

During the Season of Creation, it is good to remember what Franciscan mystic and spiritual teacher Richard Rohr said: “Nature has been revealing God long before the Bible and Church came to be.” He reminds us that nature itself is the primary Bible. The world is the locus of the sacred and provides all the metaphors that the soul needs for its growth.¹ Or as the third century desert mystic St. Antony replied when someone marveled that he could be so wise without a library, “My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand.”²

In said spirit, Ron Keith and I have enrolled in a docent training program at Bouverie preserve, where eventually, we will be guiding local school children through an outdoor voyage of discovery. The earth is humankind’s first classroom. For most of our time on earth, children were not expected to learn indoors, absorbing the opinions of others and working to live up to the image of a successful person.

The teaching skills we are learning at Bouverie emphasize questions over answers, wondering and observation, and allow us to explore how we think and see without anyone judging or grading us. Eco-education takes children to the place where all life began and gives them the chance to learn from life itself.

Because I am a trained theologian and not a trained scientist, I was delighted to get my hands on a set of Ecosystem Connection Cards that Audubon Canyon Ranch prepared as educational aids. The cards help us discover that life as a set of connections rather than a checklist of things to accomplish before I die. All lives depend upon other lives. Every living

¹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, Tuesday, June 13, 2023

² Barbara Mahany, *The Book of Nature*

thing plays a role in the health of the world, and many reveal ways in which humans have made the world a very sick place.

For example, on the California Bay Laurel card we learn that woodrats nibble its leaves and spread them around their nests to kill flea larvae and other pests, while owls, woodpeckers, and bobcats sleep and build nests in its cavities. Laurel nuts are food for Western gray squirrels, scrub jays, mice, crows, and woodrats. I make mole from them and use the leaves to season my stews. A laurel grove is a reliable indicator of the presence of ground water.

California bay laurels are fast growing and resistant to fire. As a result of fire suppression along the California coast, the bays have crowded out the much slower growing oaks in the mixed forest. The non-native funguslike plant pathogen *Phytophthora ramorum* which causes sudden oak death found a new home in the bay trees and caused a great die back beginning in the 1990's.

All nature is like this. It has both positive and negative effects. Yellow jackets eat garden pests. They also have a painful sting. Mosquitoes are pollinators, but they bite, and especially as the ecosystems of the world degrade, carry a host of diseases. Fence lizards, on the other hand, have a protein in their blood which kills the bacterium which causes Lyme disease. They also eat yellow jackets. Wild turkeys savor ticks. Fire is an important player in a Mediterranean climate with its long dry season.

If we ask questions of nature, nature also has questions for us. What is our role in maintaining the web of life? What does it mean that we can step back and ask questions about the world and our place in it? Detachment can be a positive thing when it leads to a positive understanding. However, it can become a negative thing when we, who are easily deceived, confuse detachment with separation, and consider the world around us as something apart from

us that we can exploit for our own benefit. Sudden oak death is but one of the negative results of humans taking forest management into our own hands before we know what we are doing. Alone of all the animals, humans regularly act out our worst impulses.

The I-Thou perspective, when it gets anxious can result in a binary, judgmental perspective. It's too easy to think we can tell the difference between good and evil, who is in and who is out, what is uplifting and what is a downer. Dualism is so innate to an untrained mind that all the world's religions arrive to help us understand it, move beyond it, and finally integrate it. Religion helps us find a place of balance in a whirlwind of apparent opposites, to understand how day cannot exist without night, birth cannot exist without death, peace cannot exist apart from conflict, and shows how we can live mindfully in the tension. This is very hard. It always reminds me of that wonderful moment in seminary when someone blurted out, "Who does God think he is to send sun and rain upon the just and the unjust alike?"

In a non-binary mind, both positive and negative observations hold equal value. One of the first things we notice when we meet a king snake is that it is not a rattlesnake. Many of the words we use to describe God are also negative. God is "immortal" "invisible" "inaccessible" "hid from our eyes." Even the so-called positive words such as "love" and "wise," while recognizable, escape definition. The great mysteries are by their very nature negative. One of the best reasons to put God at the center of your mind to learn that the unknown does not have to be scary.

"Peace" is a word like "love" and "wise." We might yearn for it, but we can't really define it. We wonder about peace in much the way children wonder about trees. Is peace innate? Is it singing "Kumba ya" or is it facing angry men with clubs on the Edmund Pettis Bridge? Yesterday was the International Day of Peace. Today's readings contain both a positive and a

negative account of peace. In Psalm 1, we hear:

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.

In the Epistle of James, we get the negative:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

Or as our bishop said so beautifully at Thursday's clergy call: "We are not just Democrats and Republicans; we are children of God reconciling ourselves to one another through Jesus Christ."

At our Gospel of Thomas conversation last Thursday, I asked this question of participants: What, to you, does peace look like? Every answer was good. Every answer touched me.

But Jackie's stood out for me, because it was both Biblical and I didn't get it. She said, "In the Bible, Jesus stilled a storm and walked on water. Peace is like that: a sea which at its surface is smooth and quiet and firm. There may be lots of turmoil beneath, but the surface is serene." I wondered about that because on Thursday I experienced no turmoil whatsoever. Indeed, I thought that at last I might have stilled not only the surface of me, but the inner parts as well.

Then Friday arrived. For no reason I could fathom, I woke up both restless and conflicted: surrounded by too many options and far too many books with no idea where I wanted

to land. My mind was spinning, and I was totally ungrounded. I've seen birds act this way, jumping restlessly from ground to branch to lamp post, their wings all aflutter. Although I remained calm on the outside, inside I was a rip tide of conflicting views. That's when Jackie's image from Thursday hit home. Being peaceful is not living in a la-la land where the most exciting thing that happens is hopping bunnies. Being peaceful is being able to live with all that inner conflict. Jesus calmed the storm without, that we might calm the storm within. Being peaceful is far more than calm; it is the ability, when I am not calm, to refrain from acting out against others. To see envy for what it is: the life I'm not living but should be. To see anger as an expression of wrong and not a mandate to yell at my husband.

Keep the surface as calm as you can. Do not be afraid of the turmoil within.

The Buddhists teach that humans are on earth to end suffering. The Jews teach that we are here to order and co-create the world with God. Jesus taught that we are here to tend the circle of eternal life. Muhammad taught that we are here to practice virtue. Nature teaches us that everything depends upon finding our true place in the universe.

The Season of Creation calls us to remember that true dominion is not the ability to take life, but the ability to give it. Amen.