Made of the Stuff of Stars

Keith Douglass Warner
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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 pilgrim-age, 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.

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...
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 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 have told 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.

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 sunset 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 system, 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 farmes-in-training and their peers, 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 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
Physicality and destiny are encompassed by the Incarnation of Christ.

Warner: Made of the Stuff of Stars

We need a new generation of leaders...