

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 7, Episode 3

Seeing Nature as a Mystic

feat. Douglas Christie

Brian McLaren: Like a lot of people, I've had a few careers in my life. The first was as a college English teacher and then I became a pastor. And while I was a pastor, I became interested in the intersection between theology and ecology. I realized that a certain kind of theology had given people a kind of carte blanche to destroy the Earth in the name of God and religion, for profit and pleasure, and a feeling that they had a permission slip from God to do whatever they wanted to the Earth.

That theology, I realized, was deeply rooted in the Christian faith, and I felt an obligation as a pastor to face that ugly theology. And I felt that if we were going to find a better way forward, we needed to find a better theology to fuel it and justify it and energize it.

I found out that one of my former colleagues at the University of Maryland, where I had previously taught, was also a committed Christian and deeply involved in these very areas. And I had a friend who knew him and that friend made an introduction.

It was an afternoon, I'll never forget, the first afternoon I spent with Herman Daly. Now, if you've never heard of Herman Daly, you could look his name up and you'd find so many books that he's written. The one that had won my heart was a book he co-wrote with a theologian named John Cobb, that was called *For the Common Good*. And then I read a book of his called *Beyond Growth* and many other books.

Herman is known as the Father of Ecological Economics, and he would kind of mock that title because he'd say, "Economists are so arrogant. They think that ecology is a branch of the field of economics, when the truth is economics happens within the ecological systems of the Earth." And I've been so intrigued with the power of economics to dominate our thinking. And I've realized that if we want to be liberated from bad theology, we also need to be liberated from bad economics, economics that justifies the exploitation and destruction of this beautiful Earth.

The Father of Ecological Economics is quite a mantle to bear. Today's guest has an equally fascinating title that's often given to him. Douglas E. Christie is understood and introduced as a Scholar of Contemplation and a Scholar of Contemplative Ecology.

To say that how we see the Earth is a special way of contemplating. And seeing the Earth ecologically affects the way we contemplate and affects the way we do ecology. I wonder if we are ready in this conversation to allow ourselves to be affected by someone who is a scholar of contemplation and a scholar of ecology and a scholar seeking to put them together.

In a previous episode, we read a beautiful passage from William Wordsworth's poem, *Tintern Abbey*. And in an interview our guest today, Douglas Christie, referred to that very poem. He said, "I have come to think of contemplation as a way of seeing deeply into the life of things." This is an idea found in William Wordsworth's work. And he then goes on to say, "But it also is rooted in Christian ideas of contemplation."

To see deeply into the life of things, to develop an ecology, a way of understanding the Earth's system, so that we can preserve them rather than exploit and destabilize them. So that we can honor them and fit into them rather than try to control them for our own profit and benefit. This is deep and important work in this time. And so I invite you to join me in opening ourselves to some wisdom from I think the Father and Founder of Contemplative

Ecology in today's episode of Learning How to See.

Welcome everyone to this episode of Learning How to See. This is an episode I've been looking forward to. I'm so grateful that we have Douglas, E. Christie with us. There are not too many people who can be introduced as a leading or the leading scholar of contemplation and contemplative studies.

So for someone like me working with an organization like Center for Action and Contemplation, it's a great honor to have Douglas with us. And, Douglas, I wonder how would you like to introduce yourself to these folks, many of whom will not be familiar with your work yet?

Douglas Christi...: So I'm somebody who found my way into the study of contemplation or the traditions of contemplation through some very strong experiences early in my life. And that included experiences in the natural world, but also encounters with monasteries and monastic communities. And it touched something deep within me and it led me into a lifetime of reading and reflection that also turned into a form of scholarship and writing.

But the whole thing proceeded from an experience of wonder and amazement, and kind of a sense of being drawn into a tradition rooted in silence and solitude and stillness. And this remains important to me all these years later, my relationships with certain communities, my own sense of what it is to practice. And so there's a thread from early experiences all the way through to a lifetime of reading and reflection, which for me is part of what it means to practice.

Brian McLaren: Thank you. You're a professor at Loyola Marymount University and you have written some wonderful books. My introduction to you came from this beautiful book, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*. When I read this, this felt to me like a person's magnum opus, but you continue to write more of them. And your newest book, it's called *The Insurmountable Darkness of Love*, and both of these books are deeply relevant to me and my own life, I'll just say.

And to this season of this podcast, Learning How to See, I sensed from an interview I read out with you, Douglas, when you were asked to define contemplation. You referred to William Wordsworth and his phrase, "to see into the life of things." That line from that poem was one of my introductions to contemplation when I was an undergraduate in university.

Yet here this thing of contemplation is a body of work that deserves scholarship. This study of an experience that often involves silence and the withdrawal from words, the ability to, in some ways, still the flow and chatter of words, it requires us to use words to talk about it, and now has an academic discipline.

And something I've wanted to ask you about just for myself, I'm noticing that the term contemplative as an adjective for fields of study is being used. Obviously contemplative ecology is a main subject we'd like to talk about today, but there's contemplative education and contemplative spirituality. And I'd love to hear what you see as a person on the front row observing an academic field of contemplation that now it's becoming an adjective to help us see other things. Does that question make sense?

Douglas Christi...: Yes, yes, absolutely. Academia is sometimes behind the curve a little bit, not in a bad way, but it's sometimes catching up to something that's already alive in the culture or in the world. And if you say traditions of contemplative practice in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, any of the great traditions, and then also other forms of tradition arising from esoteric practices and so forth, these have been around forever and people have been reflecting on them forever.

Maybe more within the tradition than something we've become accustomed to in the 20th and 21st centuries, which is standing a little bit apart and offering a critical take. But that's what academic scholarship brings to the table. And so the emergence of a field of contemplative studies, which has now happened in I would say the last 20, 25 years or so, it has a place at the table at the American Academy of Religion.

Which is usually a way of saying, "Okay, we really exist. We have an approach, a disciplinary integrity and so forth." So there's a Journal of Contemplative studies that's published out of University of Virginia. And so this suggests that contemplative studies as a way of thinking about religious experience, has really begun to mature.

Now to ask about what that field is doing and what kind of work it's undertaking would be even a longer conversation. But it is fascinating that it has emerged and it is emerging. And I think it's important and it says something about what we're trying to understand about a particular dimension of spiritual experience that is commonly identified as contemplative.

And that doesn't mean the same thing in all these traditions, it doesn't mean that those who study it are all talking about the same thing. But it does signal that there's something important and necessary in a distinctively contemplative orientation that is catching the attention of scholars. And often it's sending them back into particular traditions to ask about this form of practice, this form of meditation, this form of thought. And it seems to me to be a great and wonderful thing that it's happening. Yeah.

Brian McLaren: Tell me if this would ring true with you. It feels like the kind of modern project, what we've been involved with in the intellectual world of the academy for the last few hundred years since the Enlightenment especially, has been really specializing in analysis. Taking big things apart into smaller and smaller pieces, feeling that we can understand the whole by understanding the pieces. And taking long-term things apart, tracing them back farther and farther through history to some original causes. And we feel we understand them when we have traced them back to their causes.

And it seems to me part of what's happened in recent decades is we've realized there are real limitations to that thinking. And that kind of thinking can solve a lot of problems, but it also can create a lot of problems. And it feels there's almost this sense we need new ways of thinking. And this contemplative field is inviting us into traditions that were often associated with literature as well as philosophy, that now are presenting us new resources. Would that ring true for you?

Douglas Christi...: I think so. And also, I mean this conversation about objective truth so to speak, has been unfolding for a long time now. And I think it's been called into question by many different fields. So to say that we're firmly in a post-enlightenment, post-modern moment I think is kind of clear to many people.

And yet some of the residual effects of the Enlightenment, especially a kind of distancing of the subject from the matter that he or she is investigating, which has been a good thing in many, many fields, this objective distance. So you can listen carefully and maybe there's even something contemplative in that if we look at it in the right way. But there is this awareness that our own subjective involvement, or a growing awareness, that it's fundamental and it's necessary for anything we hope to know. And that includes the risk that we undertake to try to know about anything.

And this has been fundamental to contemplative traditions since the very beginning, the sense of risk and even danger that comes from opening yourself to this immensity. And there is a moment for objective distancing and for learning how to read texts in a thoughtful, critical, respectful way. Of course that's necessary and important.

And I would say that if we never get past that critical apprehension of reality, we fall short of something that has always been important to contemporary Christians, which is immersion and kind of a wild transformation of the self in this larger reality. And I think that's something of what we're hoping to recover in this time that we're living through now.

Brian McLaren: Well, that really takes us where I would like to go more specifically in this conversation, Douglas. I've just written a book on our current multi-crisis or poly-crisis. The title is *Life After Doom, Wisdom and Courage in a World Falling Apart*.

And what many of us are experiencing is this sense when we allow ourselves to really try to see what's there, fidelity to reality as it's been put, we just start to feel how much trouble we're in, in our relationship with the Earth and how much damage has been done. And we start to feel deep, deep grief over that reality.

And I feel that behind so much of what you write in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, I felt it very much when I got to page 70 in a chapter called *Penthos, The Gift of Tears*. You write, "Grief over losses in the natural world has become a common part of our personal and collective emotional landscape. At the same time, the very depth and extent of these losses has produced for many a kind of psychic numbing, resulting in an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge or respond to this loss lest it completely overwhelm and perhaps debilitate us. There is too much to grieve."

As you know, probably intensely since the writing of your book, more and more people are experiencing a kind of psychological, emotional, spiritual overwhelm. Where the grief that they feel and the concern and anxiety they feel as they face the realities of our ecological situation, just pull them into places they've never been before. Places where maybe they need some of those contemplative capacities to try to regain centering and grounding.

I would love to just hear you talk about that reality of ecological grief in a situation

that we're really in, that I'm sure is behind so much of your work.

Douglas Christi...: Well, thank you for the question. I could feel myself as you were talking kind of dropping down into a deeper place of feeling in myself. And because you're naming, this is a funny part of our conversation, you're naming it and then you're reading a place where I'm naming it to me.

But often we go through our days and we have developed various coping mechanisms for, I mean, I don't want to say just getting through our days, but moving through our days with some degree of openness and delight and joy and attention to others. And living the way we wish to live, which is not closed off.

And at the same time, I suppose it's true that we learned to bracket elements of reality that are just perhaps too much to take in. And maybe we don't bracket them completely, maybe they seep in from time to time. Or we encounter something in the world or we read about something and we're reminded again that this is also part of our shared reality. And I think it's normal and probably necessary that we protect ourselves to some degree from the sense of being completely overwhelmed.

At the same time, if we can't allow ourselves to feel these things, we're going to be in even greater trouble than we are already. And so I think it's a moment we're living through, all of us, where both personally and collectively, and in conversation with those who we know to be part of our community, we're constantly checking in on this. To see how we ourselves are doing, to see how others we know are doing. Trying to keep the space open for honest, intimate exchange.

And some of that exchange is going to be a sense of shared loss. It's bound to be. And I think that's a good thing actually, that we do this and that we don't shy away from it. I'm really persuaded that, just as in the same way that we share personal losses. When someone beloved to us passes away and friends family gather, and we don't try to pretend that nothing's happened or that it's all fine, we descend into a shared grief, we hold one another, we cry. We remember how much we love and cherish one another.

And I think these moments can rekindle our feeling for life and our commitment to life. And it doesn't necessarily mean that out of that experience of shared grief comes this or that project of direct action or political action or any number of things. Although it can inform that, I'm convinced of that. But we return to our basic humanity.

We recover a sense that we're part of a larger reality. That these losses touch us because we know that we're involved deeply in this world that has given us life and that it matters to us. And if that grieving can help open us day by day to our own sense of our participation in life, then it's going to help us.

It's going to help us not grow numb and not give into despair. And we're probably going to find in the years ahead, that shared grieving is part of what we do, and we could probably do with more of it, if we're being honest. And I don't think it's the same as giving into despair, it's sharing in our love for the world.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, as you say that, it reminds me of the blues. When you go to a blues concert or

you're a blues singer, you feel better because you acknowledge the pain in some way. And it helps you bear the pain by having a place where you can gripe about it and complain about it and feel it and mourn it. And yeah.

You said that so beautifully at the end of that chapter, I mentioned earlier, I'll just read a couple of sentences again because I think they're so beautifully said. "In the ancient monastic tradition, the gift of tears was seen as crucial to healing the self and the world. Can such a spiritual practice have meaning for us in an age of ecological degradation as we struggle to come to terms with losses so deep and extensive that we can barely acknowledge them, much less absorb them into our conscious lives or act in response to them?"

Where would you imagine those kinds of coming together for especially grief, ecological grief? Would you imagine that churches developing liturgies for this? Or universities? Or I'd love to hear if you have any thoughts on that.

Douglas Christi...: I mean, it's interesting just to speak to the Christian tradition for a moment. And we draw upon deep, deep traditions of grieving and mourning in the Jewish tradition, of course.

We have this language in our traditions, we have it in the Psalms, we have it in our liturgical life. I know not every Christian denomination approaches liturgy in the same way, but there are great and beautiful liturgical forms that invite us to grieve in this way. Most of the time we call upon these forms in funeral settings, in relation to the loss of a particular human being, and this is right and good.

I'm not sure we've explored enough. And I think *Laudato si'*, just to take one example, I think encourages us, or exhorts us to go deeper and further and to draw upon these traditions in a way that acknowledges other kinds of losses.

There are Earth liturgies that have emerged in the last 20, 30, 40 years and people are experimenting with this. So we have the resources in our own faith traditions that I think we should maybe acknowledge and be more creative about. And I don't think anybody who's in the position of pastoral leadership would find it such a hard sell to a community to say, "This work that we do that's part of our faith tradition can be opened out and expanded to include the entire living world."

There've been various bogeymen that we've had to fight against. Is this pantheism? Is this nature worship? It's Christianity, it's the incarnation. And I don't say that glibly. I just mean that we can claim this and stand in it without any embarrassment or shame. This is Christianity. And it helps to have documents like *Laudato si'*, but *Laudato si'* itself just it sends us back into the tradition, not just Saint Francis, but other figures and back into scripture.

And so we have these resources, we can do this. I've witnessed it myself at times. I will also say that I've been in other settings, I don't like to use the word secular so much like the sacred and the secular, because it feels too sharply defined. But gatherings where there's no common shared faith tradition. It might be scholars gathering to reflect on the natural world or nature writers or poets.

Or it might be a moment, I think I described this in *Blue Sapphire up in the Headwaters*

Forest, Northern California, where there's a gathering to resist the ongoing clear-cutting. Well, sometimes in these situations you notice that grief arises up of its own accord. And sometimes this leads to a kind of improvised spiritual practice that perhaps would take a lot of careful examination to say, "Well, what is that exactly? Is that a Jewish or Christian or Muslim practice?" It might not be any of them, but it's a deep heartfelt response to the sacred and to the desecration of our world.

And so I find that really encouraging that we can gather across and between traditions. And maybe not even naming precisely what it is that we're saying in our grief, but grieving together and expressing our love for the world together. And so we have this capacity. And I've seen it in different forms in different places. And sometimes it needs to remain implicit because the shared language isn't there. So we stand with one another and profess our faith silently, but we can do this. We can do this work.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, as you were just saying that, I was thinking there's a songwriter I've enjoyed for many years named Bruce Cockburn. And he has a song called The Beautiful Creatures, and the refrain is the beautiful creatures are passing away, passing away. And in his concerts when he sings that song, I'm thinking that song itself creates artistic space for a sharing of the kind of grief.

And so I could imagine at a gathering of scientists for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there are moments in a scientific proceeding when people, even if it's just in between the lines of a lecture, are probably processing and sharing that grief together. And I'm going to guess even in our conversation, as some people are listening, they maybe are being given permission.

They've been feeling they've had this huge wall of grief like a tsunami coming toward them, and they don't know how to process it. They've been pushing it away. But I think even just hearing us talk about it might help people see, "No, you're not alone. There's nothing wrong with you for feeling this. This is your sensitivity and connection and honesty." And there are a whole lot of us feeling this.

Learning How to See will be back in a moment.

Douglas Christi...: It's a form of spiritual practice. We don't sometimes allow ourselves to realize that we're overcome with feeling and something's welling up from the depths of our being. And the desert monks understood this to be the touch of God in us and the breaking open of our hearts.

And we sometimes understandably think of it as, "Well, I'm losing it." And in a way, it's true. That's what's happening. You're losing it. But you're also losing your guardedness and you're recovering your tender heart. And that's painful, but it's so important.

Brian McLaren: This I think is especially important for people who are interested in contemplation because I think there's a whole approach to contemplation that is about a search for serenity and inner peace. I want to detach from the world that causes me anxiety and enter into a beautiful quiet stillness at the center of things where I will feel at one with God and the universe and all of my problems will melt away.

But something I appreciate in your writing is you are saying no, that's not even historically accurate to the tradition. Well, I love how you said it, that we speak of the dark night of the soul, but there also is a dark night of the world. And I'd love to just hear you reflect on that dimension of contemplation that actually brings us to feeling the pain of this Earth and our fellow creatures.

Douglas Christi...: It's not very easy to talk about this. And yeah, it's just kind of, I'm pausing for a moment here, just to make sure that I avoid rushing into the space that you've opened up so beautifully. I think that what many of us discover in our own experiences is that there are moments or maybe even whole seasons when the lights seem to go out. And we have many ways of thinking about this.

And in our own time, the language of depression often comes to the fore and rightly so. And then there are ways to respond to that with different forms of therapy. And this is also, of course, a wonderful thing to help us, I don't necessarily want to say get through it. It's a little bit of getting through it, but it's coming to terms with it. It's coming to know ourselves and also maybe at the deepest level, recognizing that some of the things that are affecting us are much larger than ourselves. And that there are some good reasons why we don't feel so great all the time.

And I noticed that it's really been interesting working with young people these last 15, 20 years or so. And it's been noticeable and people have begun to document this in different ways, the heightened level of anxiety and fear and worry for the future.

And oftentimes when we respond to studies that emerge or our own anecdotal encounters with this heightened level of anxiety that we experience among young people, we respond to it on an individual and personal level, which is good. We're trying to see the person in front of us.

But we don't take seriously enough, I think, the weight of what they're carrying and what they've been given to live through and what the world has given them. And of course the world has given them life and beauty and joy, but it's also given them unimaginable violence and other kind of crushing realities that they're somehow being asked to carry.

And so I say all this to say that we have these traditions of darkness, spiritual darkness, mystical darkness, the dark night of the soul. These are powerful traditions of inviting us to think about what happens to us when we lose our way, when we do find ourselves in the dark.

And it's probably important to distinguish there are important writers like Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Denisius, for whom the language of darkness is primarily serving to remind us of the great and wonderful un-knowability of God, or at least that we can't completely know God. So it's a way of protecting God's transcendence or divinity. Or reminding us that there's a dimension of our experience that as we draw closer to God, where we're going to enter into incomprehensibility and unknowing.

And this is again, as with tears and grief, this is understood as something profound and important and necessary. It's not a negative experience. It's a deepening of experience. And I

would say that when we read these traditions today through our own experience, I think it's hard to avoid bringing with us into that experience, some of the darkness that we experience that doesn't feel on the face of it as if it has some particular spiritual meaning.

It's an emptying out of meaning. It's a grotesque loss of life and community, and I don't think we're invited to give it a spiritual meaning. This is what it really means, or God's providential love is guiding us toward the fullness of all life. We sometimes don't feel like we know that and we can't affirm it. And so the darkness that we feel sometimes is a darkness of this emptying out of meaning, and a sense that it all makes sense or it can make sense even theologically or in prayer.

And I think something that I don't really feel confident enough to say, "Oh, this is the way we should proceed." Because it's another form of unknowing that I'm wrestling with myself. But I think there might be an invitation to us in our own time to honor that unknowing that we feel and experience in our lives. And maybe we need to grieve that a little bit as well.

But it can also, I think, open us up to a deeper sort of honesty in our spiritual practice. That this is where we find ourselves. And there are others in our tradition who have traveled this way and who are ready to accompany us and encourage us even if they didn't themselves know where they were going. And that this is another form of spiritual practice. Not knowing where you're going. And again, I think it has potential for helping us in our communal life that we share this unknowing.

And so rather than feeling that, as sometimes it's characterized, that this is an emptying out of faith. If you find yourself in a place of unknowing, it means your faith isn't strong or you've lost faith. There's another tradition here that suggests something very, very different. This is another way of living out your faith in darkness, in unknowing, in absence, in the desert.

I don't pretend for a moment that this path is easy to walk. It isn't. But many, many of our brothers and sisters have walked this way before us. And I think there's some comfort to be found in seeking their company. And then maybe voicing to one another our own sense of lost-ness. And allowing that to come into our shared life.

And holding one another close in that sense of shared lost-ness. And knowing that we have one another, that there may be a path toward finding God at the center of our existence in this way of unknowing. I think it's profound and necessary in our own time to rediscover these traditions.

Brian McLaren: Well, thank you so much for that. I think you took us there in not only what you said, but the way you said it. I'm feeling at this moment, Douglas, that in our current ecological crisis, what Thomas Berry said is our need for a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship.

I think we have certain people who are doing really important work. They're figuring out how to make cheaper solar panels. And they're studying the collapse of glaciers so that we can better understand what's going on. And they're improving battery technology. And they're fighting political battles that are very, very difficult. And there's all of these very

practical things.

And yet at the same time, I think we have a sense that if we don't go through some kind of deep spiritual transformation in the way we see the Earth, and in the way we understand ourselves related to the Earth. And the way we feel our connection to the cosmos, that some number of us have to get there, it seems to me to help us get through.

And this feels to me like so much of what I experience in your writing. You're trying to help us mine from these ancient sources, resources that can help us. They then become matters of, they really help us make it through and they help us survive.

So I want to thank you so much for your body of work. And I'm so happy to be able to introduce other people who may not be aware of it, to your body of work. And I very personally want to thank you too because you've kind of helped me stay in the struggle. So thank you so much.

Douglas Christi...: Thank you. Thank you. And thank you for this very warm, rich, openhearted conversation. I appreciate it very much.

Brian McLaren: Thank you, Douglas.

We hope that this season of Learning How to See will inspire you to vote wisely. To walk upon this Earth more gently and to speak up with grace and clarity whenever you can about our need for a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship. We hope you'll become part of the growing movement of people who are exploring and embodying that new relationship.

I believe this is holy work, sacred work, God's work, and is part of what Jesus meant when he spoke of the kingdom of God. If you'd like to learn more about why I care so deeply about our theme for this season of Learning How to See, I hope you'll check out my new book, Life After Doom. And also my book, The Galapagos Islands, A Spiritual Journey.

Sincere thanks to our guest today, Douglas E. Christie. As you could tell from our conversation, I have not only found his work to be intellectually stimulating and informative, but I've also been helped personally through his work. You'll find links in the show notes.

Big thanks as always to Corey Wayne and Dorothy Abrams who produced Learning How to See. Thanks to April Stace for her musical support and to Sound On for their post-production support. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation, for making Learning How to See possible. Thanks to you for your interest and investment of time. And thanks for sharing Learning How to See with others if you find it meaningful.

If you would like to share some way that this podcast has been meaningful and helpful to you, you can email us at podcasts at CAC.org, or by leaving a voicemail at CAC.org/voicemail. We need your responses to be brief, about 175 words in writing, or under a minute spoken.

As a parting moment of shared contemplation, I would like to read the closing paragraph

from Douglas Christie's article, *Christian Contemplative Thought and Practice in the Contemporary World*. "The sense of being lost in the darkness or of wandering through a desert without a clear sense of the way forward is increasingly common in the writings of Christian contemplatives. Here one finds a growing conviction that to practice contemplation is to open oneself to a continuous deepening of awareness that transforms one's relationship to everyone and everything."

"In his recent encyclical on the Environment, *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis makes a plea for just this kind of deepening awareness as a key to our common work. "Our goal," he says, "is to become painfully aware. To dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering, and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."

"This is what it means to become a contemplative inaction, to dwell deeply in the desert, ever mindful of the sustaining presence of God, while also remaining mindful in every moment of one's responsibility to love and care for the other."