

LEARNING

HOW

TO

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

Season 7, Episode 4

Seeing Nature as a Theologian

feat. Mary Evelyn Tucker

Brian McLaren: I was brought up in a Christian environment and I was exposed to many, many theologians, both from Christian history, past centuries, and then in the 20th century in which I grew up. And I look back now and I realize that my theological tradition focused on a few theologians who we liked and celebrated. And we studiously ignored, we were completely ignorant of, or we didn't think they were worth mentioning, another whole long list of theologians. And what's happened to me in my life, later in my life is that I've discovered many of those theologians that we were taught to avoid and they've become so important in my own life and thought and spirituality.

One of them was a Catholic priest and theologian, although he didn't call himself a theologian, his name was Father Thomas Berry. And he preferred to call himself a geologian because he felt that a theology of God must be integrated with a deep reverence for the earth. So he mashed those words of theology and geology together and described himself as a geologian, seeing the sacredness of the earth.

And he saw the crisis of how we treat and live with the earth as the greatest crisis of our time. And he felt that any theology that didn't address this most existential of all of our crises was a theology that was, in many ways, not only wasting our time, but distracting us from what we really needed to pay attention to.

I want to read you a sentence from Thomas Berry. The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for the survival demands of a present situation. Now, what he's saying is that we all have a story, a cosmic story in which we situate ourselves, a story of what's going on in the world, what's the world about, what's life about, what are we about? And sometimes, he says the story that we were told, the story that shaped us, that gave us identity and a sense of purpose, sometimes that story doesn't help us survive. In fact, sometimes that story can hinder our chances of survival. So Father Thomas Berry, in the 20th century, devoted himself to trying to tell a new story.

Now, in earlier season of Learning How to See, you might remember we looked at seven stories that can frame our lives. Six that create conflict by casting us as actors or characters who are in competition with one another, who are enemies of one another, and then one story that leads to harmony by casting us in the play or in the drama or in the story as siblings and neighbors and collaborators who have to discover each other and understand each other and work together for the common good. And in many ways, what Thomas Berry was about was that seventh story, helping us find a story that not only helps us get along with each other, but in an even deeper way, helps us understand our place in the cosmos, our place in this amazing solar system, our place on this planet spinning around its axis and going around the sun as the sun itself spins around the edge of this galaxy. These cosmic stories were the focus of Thomas Berry's life and work. He believed that without a new and better story, we would not survive.

Today, we're going to have a conversation with someone who was a student of Thomas Berry, who knew him and has taken that work of telling a new story to new dimensions, has, in many ways, expanded upon and strengthened and popularized Thomas Berry's seminal work from the last century. And as you listen to Mary Evelyn Tucker, I hope you will find yourself being intrigued and drawn into a bigger and better story that can help us meet the survival demands of our present situation. I'm so glad that she and you can be part of this episode

of Learning How to See, learning how to see like a theologian who is a storyteller, who is helping situate us in this amazing unfolding story of creation.

Welcome, Mary Evelyn Tucker, to Learning How to See. I'm really happy you could be part of this, thank you for saying yes. There is so much that we could say in introducing you. And on our show notes, we'll have all kinds of links to your amazing and varied work. How do you like to introduce yourself?

Mary Evelyn: Well, first of all, it's a great honor to be here and delighted to be in conversation with you, Brian. And I guess I would say I'm a student of Thomas Berry's, who's great inspiration for our life in Teilhard de Chardin. And I've been fortunate to be working in that stream of their ideas for many, many years, and we'll discuss some of them here.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Okay, very good. And I'll just tell you a personal connection. Many, many years ago, I think shortly after it came out, I read Journey of the Universe and we'll talk about why that work is so significant. And my wife read it and has read it again and again and again and again. It has become a kind of spiritual sacred text in a certain sense for her. And I know for many people, and I know that that is part of the story behind the book, but that is jumping ahead of ourselves. You mentioned that you were a student of Thomas Berry, and could you give just a brief introduction for people of that amazing figure, who many people have still never heard of?

Mary Evelyn: Right. And both Teilhard and Thomas, of course, were very influential in the formation of Journey of the Universe. Teilhard had this sense, we need a deep time story of evolution, but Thomas Berry said, "We need to put that in the form of story. We need a new story." So his inspiration for us was that sense that our world is, as we know, even more now in chaos, in uncertainty, in challenges.

So he put before us, as graduate students, even at Fordham University, I met him in 1975. So all these years, he was very aware of the environmental crisis and he inspired us in this large sense of a new cosmology. And the other thing he did was he taught the world's religions at Fordham University, it's one of the greatest programs in the country, frankly. And people came from Yale and Harvard to study with him. So he was a cultural historian who knew the world's religions, west, Asia, indigenous, and his library of 10,000 books was like this waterfall of information and inspiration. So he inspired us both in the religion and ecology work and in the Journey of the Universe work, and we're so grateful, so indebted.

Brian McLaren: When you say us, you're referring to you and your life partner. You want to tell us a bit about him?

Mary Evelyn: Right. Well, everything is about us these days, isn't it?

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Mary Evelyn: Not the we, not the me. And I couldn't survive without John Grim, who I met as a student at Fordham, coming back, I was coming back from Japan and very disoriented and started to study with Thomas Berry. And there was John, who met Thomas in 1967. And he just blew into this room where I was studying Sanskrit. He had a dog on a leash and a long beard and cut off shorts and had been hiking in the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho all summer and said,

“You have a piece of paper and a pen? Because I’m going off to class on Hinduism,” to the teacher. And I went to the same class, and the rest is... He was such a breath of fresh air. But his work in indigenous traditions has completely inspired our life. Again, Thomas Berry taught the first courses in this, both at Fordham and at Barnard in 1975. And he had a whole room of literature on Native Americans and so on. So John Grim is my life partner and my soul mate.

Brian McLaren: Oh, that’s so great. And you’ve produced such amazing work together. And Thomas Berry plays such a significant role. Catholic priest, theologian, I’m not sure if there was a more radical, in the deepest sense of that word, Christian thinker in the time between Teilhard de Chardin and the present. It’s stunning to me that so many people still don’t know about him.

Now, I’ll tell you, Mary Evelyn, you might not know this, but I actually have been your student because I took the Coursera course on Thomas Berry that you co-produced, and benefited so greatly from it because I just wanted to learn more about Thomas. And then you’ve written a biography of Thomas Berry that also just does... It’s so worthwhile. But Thomas, I wonder if you could just give folks a sense of why everybody should know about him.

Mary Evelyn: Well, such an important question, and I think about it almost every day, Brian, because his thought was, is so profound, such a source of wisdom. And we edited all of his books and going through line by line with him to make sure it was just as he wanted to say it, because some of the chapters were talks and we wanted to make them into written.

So why is he so important? Well, in part because he was actually a cultural historian, even more than theologian, and he understood why culture and values matter. My grandfather was a historian at Columbia, also a cultural historian who changed the department from military and political history to invite culture in. And Thomas Berry knew of my grandfather’s work and read his work too.

So there’s this sense that, and this is where it’s relevant to today’s world. How does culture shape us? Form us? How do the religions of the world, with all their problems, have promise and possibility? Exactly what the Center for Call to Contemplation and Action is doing. Thomas Berry, and this is what was so astonishing, we couldn’t have done our work on world religions and ecology at Harvard without his courses, his comprehensive understanding of these religions. He taught us Buddhism, he taught us Confucianism, which is my own specialty. He taught indigenous traditions. And this library, he kept giving books away and away.

So his knowledge of world religions was astonishing, but it wasn’t just studying them for the sake of studying them and writing a PhD. It was what are the fruits of these traditions for living in our 20th and 21st century? And then they all flowed into, you see Journey of the Universe. So we have these traditions woven with a scientific story of the universe. So it’s a new genre, really.

Brian McLaren: Oh my. As you’re speaking, I’m just thinking a lot of people aren’t old enough

to remember this, but for a lot of generations, to study history was to study military and political history.

Mary Evelyn: Exactly.

Brian McLaren: And you could know all kinds of dates and wars and generals and have no sense of the life of people in different times in history, so just to be a cultural historian. And I'm also thinking, you said he was teaching world religions and indigenous thinking. And, of course, I don't think it was that long ago that if you learned about world religions, indigenous thinking wouldn't even make the cut to be considered.

Mary Evelyn: So important, Brian, what you're saying. So important. And his desire, this is the thing about all of those of us and many, many people listening here, we're on a search, right? And Thomas's search was, I feel it, and I know you do, Brian, it's like daily. It's like this isn't work, this is our spiritual journey, and it's what gives us life and energy and what Teilhard would call the zest for life, even in the midst of suffering.

So your point about cultural history is huge. And as well, Thomas, to study these Asian religions, much less indigenous, he went to China in 1948 with Ted DeBerry, who became my teacher at Columbia, and he was a student of my grandfather's. So there's this amazing lineage of these scholars who were so far ahead of their time that they wanted to bring Asian studies into the curriculum at Columbia and at Fordham way before their times.

And why? Because both Barry and Ted DeBerry had a sense these are wisdom traditions that have shaped Confucianism, that I study and that Thomas loved, has shaped more people than any other tradition on the planet because of the antiquity and size of it. So that's the excitement of why these traditions are still relevant and why they have such ecological wisdom now.

Brian McLaren: So you start with this amazing thing that Thomas Berry represents, and that you and your grandfather and many others have been part of, learning to see culture as a holistic thing, and not just trying to be, let's say, white American Christians learning about Buddhism and critiquing it from all of white American Christian assumptions and not even being able to see it as something of its own right and its own... To try to see the world from within it rather than to assess it from some privileged position.

Mary Evelyn: You've said it so well. That is so perfect, because when I was teaching at Iona College in New Rochelle, the Dalai Lama came and I helped the faculty prepare for this coming. The cardinal of New York came to be in dialogue in a public place, stage. The cardinal began the dialogue by saying, "Well, Dalai, I'm a theist, you're an atheist." Can you imagine the beginnings? But let me, I know, but this is where we still-

Brian McLaren: Yes, we still are.

Mary Evelyn: We still are. And interreligious dialogue has been hugely important, and I've been involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue and Confucian-Christian dialogue and so

on. But it has to have not only a depth of understanding, but a depth of meaning for our times.

Here's an amazing example of Thomas, with all of his intellectual acumen and spiritual insight, I'll never forget his appreciation for the largest tradition in East Asia, that includes China, Korea, Japan, and so on, is Pure Land buddhism. Of course, we know and loves Zen. So many people are attracted to Zen, including me. But Pure Land Buddhism is the sense of prayer and praise to Amita Buddha, that you will all be welcomed into the pure land. And Thomas's sense of the simplicity and elegance of that chant and why it called people in, I'll never forget it. His range of appreciation, astounding.

Brian McLaren: It feels terrible and wrong to do what I'm about to do, but I'm going to do it. Here it is. That's an amazing enough contribution for life to help people enter into a cultural... A deeper understanding and appreciation and exploration of culture. But then Thomas Berry jumps beyond that and says, "Hold it, culture is part of nature," and this dynamic of nature and culture. And I wonder if you could say something about his term, a geologist as a way of describing not only immersing himself and understanding himself within culture, but then expanding to nature.

Mary Evelyn: That's so beautiful and such a rich insight, Brian, once again, because it's kind of this concentric circles, if you will, of the human. This is very Confucian. So Thomas understood the sense, well, we're cultivating ourselves as human within culture, and culture and cultivation are deeply related, as is agriculture, and how we take out the weeds of our imperfections. And that's very much part of Confucianism. It's a botanical cultivation, literally, in relationship to nature. You see?

So that the traditions that he helped us to understand in Asia, just to give this example, were taking a profound culture that said, we're not isolated. We're humans in relationality, and starting with family and friends, but then nature and earth. And you see, for Thomas, nature, it's not just our gardens, which are very fantastic, but it's the whole earth community. And he gave us that term earth community, which I think is so refreshing, so inclusive.

But then Confucianism and Thomas went from the earth community to the cosmos. And that's a really unique thing when he did it because he recognized, as we do now, much more, that cosmos, earth, and human are one dynamic flow, a continuity of being, is the way it's been described. So Thomas gave us this freeing sensibility, way beyond an anthropocentric one. We're nested in these concentric circles of constant creativity, change that we can cultivate ourselves in relationship to seasons and cycles. He was a monk, so the liturgical cycles of his contemplative practice for years, until he was 45, and he entered at about 18, the daily cycles of the prayers and liturgy was all embedded in cosmos and nature. See how profound that is for his thinking.

Brian McLaren: There's 25 tangents I want to take, I've got to discipline myself here to just go on one. So I want to talk about this move, first just to look at human culture as this varied, well, multiple ways of being and knowing, as you put it in the subtitle of a recent book that you edited called Living Earth Community, again building from this idea from Thomas. Moving from culture to nature and nature being the earth, but also the cosmos because the earth doesn't exist without a sun and all the rest. And all of this is taking place in a story.

Thomas Berry would often tell the story of a childhood experience. I forget, I think he said he was seven or eight or nine when he went into a meadow. And I want to ask you two questions about this. First, if you wouldn't mind just summarizing that story as he told it. And then I wondered whatever affected you to resonate with his teaching so much? And is there some similar place or story in your life?

Mary Evelyn: Well, what a beautiful question and invitation. And I think it's curious, isn't it, Brian? How that meadow across the creek, it's an essay in the great work, so many people reference it. So many people feel invited into this space. And that's what's so exciting about our moment, because it's an ecological spirituality that is blossoming now all over. And Thomas, by articulating it, we have these experiences as a young child, as you say. And it was, he's wandering through the streets, still undeveloped in his hometown of Greensboro, and he comes across this space, this place with a creek and a meadow and lilies. And all of a sudden, don't we all love lilies, the whiteness of them and other colors? But these were white lilies and the smell that lilies have.

So he was entranced. It was a call into that space and a sense of resonance with that space. And again, we all have resonances with sunrise, sunset, as you've just said so beautifully. The stars, the Milky Way, the deep feeling that we're living in a living earth community. Even nature doesn't do it, does it?

Brian McLaren: No.

Mary Evelyn: It's like nature's out there or the environment.

Brian McLaren: That's right.

Mary Evelyn: And it's why we called the project Religion and Ecology, because these are ecological, dynamic changing systems that we have some insight from, from ecology and biology. But really, how are we going to do restoration of systems that we still don't fully understand?

Brian McLaren: Yes, don't understand and love enough to see how they deserve to be restored. So did you have any similar experience or are there places in your life or experiences in your life that you feel touched you with that same reverence?

Mary Evelyn: Absolutely. And I grew up near Columbia, on Riverside Drive. There's Riverside Park there, there's the Hudson River, which became and is still a huge bioregion for me because of my family being there. And the river has all kinds of resonances because of living near Columbia, but in Thomas's Riverdale Center just 20 minutes north and where Teilhard is buried up in Hyde Park. And I lived also on the other side of the river with John.

So this river and its experiences and the feeling of where it develops way up in the Adirondacks, I have goosebumps talking about it. And its estuary in Manhattan, it is a river that the Indians would call flow in both directions. So you've got the fresh water from the Hudson, you've got the salt water coming up. And my father worked in a law firm down at the tip of Manhattan, and I really feel his ability and my mother's ability too, but to deal with tradition and modernity in this confluence of rivers is something that the river gifted us something.

Brian McLaren: Oh my. Oh my. I just think how perfect that is to live in New York, but to realize New York is surrounded by rivers and there's a sky over New York, and if people have eyes to see and will take the time, they'd realize that even in New York, they are in nature.

Mary Evelyn: Exactly. There's no question. And Central Park, of course, and Olmsted's designs. But I have felt that for years because I was also very aware of Harlem not far away, social justice. It bothered me deeply and so on. But I worked one summer in a day camp for young kids and we would take them to pools and so on. And they could feel that dynamic and the zest for things in the smallest areas, even the markets of New York bring us such gift, such renewal.

Brian McLaren: Oh, that's so good. That's so good. Learning How to See will be back in a moment.

Mary Evelyn, in every place I've read you and every place I've heard you speak, I have never heard you rant. That must just be, maybe you do it sometimes and I haven't come across it. That must not be part of your personality, but I'd like to give you permission for just a minute, if you're willing, because I'm introducing you to the Learning How to See community who don't know you already as a theologian. And of course, your work is very hard to categorize. And Thomas Berry is seen also as a theologian. And Teilhard de Chardin, for people who don't know, another great Catholic intellectual, a priest who challenged some very deeply held Catholic beliefs. There's so many ways to talk about Teilhard, maybe almost as a theologian of time, as well as of the earth and matter, such great preoccupations.

But the fact is a lot of the trouble we're in is because of Christian theology in its sort of conventional forms. And when you mentioned Thomas having all of those years as a monk with the daily hours and the liturgies of the church, there's one sense where I can see that bringing him great benefit. But I'll rant for a second. I feel that so much of Christian theology is almost perfectly designed to make us forget that we live in a precious earth, we live in a beautiful cosmos. Obviously, neither of us think this is the only way to understand Christian faith, but the version of it that the vast majority of people have received and are still receiving is, it seems to me, a problem. And I wonder if you, I'd like to give you permission to rant a little bit if you'd like, but to talk about maybe what that means for how our theologies and liturgies need to change to meet the challenges of this moment.

Mary Evelyn: Well, that is the question, isn't it? One of the most important questions of our time because one of the largest world's religions, over a billion people, its effect will be enormous. But Francis' Laudato Si is deeply impactful. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch, we went on many of his symposium on water. He talks about earth is icon. We have new theologies emerging, we know that, ranging from evangelical, creation care, to a sense of the living earth community.

But I wonder if one of the ways back into what the tradition does hold and how we can excavate that. Really, we were just in Rome for the World Congress of Philosophy and excavation is such a powerful idea, right? So I just wanted to say that I think, and I wanted to draw Teilhard and Thomas back into, we are all historians. I'm a historian of world religions. Thomas Berry was a historian of religions and culture even more broadly. And Teilhard is a history of deep time or Teilhard's a historian of evolution. And really, none of us are theologians because that term, while I respect it, is very much associated with seminary studies or studies of what is a God, the logic of God. And I am so in love with the notion of the deep mystery of things. I have no words for it, and nor did Thomas in certain ways.

So the invitation, of course, it's back to our mystical traditions, which feel the same way, right? The God beyond name and forms and the Daodejing begins with this whole sensibility. But you know why this is important? We all understand, young people love that. We don't have to name the mystery we feel and sense and experience all the time in the natural world, because the infusion, if we want to put it in Christian terms, we can return to that, in the beginning was the Logos, John's gospel. We have this sense, there's an inner ordering principle of all reality that is this is transforming the self-organizing dynamics of the evolutionary process. If we have and value an incarnational reality of imminence, of divine presence from the stars and galaxies through earth systems to humans and ecosystems, that is a great entry into deep time and into a sense of divine mystery in everything. The next generation wants to be liberated to their experience of that.

So we can do this, we can definitely do it. And we have these resources that we're talking about right now, but many, many more as well.

Brian McLaren: Yes, yes. So if you were writing a script for a denomination of the Christian faith, or even for an individual congregation who said, "We realize that the words we use and the way we use them and the frameworks that they assume are part of the problem," and they said to you, "Mary Evelyn, what do we do? Where do we start?" What would you say?

Mary Evelyn: Well, again, that's a hugely important question and I want to underscore how important this is because for example, just to be candid, we've been trying to get the Jesuit order to open up more in their colleges and universities. And I spoke to their alumni association in Barcelona several years ago, they have 9 million graduates. They have the largest educational system in the world. I studied in Tokyo in their Jesuit university there, Fordham, we all know they...

So your question is deeply important and the Jesuits are now making a commitment to *Laudato Si* in their curriculum, and that's terrific. But your question is absolutely what we need to think about because how are the Jesuits going to teach this? You see? And all the other Christian groups, with their particular tradition moving into modernity, this is the largest challenge for all the religions of moving into modernity.

So I think there's things out there that we can draw on. It doesn't have to be from *ex nihilo*, from nothing. And one way, I'm finding it fascinating, is, well, a couple of ways. One is liturgy. People are talking about mourning, the sadness of things and mourning, the beginning of things. And there are litanies to include extinction of species, to include the injustices, racial and otherwise, in our societies. As we process this deep sadness, this deep sense of despair even, we need to find rituals, prayers that will bring us back into joy and harmony and possibility.

And the other thing is there was just a Sisters of Earth conference, and these have been nuns and non-nuns, but women who've been thinking about these issues inspired by Thomas Berry for 30 years. This was their 30th anniversary.

Brian McLaren: Is that so?

Mary Evelyn: And do you know what they drew on? Which I want to say something more about is, so we've done this book and project on living cosmology. But also, we're working now on

living earth community on a website that relates to what they were doing. Because they had sections on what it is that insects and birds and plants and trees are teaching us. You see? About the intricacy, the complexity, the superb feeling of communication in the world around us.

So we're creating a website that will highlight many of the spiritual ecologies around the world, but are available to all of us, as well as what we're calling differentiated sentience. That there's sentience we know, trees communicate, their roots communicate, and so on. Plants, they're intelligent in different ways.

Now, I asked two students to do this work when we went to China this summer. We came back after five weeks. They had found 200 pages of materials on this topic.

Brian McLaren: Is that so?

Mary Evelyn: If we're talking about an invitation into hope and possibility, an antidote to despair that has incarnational roots in our own tradition, it's everybody I've spoken to about this, Brian, just like you, it's like, "Wow."

Brian McLaren: Yes, this is what we need.

Mary Evelyn: The possibilities. Right?

Brian McLaren: And here's my hunch, I'd be happy to be wrong, but my hunch is that if places can host those kind of liturgical experiences, people will fall in love with it. That we have to let them experience it before we ask anybody permission...

Mary Evelyn: Yes.

Brian McLaren: ...that it can be done because it's something that the people's hearts are crying out for.

Mary Evelyn: Completely. Completely. We did webinars here at Yale with some of these leading thinkers and Robin Kimmerer, of course, and Braiding Sweetgrass, but many others on *The Hidden Life of Trees*, etc. These were open to the public with *Orion Magazine*. 4,500 people signed up for these workshops. We have workshops now at the School of the Environment where we've been teaching, and its Forest School as well. There's a whole new series on indigenous ways of knowing and caring for forests. They have thousands of people listening to these now, you see? This is where we need to open the doors and windows.

Brian McLaren: Yes, Yes.

Mary Evelyn: And draw in this beauty and awe because awe leads to action. Awe will inspire our hope.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yes.

Okay. I hate this that our time is running short, so I want to make an observation because I've been struggling with these issues. As you may know, I was a pastor for 24 years and I've worked a lot with clergy. I remember when I started peeling the onion and seeing ways that

what we might call anti-ecological thinking was so deeply embedded, not only in specific doctrines or words or whatever, but in the assumptions that shaped so many things. And I remember gradually feeling, you know what our big problem is? We just need to tell the story of the universe in a whole new way.

Well, of course, this has been such a key part of your life. I remember years ago, I came across a quote from Thomas Berry. Here's the quote, "The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story of that society becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of the present situation."

So you and Brian Swimme and others have been working on this for decades. Let me bring one other quote that I don't have exactly, but I have a sort of a paraphrase of it that you may actually know the actual quote. But Carl Sagan once said something like this, someday there will be a religion that isn't in conflict with science, but begins with scientific understanding of the magnitude and wonder and complexity and diversity of the universe. Someday that kind of religion will arise and it will have a new story to tell.

I'd love to just maybe hear anything you'd like to say about your work and Thomas Berry's work in trying to help us have a story that is at once scientific but also sacred in the sense that it's not reduced. I think when people hear the word scientific, sometimes what they think is, "Oh, you want to reduce everything to equations and mathematics." But no, there's a way of telling the scientific story of the universe, from cosmology to how forests work and how fungi work and how fish develop and all the rest. Yeah, I'd love to hear you talk about that big story.

Mary Evelyn: Again, your questions are so perfect, so insightful and penetrating because there's no question that as we learn to weave together the enormous scientific knowledge and the spiritual wisdom that we are gleaning from the world's religions and beyond official religions with their problems and their promise, that is one of the most important ways forward.

Now, why? We could not have done *Journey of the Universe*, which took us more than 10 years to do the book and the film and so on, filming in Samos, in Greece to get the sense of crossroads of civilization, we could not have done it if the universe hadn't birthed an extraordinary amount of science, from the great flaring forth to the formation of galaxies and stars and so on. In other words, in our lifetime, the right amount of science was available for us to distill it with Brian's brilliance and offer it as a story. Our grandparents didn't know this. We didn't even know as we grew up how old the universe was, right?

So we have the scientific knowledge. We have what I would say is a next generation of scientists who are not afraid to speak about this with wonder and awe and significance. Here's the thing, as we like to say, this is what the spiritual and humanities dimension can bring in this weave. What is the significance of this? Because if we've stripped, as we have, any sense of meaning or purpose to our evolutionary story in a reductionist, materialist framework, we are left with the largest crisis humans have ever faced, namely a meaningless and purposeless universe, a totally materialist earth. Why do we have such depression and despair and mental health issues? Because we've stripped that out of the most extraordinary creation of a 13.8 billion year history.

But there are books now on cosmic purpose. There are a regaining of that sensibility that we live both with purpose and randomness. These have got to be rewoven. You see? The scientists were bothered, "It's all purposeful." And the religious people, "Oh, it's all random." They're bothered. We've got to integrate. Creativity has both.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Mary Evelyn: Life has both.

Brian McLaren: Yes.

Mary Evelyn: It's not either or. And then our next generation can say, "I can live with chaos and creativity. I can do this."

Brian McLaren: You mentioned the word despair a few minutes ago, and I wonder if maybe, just as our last question, I hate having this, for this to be the last question, but every time I've ever heard you or read you, you just overflow with energy and vitality and excitement and all the rest. I'm sure you have bad days like all of us do, but I wonder for people who are feeling that kind of overwhelm when they look at the power of, from the power of the fossil fuel industry to the concentration of wealth among a few probably mentally damaged billionaires, damaged by the very mechanisms that help them become so wealthy, and they see politicians who, there's just no word for it other than craven stupidity and greed, and they see this, they feel overwhelmed, what would you say to them from your own life about what might help them deal with that overwhelm?

Mary Evelyn: Well, again, history. There's a Broadway play right now on the suffragettes and what women went through for the vote. It's unbelievable. In the UK and here, truly, it's unbelievable. And I was part of the Civil Rights Movement in '60s. I went to college in Washington DC at Trinity, where Nancy Pelosi did as well, 10 years ahead, but we were all involved in Civil Rights and the anti-Vietnam campaign and my sense of social justice that comes out of Catholic and Christian social justice teaching is still very profound.

So as we understand and John understanding Native American history and what we now know, but we were just at a museum in Old Lyme, 400 native people in Mystic, Connecticut, a great spot for tourism. 400 people were killed there by colonists. So the endurance of peoples who have suffered so much still gives me inspiration every day, every day. And I think we're in a moment of hope and transition, and I think we're seeing these histories being written out with new possibilities that we can join and affirm.

It's like when Gorbachev changed the Soviet Union. We are in a moment when change can happen and the clouds can lift. We are living between despair and possibilities. No question, we have to own that, and that's a spiritual practice. Every morning, I try and do my spiritual practice, but living with John who's very... Every day he wakes up hopeful, optimistic. Thomas, who we saw every week for 35 years and so on. So we have these people who have that kind of energy, but we have historical possibilities that we've seen of change. And that's why reading our story, our human story, our earth story, our universe story will ground us in the change and great work of our time.

Brian McLaren: What a good place to stop. I have a feeling that an awful lot of people who listen to this episode first are going to want to learn everything they can about you and Thomas Berry. Maybe look into Teilhard De Chardin. But I also feel like they're going to leave having caught a little bit of your bug, having caught a little bit of your spirit, and that will be maybe the greatest gift of all. Thank you so much for this time.

Mary Evelyn: Thank you, Brian. You have a beautiful spirit as well. Thank you.

Brian McLaren: We hope that this season of Learning How to See will inspire you to vote wisely, to walk more gently upon this earth, and to speak up with clarity and grace whenever you can about our need for a new human-Earth relationship. We hope you'll become part of the growing movement to forge that relationship among our species, the larger web of life and our planet itself. This, we believe, is holy work. It's sacred work. I think it's what Jesus meant when he spoke of the kingdom of God.

I think you could tell how much I enjoyed being in conversation with Mary Evelyn Tucker in this episode. You probably noticed that we entitled this episode Learning How to See like a Theologian. But Mary Evelyn explicitly said, "I'm not a theologian, I'm a historian." And we noted how her mentor, Thomas Berry, called himself a geologist rather than a theologian. I think that's one of the surprise insights of this episode, that the word theologian has been problematized by centuries of theology that did not help us see and appreciate and love and inhabit the natural world, as we must learn and relearn to do now in our current situation.

I wonder how your understandings of God and theology have been changing as you take more seriously the natural world of matter, evolutions, ecosystems, plants, animals, galaxies, and humans as part of nature. If you'd like to share an answer to that question, how your understandings of God and theology are changing, you can email us at podcasts@cac.org or by leaving a voicemail at cac.org/voicemail. We need your responses to be brief, about 175 words in writing, maximum or under a minute spoken. If you'd like to learn more about why I care so deeply about the subject of this season, 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, Mary Evelyn Tucker. You'll find links in the show notes to learn more about her and her work. Big thanks as always to Corey Wayne and Dorothy Abrams, who produce Learning How to See. Thanks to April Stace for her musical support and to Sound on Studios for their post-production support. Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for making this podcast possible, and thanks to you for your interest and your investment of time. And thanks for sharing Learning How to See with others if you find it meaningful.

As a parting moment of shared contemplation, I'd like to read three brief quotes from Father Thomas Berry from his book, *The Great Work*. "We can no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an it rather than a thou. Everything has a right to be recognized and revered. Trees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, and mountains have mountain rights. The great work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of

the earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.”