30 years, and he works for the federal government as a futurist and advisor on religious conflict. But among his other day jobs, he's also a gifted writer. In fact, many of you will really enjoy his substack called Think Future, where he lets you in on how a futurist sees the future and thinks about the future. He also has written what to me is just a brilliant short ebook called The Knight and the Gardener. And if you go to Knightandgardener.com, you can download that for free. It is some combination between a set of wise sayings and a short but very pregnant and brilliant way of seeing the world from two different angles.

Cassidy, anything I said there that wasn't accurate or that you want to add to? Maybe you could tell us anything you'd like us to know about your personal life and background.

Cassidy: Well, Brian, thanks for having me. That pretty well captures it. I live in the D.C. area with my wife and two kids, and if we're lucky, we'll hear them somewhere along the way.

Brian: That's great. That'll be real life. That's good. Cassidy, I don't know if you have time to or are a gardener with your actual physical hands in dirt, but you have used the image of a gardener as a way to see a way of living in the world, a way of seeing the world. I'm interested in this

podcast about different ways to see, learning how to see. And so you present this almost parable of the knight and the gardener, and I wonder if you could give folks an overview about it, and then I'll have a few specific questions to ask you.

Cassidy: Sure. First of all, I keep my yard alive despite my best efforts. That's about as much of a gardener as I actually am in real life. The full title's *The Knight and the Gardener: How Worldviews Make Worlds*. And the idea behind it is that each of us holds particular storylines in our heads about who we are, how the world works, what the future is about, what the future isn't going to be about, and who we are all in this. We're characters in a story of our own devising.

Brian: So give me the two basic worldviews, maybe starting with the knight worldview. Knight being K-N-I-G-H-T, like a knight in shining armor. Tell us about worldview and then maybe use that to help us get an understanding of the gardener worldview.

Cassidy: So Knights or people who hold the Knight perspective in their mind's eye when they understand the world are people who see the world divided into good guys and bad guys. It's a world divided into light and dark. That there's very little gray area. That the problems of the world are. The problems are caused by people, people are to blame, and that heroic people are the ones who oppose the evil. The world is always a place at war. The world is always a place of danger. The world is always a place of right and wrong and very little in between.

People who hold the gardener mindset are people who see the world in terms of growth and change. And so world problems aren't necessarily the cause of good guys and bad guys as much as it is problems that need to be solved or problems and challenges that need to be addressed over time.

So there's more than just these two worldviews in the world, but I only talk about two of them in the book. But which worldview you hold then shapes what you see as heroic behavior, and then that shapes how you handle your love relationships. And then those together shape how you handle conflict situations. And then all of that together shapes, how you approach matters of the soul and how you see God. And so if you remember the old Carl Jung line, "Tell me your image of God, and I will tell you your theology," that's what this is about. It's about the narrative that you hold, the worldview that you hold, shapes how you see the Bible, shapes how you see other people and shapes how you see your family and see everything else.

Brian: So I'm going to guess that some people are born into war-like situations. I think we can think of people in different places in the world who are coming of age now, and it would be natural for them to grow up as knights in that sense. It's hard to imagine them not, but I'm going to guess that some people will grow up, even in those horrible settings, and they won't see the world as knights, they'll see the world as gardeners. And I imagine that some people live in very peaceful settings and they want to see the world as knights and they're not driven to see the world as gardeners. Tell me how you think that sorts out.

Cassidy: Oftentimes you're taught the narrative that you hold. And so you can have a very peaceful life, or if you were raised in a very peaceful setting, and still be very knight-like. So if you

imagine, most fundamentalists, most religious fundamentalists are knights. I mean their theology is set up that way. And so you can have somebody who's never faced any external conflict, but they've been trained to fight internal wars within themselves or to fear different aspects about themselves along the way. So it is a bit relative. You also see it sometimes with people who were raised in abusive environments. So if you think about a family member or a friend that who is a little bit artificially paranoid or seems artificially paranoid, and so what they'll do is they'll wake up every morning and they'll say, "I'm in danger, just like I'm in danger every day, and who's on my side today? Or who can I manipulate to be on my side today?" So it can be a family systems or a family dynamics type of situation.

On the flip side, gardeners are raised in conflict situations all the time and they realize there's no way to outfight, there's no way to win. The only way out is to go through. And so they will make themselves into, or they'll make the situation into something that displaces the conflict or just obviates it, just makes it unnecessary. And they just walk away or they just walk through it. So it really is what is in you and what you have trained yourself to be, the story that you tell, that shapes everything else.

Brian: It strikes me, I guess, this is super obvious to you, but it just hit me in a new way listening to you that if a religion emerged in a time of violence, you can understand how it might then be a knight religion, but if the religion lasts many generations, it's going to last through times of peace. And so then in a sense the religion keeps going, this mindset of us, them, dualistic, oppositional identity and so on. Making us always look for some danger, even if there's a lot less danger there. I mean obviously there's always some base level of danger. And then it strikes me that there could be other communities that train people to see the world as gardeners. And because they're part of that religious community, that would be sustained even through a time of conflict. And of course that's making me think a lot about Jesus and Jesus' message and where Jesus would fit in all this. Anything you'd like to say about that?

Cassidy: Well, Jesus certainly grew up in a time of strife, and began his ministry in a time of strife. And two of Jesus's 12 disciples were reformed terrorists.

Brian: I bet a lot of people haven't heard of that before.

Cassidy: Well, no, but I mean it's Simon the Zealot and Judas. Judas was Sicarii, he was an assassin. The singular of Sicarii is Iscariot.

Brian: So that wasn't his last name? That was his identity, that was the terrorist sect that he belonged to?

Cassidy: That's right. Yeah. So the Sicarii were the Jewish nationalists who weren't spectacularly theologically dogmatic, but they were religiously political or politically religious, and they would sneak up on Roman officials in crowds and stab them to death. So the Sicarii meant the dagger men. And then Simon the Zealots were of course the Jewish fundamentalists of the era and often were very violent. And the very first thing that Jesus does when he calls his disciples is he calls them out of knight world views. He basically says, "What you think is good and what you think is evil is not God's way

and it's not how God sees the world." And so Jesus basically abandons all knight pretense in a knight time.

Brian: He in a sense says to people, I'm inviting you to change your worldview. I don't think that the Knight worldview you inherited and that makes sense to you and that the world that you make sense of the world through is the right way going forward. I want to offer you a different worldview. And would you see that then as essentially a gardener worldview?

Cassidy: Yes, very much so. Even the Seven Sacraments of the church are gardener actions. They are movements that bring people forward. So it's baptism, it's the Eucharist, it's confirmation, it's ordination, it's confession of sins, it's anointing the sick, and it's matrimony. These are all at one-ment or atonement, at one-ment. And they're all gardener actions. They're all gardener moves.

Brian: I hadn't thought of that. If you imagine what Knight sacraments would've been, they would've been very different, wouldn't they? And these involve watering life and celebrating harvest and seeing meaning and harvest and seeing meaning and bringing people together to have, oh my goodness, that's beautiful. That's beautiful.

Cassidy: If Knights had sacraments, they would involve victory. They would involve victory and defeat.

Brian: Yeah.

It strikes me that when I use my eyes and look at our world and I see conflict in so many areas, human violence, it seems like there's an awful lot that can build in us this idea that the only way to survive in this world is by being a Knight. I also think of the way that I was taught about economics, that it was a dog-eat-dog world, and it was a gross misunderstanding of Charles Darwin original idea of survival of the fittest, which meant survival of those that fit best, which you might say survival of those that are the best gardeners because they know how to fit in with each other in a harmonious way. But it became survival of the most aggressive, the most hostile, the fastest, strongest, meanest, most violent.

So it feels like there's so much in our world that sets us up to live as knights, and yet as I look at our environmental crisis, it feels like we've also been knights toward the earth, and we're at this place where if we're going to survive with the earth, we're going to have to, at least in that area, figure out how to be restorers and gardeners and life givers again. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Cassidy: So yeah, knights, if you've heard the terms zero-sum games and non-zero sum games. Zero-sum games are ones in which there are finite resources and can only be winners and losers. So it's the dog-eat-dog type of situations that you just mentioned. But non-zero sum are games that are designed to keep the game going. There aren't competitors per se. And so to misuse Charles Darwin in a different way, zero-sum games are survival of the fittest, they are the only the strong survive type thing, but non-zero sum games, it's the most cooperative people and the most cooperative communities and the most cooperative ecosystems are the ones that survive. So they

are the most fit in that regard.

Brian: Cooperative, adaptable, interrelated, connected. And that starts to be a lesson that somehow we have forgotten in our knight-framed world, we're trying to rediscover those kinds of gardener mentalities.

Now you specialize or have a specialty in understanding the roots of religious violence. And it seems to me it's a cliché, oh, religions are the cause of war. And you and I both know the causes of war are complex, causes of violence are complex, but of course religion gets brought in and very often becomes a knight-oriented enterprise. I'd love to know your thoughts on what it would look like for us to see religion become a gardening venture again.

Cassidy: I have two sets of thoughts on that. The first is, religious conflict always begins with a knight perspective. It's the necessary prerequisite. And if you find yourself falling too far into a knight perspective for too long, that is the beginning of the road to religious conflict. There's no way around it. The second is, I actually tried to deal with the roots of religious conflict in my second e-book, which is called *Combat Theology, How to Weaponize and De-Weaponize a Religion*. And that gets into the four different ways that religious strain can turn toxic and how to undo that process.

Brian: And we'll put a link to *Combat Theology* as well, because I found that such a distillation of a huge amount of reading I've done. You have it in a very distilled and clear form there. I wonder if you could be my advisor for a minute because I wake up every day being aware that we have global emergencies that could lead smoldering or flaming problems that could become even more catastrophic. But I'm also aware that underneath those human conflicts, there is a lack of gardening work, meaning we haven't taught people how to live as gardeners, we haven't taught people how to resolve conflicts before they get out of hand, we haven't taught people how to see through the lies of a con artist or an authoritarian. And so if we aren't doing the gardening work, education is gardening work. If we aren't doing the character building work, that's cultivating work of people's lives, if we aren't doing that work, then of course we're going to have conflicts that. Without that work, conflicts, destructive violent, harmful conflicts are inevitable.

But I'm also aware that every day we wake up with this emergency relating to how we're living with the earth, that we built an economic system that takes more from the earth than the earth can keep giving and pumps out pollutants that the earth can't detoxify fast enough. So we end up changing our earth. And I just sense, wow, we don't have much time to learn and to get going with the work of the gardener. I'm sure you feel that in your own setting and in your own work. I'd love to just hear your thoughts on what you think needs to be done. I'd really be interested what you wish faith communities might take a greater role in doing as well.

Cassidy: So I am an optimistic futurist. Most futurists tend to fall into particular buckets, optimists or pessimists. And we have certainly been in a long time of cynicism and pessimism, and I think that phase is going to end soon. I think that we're going to have a lot better goods and better along the way here shortly. I think that we are toward the sharp end of a bad time and things are going to start looking better here very soon. Because of that, I tend to look for who's working on problems that we're just now marching. So I won't name names here, but

there are folks who are looking at processes, natural processes that can be used to consume plastic, consume waste, de-pollute, to clean up the environment in a lot of ways. And some of those things will buy us some time. So even though we are in a dangerous time, we're not in an emergency time writ large.

And we do need to think about cooperating with the earth on which we sit, on the world on which we live, because it's certainly trying to cooperate with us. We've been part of this ecosystem for millennia and hopefully for millennia to come, but it's been trying to work with us and we're just not reciprocating.

The second part, what can faith communities do? If there's one thing that I could suggest to every pastor in the country who's looking for something to preach on Sunday, it's to look to the universalist passages and the universalist prophets. So in a lot of ways, the Old Testament is a long culture war debate between the Jewish nationalists and the Jewish universalists. The people who believe that it said that God was for us versus God is for everyone. Is God on our side or is God on everyone's side? And different prophets emphasize one or the other. Isaiah is divided unto himself. Which is why you have chapters one through, I think it's one through 40, one through 39 are nationalist and 40 through 55 or Universalist. And that's where Jesus gets his servant leadership model from is euphemistically called Second Isaiah, and then Third Isaiah, which is 56 through 72 is a mix of the two. So I go to the Gospels and then I go to Second Isaiah. But you get past a lot of the division and you get right into everything Gardner all the time by going to the universalists, going to Jesus, going to Second Isaiah, going to the 10 stories in Genesis, some of the Psalms, there's lots to go to.

But if you want to go back to the Bible, that's how to go back to the Bible on this.

Brian: Beautiful. And I mean, just the way you frame that could help a lot of people to say the Bible contains the same argument that we have going on in our culture. It's an argument between knights who have reasons for seeing the world the way they do, and gardeners who have reasons for seeing the world they do. And if you want to identify as a Christian, it's very clear that Jesus took a side in this argument. And that the knights have to see the world in an us-versus-them way. That's the way the world is defined for them. And that the gardeners say, hold it, even if there's an us and a them, they have to breathe the same air and they have to drink the same water and we have to live with the same climate. Suddenly, we're part of a larger reality in which we have to get along and survive and be cultivated in a way to coexist. I think that is a super big help for people to think in that framework.

Anything that you can think of you'd like to offer as a final word, anything else you'd like to offer?

Cassidy: There will always be many wars with us, but there's only one garden. And there only was and there only ever will be. So, get to gardening.

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.