

**LEARNING**

**HOW**

**TO**

**SEE**

with

**Brian**

**McLaren**

Season 6, Episode 11

Seeing Nature as Nature

feat. Felicia Murrell

Brian: In this season of Learning How to See, we have been in conversation about how we see the natural world around us. Ironically, we could have this conversation without realizing that we are part of the natural world of which we speak. Our eyes evolved as part of the evolution of fish, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. Our thinking capacities rely on what sage poet Mary Oliver called the soft animal of the body. In today's episode, we sink into the soft animal of our body by realizing that we are seeing nature as the larger whole or web or kinship or family of which we are apart. We will ease into the reality today that we are nature seeing nature. You'll meet a gifted writer and poet and you'll learn a bit of her story as we explore how waking up to the distinctiveness of one specific thing can be a portal into the connectedness of all things. You'll sense how a move from domination to respectful interaction or conviviality can help us see realities our culture often renders invisible or inconsequential.

I hope you'll feel how seeing nature leads to loving nature and how loving nature leads to preserving rather than exploiting nature. And how in saving nature we are also saving ourselves. Thank you for joining us for this episode of Learning How to See, learning how to see nature. Felicia Murrell grew up in the red clay of North Carolina. She learned to love the earth. She learned to love trees and clouds and rivers and lakes. She learned to love words. She became a writer and a poet, and you'll be hearing some selections of her poetry through today's episode. She's the author of *And: The Restorative Power of Love in an Either/Or World* and will include links in the show notes.

Felicia: The thing is, we've got to feel the pain to heal it, and then we've got to heal. Pain demands we pick a side, but we don't have to. We can choose to side with love and love sees fully. Love is inclusive of both the victim and the perpetrator. In our black and white, right or wrong, polarized society we demand allegiances and then we castigate or accept others based on their loyalty to their ideals instead of loving them for their humanity. We all have the potential within us to do depraved things, wretched man that I am. It doesn't mean our depraved actions define us. It means we need love to deliver us from evil. And sometimes that evil lurks within. When love transforms our heart, our actions align with the truth of our being, and we remember that which we already are. The very good of God's creation, created in the image and likeness of love.

Brian: I'm often asked to read manuscripts of books that are coming out soon. And very often I'll have a huge pile beside my desk and I can't get to them all. One recently that I was sent I was able to pick up I thought maybe too late for anything I would say about it to be of use, but when I picked it up, I couldn't put it down. It just had a beautiful spirit to it, beautiful writing and the feeling that this writer was just pouring her own soul out into the pages and it felt very transparent and very present. And I'm so happy that my guest today is that gifted writer, Felicia Murrell. Felicia, thank you so much for being part of our conversation here today on Learning How to See. I wonder if you could introduce yourself to folks and what would you want them to know about you?

Felicia: Thanks for having me, Brian. I think I'll just simply say I'm Felicia. I'm a spiritual companion and a copy editor by way of vocation. And really the biggest thing about me is that I exist to love. I'm a person whose life was transformed by love and the whole of my being is just to participate in the day-to-day of life as it unfolds in the dance of love really. That's me in a nutshell

Brian: And that's reflected on every page of your book and that's why I think your book *And: The Restorative Power of Love in an Either/Or World* is such a gift. And it's really relevant to the theme for this season of Learning How to See where we're talking about learning how to see the natural world, learning how to see creation, learning how to see this beautiful living planet. And you and I happen to be having this conversation on the first day of Lent 2024. And I came across a poem that you'd written for the beginning of Lent in 2021. And people will be listening to this all different times of the year, but I thought this beautiful poem to begin Lent had so much in common with the theme of this season. I wonder if you could talk about your own experience with the natural world. When did your sensitivity to the natural world develop so that you would write a poem like this for the beginning of Lent?

Felicia: Yeah, that's such a great question. I think it's always been with me in some way or another and it's heightened at times. I grew up in the south, in rural North Carolina. And I grew up in a place that had red dirt and both of my parents have passed on, but my mom used to tell stories of me eating the red clay.

Brian: Yeah.

Felicia: And I am a tree hugger. I feel the ground very deeply and intimately. I have a sense that trees hold our secrets. And when I get burdened with the cares of the world, I often share those with the earth. One of my practices is to go find green space and kneel on the ground. And so I think that that connection to the earth, it made me care about it in a very deep way. I care about the water sources, I care about the land. And I think so often we can just think about ourselves as humans and how things serve us, but I think there's a beautiful invitation in the circle of life to see how we're all joined together. Yeah.

Brian: Yes. The title of your book *And: The Restorative Power of Love in an Either/Or World*, this applies to one of the fundamental challenges I think of our whole human species, our whole human civilization right now. We have thought of human beings in one category and the natural world in another. And in fact, for some of us, our religion even made this worse because the most important thing of human beings was human spirits or souls. And they were so important that everything else was seen as garbage in comparison. All the value or almost all the value is on the human side and almost no value on the natural world side. And that sense that how can we see both mattering and ultimately not seeing both mattering as two separate things, but both mattering as part of the same larger reality. It seems like that's something you just have known from those red dirt hillsides in North Carolina.

Felicia: Well, I think also, at least in my Christian upbringing, there was such an emphasis on dominion and on domination.

Brian: Yeah.

Felicia: And I think when we come into a worldview of dominion, it creates hierarchy and we place ourselves at the top of that hierarchy. And then the land is for our use and for our consumption. And I think about indigenous practices and their care and their reverence and the sacred way they tend the land and hear the land and honor it as a part of themselves, not something separate or outside. You do see the and inside of that. And I think that's an invitation for all of us in that way.

Brian: You and I, as two Americans, one European-American, one African-American, this land holds all kinds of stories that evolve our ancestors. You were just telling me about the background of your last name and how it relates to the land. Could you share that?

Felicia: My last name is Murrell. A lot of people say Morrell because it's spelled with two R's and two L's. But my husband's ancestry can be traced back to Murrell's Inlet in South Carolina, which is a rice plantation where many African-Americans were enslaved working in the rice paddies there. And so when people ask us how to pronounce it, we often say Murrell like pearl because of the closeness in the phonetic sound of that. But I remember taking our boys, we have four children, but this particular incident, I think just the boys was with us and we went there one year, I don't remember if it was summer or spring break, but in the more green seasons. And to be back there in the land to place our feet on land where Doug's ancestors had once labored against their will and been oppressed, there's a sacredness to it. There's a tenderness. And yeah, the land holds so much.

It holds our tears, it holds our blood, it holds our sweat, it holds the stories, it holds for those people that are buried in the land. It holds bodies and bones even, but it holds both that of victims and perpetrators, right? It holds both that of the enslaved and enslavers as well. It holds it all.

Brian: Yes.

Felicia: Yeah. In a way that it's not afraid of what's there, but I just think there's an invitation for us to be with the land, be with the natural world in a different way. I often hear people talk about it without that sense of reverence and sacredness. And I think when we step back from it and we open ourselves to consider it, how we participate in our use and consumption, our carbon footprint, all of those things changes because it becomes not something we dominate or not something that's there for us to consume and waste, but for us to participate with.

Brian: It strikes me that in those two dualisms, one of black and white and in American history and slavery, an enslaved person, and there are so many parallels of different divisions among people that that is paired with this division of human beings and the earth and your use of that word dominion, which in the Bible, I think there are charitable ways to interpret it, but basically it got interpreted in the least charitable way possible. The same domination that humans show over one another, men over women, adults over children, one race over another, one class over another, one political group over another. That's the same attitude that human beings have had to the earth. And that just comes up in your writing so beautifully. And it feels like you have, I mean, all of us struggle in various ways, but when I hear you talk and when I read your words, it feels to me like you have found someplace in your heart to hold that and. Has that been a gradual process or tell me about the process of coming to and in your own life.

Felicia: That's a really great question. I would say it's a gradual process. And I think for me years ago, I have a marked experience that I know began it and it was an invitation.

And I grew up Pentecostal, so spirit speaks, that kind of thing. But I was taking a walk and I really felt this invitation from spirit to hand to God, everything I believe to be true about God's self. And that spirit would hand back to me what was true, right? And the day in saying yes to that invitation, I really thought it would be a one time thing. But it has turned into a lifelong journey of my own homecoming. And it started with invitation from spirit of Felicia, I need you to learn to love your body as much as you love your spirit and your soul. That's up to yoga, to learn how to hear my body, right? The first time I walked by a tree and felt this tree was inviting me to hug it, that all matter matters, that there was a sense of energy that I felt it inside of me.

And Doug even laughed and he was like, just go hug the tree. And I went and embraced the tree, but it was inside of the journey of and, there's this invitation to stop and pause. I think so much of our life in the day-to-day of it, we do a lot of it very unconsciously, not having to be fully present. It's rote, it's just muscle memory. We just wake up, do the things, rinse, repeat. And I think entering into communion with love, with divine love in that way, for me, it caused me to pay more attention, to be fully present. And it started with this one thing, and then it was the next thing, and then it's been the next thing. And then, oh, and I love fashion. And I realized that in scrolling social media, I'm caught up in what influencers are wearing and what they're promoting. But what happens with that is then I am consuming, I'm over consuming, right? And where do those clothes go? Where do those shoes go? How do they affect the landfill?

And not only that, if I'm buying them cheaply, who's making them and what are those people's work conditions and how is the land affected there? And so all of a sudden this invitation to be fully present with love and fully present with myself in a way, I can start hearing questions that when I am unconscious or they're there, we just push them down in the busyness of our day to day or in that muscle memory. But when we sit, I think also the practice of solitude and stillness, the invitations are there. One of the things for me was clouds even. And when people found out we were moving to Minnesota, oh, the weather, oh God is awful, but the clouds make the lakes beautiful in the springs, and oh, dear God. It all works together. And if I piecemeal it or separate it or parse it out, if I don't take the gray clouds and the snow, then I don't get the beauty of spring and summer and it all goes together.

It's not fragmented in that way. And so part of the journey with love is learning to hold this and this together to see the wholeness of it.

Brian: That's a beautiful gift. That's a beautiful gift. And I think when we started this podcast Learning How to See, and we decided this season to talk about learning how to see nature, you've just given us a beautiful example of that. Your comment about being on autopilot through our days so often brings me back to, I lived in the Washington DC area for many years, and DC is famous for many things, but for people who live there, it's really famous for traffic. And-

Felicia: I was born in Washington DC, so yes.

Brian: Yeah, you know. And for people who live in DC, the Beltway, Route 495 where it joins Route 270 is almost always a big traffic jam. And that was true 30 or 40 years ago. And so many, many years ago, I was stuck in traffic there and not with the best attitude. And I was probably running late to begin with and now this made me even more late, and it was fall and I looked and there was an oak tree along the side of the road that was just magnificent. And it was a moment where something broke through my hurry and rush to notice that tree. Well, a special gift that became for me was that whenever I would drive by that intersection, which I would have to do a lot living there, I would notice that tree and that tree became a little reminder to me, even if I was speeding by, it was hardly ever at 55 miles an hour. It might've been at 35.

But even as I was speeding by in winter and spring and summer, I would notice that. It was my reminder to break out of autopilot and stop and stare.

Felicia: Your word, Brian, noticed, right? I think that's the invitation is to notice, because when I started doing mindfulness meditation, one of the things our instructor had us do was to go walking, to walk mindfully and to notice. And I couldn't believe all the things that I had missed in nature because I was either on my phone or in my head on the walk. And I started noticing the rocks or the shape of leaves or the color of flowers or the birds or just different things. And even here in Minnesota, one of our favorite things to do is to be caught off guard by the sunset. And we usually keep our windows open in the living room, and just about the time of the sunset is close to me preparing dinner, and I can be at the stove or at the sink and happen to look up.

And all of a sudden you see the ribbon of color streak across the sky. And now because I've noticed it, I anticipate the beauty of it. I anticipate the invitation to stop and pause and see. And so the mindfulness walking was another journey into seeing the beauty of nature in that way. And I think when we, just like with people, when we see the sacred dignity and the inherent worth and beauty of something, we hold it with a lot more care and tenderness and compassion than we do when we don't notice. Thank you for that word because it's beautiful.

Brian: You've just let out a secret for people who will read your writing and think, how does someone become such a good writer? And it really begins with the noticing. It's that noticing, noticing that beauty and then feeling like you don't want to do it a disservice. That's what makes you stretch your craft, isn't it? You want to honor the beauty that you've witnessed. Well, you do that so beautifully, Felicia. And I want to thank you for this beautiful book that you've written, and I want to thank you for this conversation. I had an experience a few months ago. I don't write much poetry, but I do write song lyrics from time to time. And when I read and heard again a line from a poem that's in your book on page 27 of *And*, it helped me understand something that happened to me with a song lyric.

I wrote a song about, it was a way of expressing my grief for what humans are doing to this beautiful earth. And of course, the reason you try to express it is you hope it might nudge people toward a change of heart. And so I wrote this song from the vantage point of birds and trees and fish who are suffering. And so the title of the song is *Maybe When We're Gone, Maybe Then They'll See*. And I had been working on the song, I cared about it a lot, but I just wasn't completely satisfied with it. I realized one day why, and I wrote a little

bridge in the song where I then have the natural world say, may they be forgiven for they know not what they do. And what I realized was the natural world is forgiving and it wants to re-embrace us human beings back into the world. It doesn't want to hate us and punish us. The natural world welcomes participants who know how to honor the beauty and fit in.

And that line in that passage that you shared with us where you talked about the victim and the perpetrator and the and that joins them in something bigger, I just want to thank you for that line. It speaks to me about this large reality we're dealing with now, and of course it relates to so many on so many levels. Thank you for that line.

Felicia: Thank you, and thank you for sharing that. The bridge, when you were saying it made me think of the biblical narrative where it talks about how creation is groaning for the sons of God to be revealed, waiting to be revealed. And often in my church paradigm, again that was about becoming a history maker or a world changer or taking my place on this grand platform, but in the way that you mention it in the song, and when your paradigm shifts from a domination kind of paradigm or power over to power with, right? If we are revealed as the sons of God, then there's a responsibility and a partnership and a participation with creation, a care for creation, and not the domination and usury and destruction of it. I love that. Thank you.

Brian: Well, thank you for your poetry and your words and for helping all of us feel a little bit better today. Thank you.

Felicia: Very welcome, Brian. Thank you.

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.