

MADE OF THE STUFF OF STARS

*The body in ecological context
Realizing the potential of environmental
studies in the Jesuit tradition*

By Keith Douglass Warner, O.F.M.

In his reflection, “Joe” wrote that “our class field trip was surprisingly the most religious experience I have had at my time ... at Santa Clara University.” My Faith, Ethics & the Biodiversity Crisis class had taken a field trip to Point Lobos, near Carmel, California, but we framed this as a pilgrimage, to a holy place, a journey to nature’s beauty but also a journey deeper into the heart. After the guided portion of the walk along the rocky point, I invited students to take some quiet to consider what the Spirit might be asking of each of them, to let the beauty of this place speak to their innermost self. Joe reported that that invitation “did more for my soul that day than any church service I had attended in years and that was simply because I was surrounded by the magnificence of creation – it was a simple but profound surprise.”

My interest as an instructor was less the fostering of aesthetic appreciation, and more the stoking of an ecological consciousness. Appreciation of nature is a good and worthy goal for education, but I believe that fostering environmental vocations can be transformative.

The field of environmental studies offers students the opportunity to study environmental problems and solutions, but also invites them to deepen their awareness of their dependence upon the natural world, and to develop a moral vision for a healthier relationship between humans and the Earth. Environmental studies has evolved as a field over the past few decades, explicitly proposing the principles of social justice and sustainability to orient students and society toward environmental solutions.

Thus, as an interdisciplinary applied field of study, it makes explicit ethical claims about how humans should better relate to the environment, and provides a vehicle for our students to cultivate a more mature conscience. Environmental studies seems to me an ideal project for Jesuit education, for in the Ignatian tradition we seek to help others recognize God in all things. Environmental studies can include studying humanity’s dependence on the natural world, observing ecological interactions between various biological organisms, and allowing the Earth’s beauty to speak to a student’s heart; all these have the potential to contribute a great deal to Jesuit educational ideals.

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The global scope of our human impact on the natural world is overwhelming and quite distressing to many students, indeed, to most people with even modest environmental literacy. As study after scientific study reports

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collapsing ecosystems, an increasingly unpredictable global climate, and diminishing resources for future societies, we should be questioning our assumptions about how we humans relate to our environment. If problems are presented without potential solutions, paralysis or denial can result. Thus, the study of solutions – personal and social – is essential if we are to prepare students for making a positive contribution to the world, and the framework of vocation can help with this.

In 2004, Santa Clara University launched the Faith, Ethics & Vocation Project in its Environmental Studies Institute. This project created four new courses incorporating religious values, moral reasoning, and vocational discernment; it also developed internships which place students who have taken these integrative courses into

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faith community settings to conduct environmental education themselves. Students are invited to reflect on their deepest concerns for the natural world, social justice, and a more sustainable society, and to recognize their response as vocational in character.

Two of the most fundamental questions that students of environmental studies confront are these: why are so many modern people alienated from the natural world? Why do many people behave as though unconcerned

about the health of the water, soil, air, and food that sustains our lives? Some environmental leaders bombard their audiences with mountains of alarming data. One scientist I know expressed the opinion that we must scare people to the point where they will finally take action.

As a person of faith, I reject that as a fruitful strategy. I do believe that everyone should be concerned about our environmental problems, but that fanning fears is unlikely to help people to develop a more respectful attitude toward the natural world. Gratitude and love have more power to transform our consciousness, and to provoke a fresh approach to the relationship between humanity and the biosphere. We desperately need leaders who are able to provide a positive vision for making the transition to a more sustainable society.

This is why one of the most essential tasks of the project is to invite students out into the natural world to experience it through their bodily senses. I take my spirituality & sustainability class on an evening field trip up to a ridge overlooking the Pacific Ocean, to watch the sun set and the moon rise. Many of these students are freshmen living in a sustainability-themed residence hall, and they experience joy together while climbing redwood trees, peering into the coastal prairie grass ecosystem, and escaping the concrete of campus, if only for a few hours. I take my class on agriculture, the moral vision of Cesar Chavez, out to an organic farm training center, where farm workers prepare to become independent small farmers. The students are interested in the concept of micro-enterprise development, but they relish tasting sweet strawberries fresh from the vine, gathering vegetables a few feet from where they will consume them as dinner, and sleeping out under the stars. Their sensory experiences of working on the farm punctuate their daily campus routine, and challenge some of them to ask why they are in school. Back in the classroom, they reflect on the differences and similarities between the farmers-in-training and themselves, and what these imply for their own vocational journeys.

The trip to Point Lobos was designed to allow the astonishing beauty of California's Central Coast to speak to my students, to challenge them to consider what might be of enduring meaning for their lives. As we look across Carmel Bay to the elite resort at Pebble Beach, I point out that Point Lobos could very easily have been developed and privatized had not some people with foresight taken action to protect it a century ago. What were they thinking? What sacrifices did they make to see this area protected for future generations? And most importantly, what does their experience of this place now call us to do and be?

I also invite students to witness environmental problems. Students find that data of pesticide poisoning

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becomes much more meaningful when stories of planes spraying fields with poisons are related by farm workers in a farm labor camp, even if in a foreign language. Students can become disoriented when they learn that the average American has hundreds of industrial chemicals in his or her body, but this fact takes on new meaning when we visit a low income neighborhood with a concentration of abandoned toxic sites and companies that “dispose” of hazardous waste. Whether inviting students to experience the beauty of nature, or to consider toxic trespass of these poisons into their own bodies, I want students to let go of the false notion that humans are somehow separate from nature. Humans and the Earth share a common fate, no matter how hard some try to pretend otherwise.

From a Catholic perspective, this shared origin, physicality and destiny are encompassed by the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation is not a discrete, historical event, but rather a timeless expression of God's love for humans and creation. Catholics do not believe that God came to save humans “from” the Earth because it is corrupt, but rather because taking on our human flesh was the greatest expression of love possible, the most profound act of solidarity.

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote that in Christ all things were created, in heaven and on Earth, and that in Christ all things are held together. From this perspective, the Incarnation is already in everything, waiting for us humans to recognize Christ's presence hidden there. Creation is not the backdrop for some greater event; God is mysteriously woven into the fabric of the material world itself, including our very bodies. Taking this theology seriously will breach our modern cultural myths about separateness, and open new possibilities for understanding ourselves to be woven with the rest of creation into the fabric of God. It also suggests that experiential education has even more significance, because it would mean that our bodily senses can guide us in our search for the divine.

Approaching the environment from the perspective of the Incarnation has the potential to destabilize conventional norms about prayer. Helping students to realize that we are made of the same stuff as stars, that we are utterly dependent on this one fragile ball of dirt, or that the air we breathe may have circulated the globe, challenges them to understand their vocation as more fully participating in the dance of life, rather than as drawing apart from it. In this light, contemplative prayer suggests that God and creation invite us to participate more deeply in the mysterious dance of life. Instead of pursuing some external reward or interceding for a

change in events, contemplation calls us to experience ourselves in a more profound, corporeal way.

Activities that cultivate a deeper awareness serve as our guides: breathing in silence; feeling soil, wind, and waves; gazing upon the night sky; tasting the fresh fruits of earth; splashing through water in wilderness. Undertaking these in the context of a spiritual journey can have powerful and transformative impact, because they stimulate bodily awareness of our shared origin and destiny with all of creation. In the language of Martin Buber, sensory experiences of the physical world help us shift from an “I-it” to “I-thou” consciousness. Studying the earth and developing solutions to environmental problems are no longer idealism and cannot be ideological. We come to broaden our thinking from protecting “the environment” as though it were an external phenomenon, and to the awareness that we are called to participate in God's on-going divine creation as stewards. We cease to think of creation as a thing, but instead as brothers and sisters in the family of creation. Our vocation, then, is to arrest and reverse the harm we are doing to God's creation, to our brothers and sisters, indeed, to ourselves.

The development of this kind of consciousness is most welcome, for it has the potential to erode the obstacles to further environmental protection in this country. We need a new generation of leaders, able to draw on the rhetoric of ethics and religious values to foster a broader reflection in society about our relationship to the natural world. This is not merely a development in Catholicism, for the Greening of Religion is a trans-religious phenomenon. Temples, congregations, and churches across America are drawing from their tradition to articulate an environmental ethic.

One need not necessarily be religious, however, to appreciate the power of sensory, experiential education. After visiting Point Lobos, Joe wrote: “Since I am not a particularly religious person, a personal dialogue with God was something I had not attempted in quite a while. While surrounded by the natural beauty of creation, it is hard not to have feelings of thankfulness and solidarity with the surrounding ecosystems. Being in this environment while praying really spiritualized the experience for me because it was so unique and simple.” When environmental education helps students recognize God in all things, then it most certainly contributes to the Jesuit educational mission. ■

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