

Kathy Cochrane: Call and Paying Attention

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Call and Paying Attention

This morning I'd like to share with you some thoughts on the aspect of call in my life and how that for me has been very much the same theme of this liturgical season – "paying attention".

"All these wildflowers that we have been identifying are creations of the Creator whom we know – Jesus Christ." These were the words of my Mother as we sat on the couch in the living room on a spring evening in Toledo, Ohio. I was about ten years old. We had been to the ravine near our house that afternoon and had observed many wildflowers. That evening – the lamp beside me, the living room, and those words have been a lamp for my life ever since. All these marvels that I was learning about almost daily were because of the Creator – even Jesus Christ. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." (John 1:3)

Thus began my "paying attention" to God's created earth. Thus began a call that has woven through my life for more than 50 years.

For me, it has been a journey with God in which my love, concern, care and commitment to and for the earth has been consistent with God's love for and God's participation in Creation. Unfortunately, for much of my life the church has neither understood nor supported this call.

It has been both paid and unpaid work. The unpaid work has been no less work. It has required continuing involvement, often as an activist.

As a girl, I continued to learn and joy in creation. One way was by getting just about every natural history badge that was available in the Girl Scout manual. Another way I paid attention to God's creation was to plot out a place in the ravine about three feet on a side. I marked it with jump ropes. Over the season, I recorded what grew, and what happened there. I also kept records of my observation of birds and wildflowers. I hold in my hand the notebook records for 1947 of birds and flowers I was observing. I was paying attention close to home, often in the ravine.

I went on bird walks and bird counts with an Audubon group in Ohio. I continued to pay attention to the Creation that was close by – like looking forward to the return of the Baltimore Orioles to the back yard each spring, noting the first song sparrow in early spring in the brush along the Anthony Wayne trail as I walked to school, seeing the vast carpet of white dog tooth violets in the ravine each spring, and joying in that incredible song of the Wood Thrush.

For some vacations in the summers after World War II, my family traveled together in our car. Trips to Yellowstone and the Smokies were also opportunities for me to learn more plant, bird and tree species. As a girl, I had been given the Burgess Flower Book for Children – full of photographs and descriptions of wildflowers. On one of these trips to the West, no doubt my father would never forget my screaming from the back seat, "stop, stop, there is a Fringed Gentian", as I spotted this plant alive and real beside the highway. I had only seen it previously in my book. We stopped to get out to look. We often stopped in our travels to get out and look.

The church involvement of my family during these early years was in the old United Presbyterian Church. From an early age,

I took my faith in Christ seriously, endeavoring to live a faithful and God honoring life.

In her book Super-Natural Christians, theologian Sallie McFague speaks of the necessity for Christians to pay detailed, careful concrete attention, to get to know nature. Edward Abbey says we need to have "sympathy for the object under study and more than sympathy – love." This kind of love sees creatures as friends. It reminds me of an experience I had while showing someone around a creation center. I heard a bird, looked up and saw it was one of the returning neo-tropical migrant warblers. "Oh, great, the Black-Poll is back," I said. My friend commented, "You speak of them as friends." Yes, they are friends.

This is as McFague says – the loving eye – not the arrogant eye of our culture that sees nature as object to manipulate – but the loving eye that sees the others as subjects –multitudes of them.

My learning in detail about what was around me meant that I was educating the loving eye, as McFague says. Scientific knowledge need not make the other just an object. It can instead result in appreciation and a desire to care for the other. This was and is the case with me.

This learning can also be expanded by the "poet's aesthetic attention to particulars" as McFague says.

It is interesting that in high school I started to take Saturday art classes at the Toledo Museum of Art. This was to become a continuing way of paying attention to God's creation.

As I began to think about college, I prayed about this decision, asking for God's will in where to go and what I would be studying. God seemed to be leading toward Landscape Architecture – a profession that would combine art, design and science and would put into practice paying attention – loving the earth.

I attended Penn State University majoring in landscape architecture. I was the only woman in my class. While in college, I participated in Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. It was there that I started to experience the first overt antagonism against me as a woman endeavoring to be active and responsible in a Christian organization.

After graduating, I worked in a landscape architectural firm in Philadelphia. Because of my Christian commitment to be involved with God in the church, I then went to seminary aiming to get a degree in Christian Education. I had minor surgery at spring break, but I almost died. I did not return to seminary. I remember processing the awareness that God had something for me to do.

During the years of traveling as a girl, I had appreciated and loved the National Parks. I wanted to work in the National Park Service. Therefore, in 1958 I went for an interview. They told me directly, "We don't hire female landscape architects." If I was not a feminist before...need I say more.

Therefore, I worked as a Christian Education Director at my church – Norristown Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. I was advisor to the college age group; coordinated summer Bible School, taught women's Bible studies, taught a young adult Sunday school class.

In 1960, I decided to try again to get into the National Park Service. This time a landscape architect in NPS convinced the head of the Philadelphia design office that it was time NPS hired a woman landscape architect. Thus, I became the first female landscape architect ever hired by the park service in the East. I did a variety of work in this office—from historic tours for battlefields, designing roads, doing planting plans, etc.

I did the planting plan for the Great Smokies visitor center and was sent onsite to supervise a group of 16 day-laborers in

the Park. Trepidation for them – a woman! Nevertheless, my last day there after several months says it all. The men presented me with a beautiful handmade stool typical of the craftspeople of that area. They thanked me for my work and teaching. "You'll never know how many times tools went home at night so that we could do things around our homes. You taught us how. If we ever have to work for a woman again we hope she is like you." I found out later that the main office in Philadelphia held up my technique as a model for supervisors of day laborers. I was just doing what I loved, sharing it with others, paying attention, being faithful to my call.

I also continued to raise questions in my job or around me about design solutions on paper; its called paying attention. While working at Antietam National Battlefield Park, I became concerned that a proposal for a highway was going to destroy the historic Burnside Bridge. By scouting, walking and scanning maps while I was there on business for other design matters I was able to propose another solution that would save the Bridge. Master Plans agreed to my proposal. A few years later, it was built – not over the Burnside Bridge.

In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote Silent Spring. In many ways, that book was a final wake-up call for me. It started further questioning for me – the questioning that has never stopped.

I went from working in Philadelphia in National Park Service to the NPS, National Capital Region Parks in Washington, D.C. There I was able to resume my friendship with a landscape architect I had known in Philadelphia. Ben Howland became a mentor to me. He was an Episcopalian. I was privileged to spend time talking with him when I visited in his home with his family in McLean. His faith and his awareness that we were doing stewardship work in caring for God's earth provided great reinforcement to me at times when the job was rough. I will always cherish Ben.

Several weeks ago daughter Andrea called. She was starting

work on a speech on women in preservation. (Andrea works in the historic preservation field.) Since the beautification movement of the 60's is included in this subject, she thought of her mother. I was very involved in Mrs. Johnson's Beautification program – from being called to the White House at any hour to having a task force of landscape architects assigned to me to produce designs. Therefore, Andrea wanted photos and information. I went to my files and spent several days copying and organizing the data to send her.

A quote of mine in the April 14, 1965 Milwaukee Journal seems to be prophetic. I said, "We can no longer just assume that we will have clean air and clean water. The trouble is that in this country, we have been brought up on the idea that there was always more. We could always move west. We have to change this attitude." Then I add, "It may already be too late."

It may already be too late. How different things would be today if people of faith, corporate America, business, government agencies at all levels had paid attention to what it means to cherish and care for earth. Today, we would not be feeling the effects of human-induced global climate change. We would not be seeing Adelaide penguins dying off in the Antarctic because of melting ice; polar bears dying off in the Arctic because winter is now a month less than normal and the young do not have time to mature; huge icebergs breaking off and gradually raising sea level. We need to pray for coastal areas like Florida. We need to pray for Bangladesh.

Years ago I traveled to Yosemite National Park to go on a pack trip in the high Sierras. After supper one evening at the campsite high in the mountains, a few of us walked out to an upper meadow where we could sit and watch the colors flow from the mountain as the sun set behind us. We sat in silence. I was in awe of this creation moment and sensed God's presence in a deep way. As the women with me rose to go, one said as she passed me still sitting there; "but by the looks of your face I'm not sure you should come down." Experiencing God in

the high country was affecting the way I looked. It reminded me of an Old Testament figure who had a similar experience on the mountaintop.

As McFague says, paying attention results in being in awe of not only the Creator, but being in awe of the beauty and complexity of the Creator's creation. She mentions a number of things that I have found significant in my life. One is that we need to relate to nature in the same way that we relate to others and to God.

That nature is valued for itself – not because of what it can do for us. Nature is God's beloved. Third, we need to experience nature – not by virtual reality. Pay particular attention to where you are. What is going on in nature where you live, at 2025, at Carroll Street? Pick a place and become acquainted – pay detailed attention to get to know it. Art and writing can help us pay attention. As Simone Weil says: "By paying attention we are in fact praying." Acknowledge that we each live in relationship with nature as well as with God and other people.

I continued to attend church in Alexandria, frequently teaching in a young adult class. Teaching adult classes has continued for me until just a few years ago when the fatigue and pain of Fibromyalgia depleted the energy.

In 1967, I married Doug, whom I had met in the young adult class. We moved to Miami Florida where I continued to do pro-bono work in landscape architecture, or volunteer work in natural history subjects for the Girl Scouts – including writing an article for them which tied in our being God's earth keepers. I continued to study sub-tropical nature.

Active in the church again on moving to Virginia, I remember, some 30 years ago speaking with a woman in the church about starting an eco-theological group. Both of us realized that no one, least of all the leaders in the local congregation, would

get it. So in order to put my faith into action I would have to articulate my care for God's earth as a faith dimension by doing it alone – or with only one or two people like my husband or daughter or a friend.

It is at this point that I began to gradually adjust my giving priorities. I had always given a tithe to church work or church related things. In fact, the first year after working in the National Park Service the IRS audited me. Contributions were the unbelievably thing. I went in for the review – pulled out the wad of my canceled checks – to which the investigator replied, "Wow! You are dismissed."

Therefore, as I saw that the earth was outside the camp for the care of the church I began to join and financially support increasingly more environmental groups. I say more and more because as one who since 10 years of age saw all Creation as loved and valued by God I wanted to include as much of it in my faith support as I could. I am grateful that Doug has gone along with this arrangement too.

In the dialogue between Jesus and the crowd in the John reading today, it continues after verse 33 and in verse 12:36 says – "The light is with you a little longer. **Walk while you have the light, so that darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.**" We must let Christ's light reshape, reconstruct, recreate the Christian response to our way of thinking about creation. As Rosemary Ruether says, we need to "convert our minds to the earth." We must discontinue the thinking prevalent in Christianity that nature is mere backdrop to living the Christian life. We must change to celebrate God's presence in, with and under all the ecosystems of the world. Within that celebration, our obedience to God must include for each one of us ecological care for all creation. We can only do this by paying attention. Let us wake up to pay attention while there is still light.