

The more we destroy people and nature, the more we contribute to all kinds of disruptions in our world today: wars, pandemics, violence, drought, floods. (Pixabay/Gerd Altmann)



by Mercy Shumbamhini

Contributor

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

April 22, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As we celebrate Earth Day this month, I have been reflecting on my pastoral journey with Sister Theresa, a young religious from another congregation who was referred to me for counseling. She grappled with our "throwing away" culture in a way that illustrates the plight of us all trapped in similar situations. Even if it appears as if everything is well, the disruption in our world today tells us otherwise.

I have been inspired and amazed at Sister Theresa's alternative/new story — a new story of our place within the natural world. An alternative story that promotes a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. A new story of hope, a story of healing, a story of connecting with nature. I think sharing her story can cultivate respect and connection to the Earth.

Pastoral care should also involve ecological care, because we are connected to one another through our ecological positioning. We have abandoned and mistreated our Earth, just like we have mistreated and neglected the fragile, the poor and the marginalized people in our society. I believe that injustice done to nature is injustice done to humanity; the destruction and brokenness of nature is humanity's destruction and brokenness, too.

We must work with nature, not against it. War against nature is inevitably a war against ourselves. The more we destroy people and nature, the more we contribute to all kinds of disruptions in our world today: wars, pandemics, violence, drought, floods. Breaking our relationship with nature will result in our own destruction. Arthur Dahl says this breakdown in our relationship with nature has not only led to serious environmental problems, but is precipitating psychological, social, economic and even spiritual problems for many today. Humanity's broken relationship with nature comes at a cost. Therefore, in order to reduce the risk of future epidemics in our world today, we need to heal our broken relationship with ourselves and our nature.

Advertisement

During our pastoral conversations with Sister Theresa, she became aware that humanity and nature are not separate. Resonating with what Pope Francis said in "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" — "We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" — she sees the Earth not as a dead rock with resources to exploit, but as a living system that needs to live like each one of us. She explained:

> I can see that our life styles of greediness and selfishness lead our life to go distantly far away from God and God's creation; in this way we destroy the healthy relationship between human beings' life and life of the planet and all creatures living in it. And as a result, this affects the environment of the world, especially the poor.
>
> We have to conserve, protect and restore the health of the earth's ecosystems. I also see that we have to select technologies that sustain the natural environment by becoming co-workers with non-human nature, not dominators over it. But we must also remember that whatever harm we do to our planet, we are harming ourselves too. I see that there are a lot of behaviours I have been doing myself like throwing food away, leaving electrical gadgets on, leaving my light to burn the whole night, wasting water, leaving soap in water — I want to mend this relationship with the earth.
>
> In caring for the earth, I also deepen my relationship with God, with nature and with other people, making my faith more alive and relevant, in and to a broken world. We benefit a lot from the earth, for she provides for our day-to-day survival, including the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink. Therefore, if we take great care of her, we can greatly improve our quality of life**.** We must embrace a just and healthy attitude towards our environment, an attitude which values nature as the foundation for a just and healthy society.

Indeed, Sister Theresa has started to apply the 3Rs — reduce, reuse and recycle — in her daily routine. She has changed her lifestyle by avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport, planting trees and flowers, and turning off unnecessary lights, for

example.

We are connected to one another, and each one of us is connected to nature. St. Hildegard of Bingen explained that we are not separate from nature, but an intimate part of it. She saw that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us. St. Hildegard invites each one of us not to injure, hurt or destroy the Earth that nourishes and sustains humanity.



We need to change our lifestyle and attitudes and replace our current philosophies of domination of nature with ecosystemic philosophies of partnership and boundedness with nature. (Unsplash/Tatenda Mapigoti)

From this I see all creation as a revelation of God's glory and beauty. The natural world itself — in its immensity, its beauty and splendor, its awesomeness and wonder — can offer an overpowering sense of connection to something beyond our imagination.

Fr. Thomas Berry says that it is very important to listen to the voices of Earth. We have to listen to the stars in the heavens and the sun and the moon, to the mountains and the plains, to the forests and rivers and seas that surround us, to the meadows and the flowering grasses, to the songbirds and the insects and to their music. This will activate our inner spiritual life and bring inner peace and serenity.

The presence of God in all creation is a precious and loving gift to each one of us, and I can only respond to God with gratitude. How beautiful to see God in everything around us, and as St. Ignatius of Loyola puts it, finding God in all things. With the beauty of flowers, I see the beauty of God. With the immensity of a sea, I comprehend God's infinity! With the light of the sun, I experience God's glory and love. Nature always soothes my heart and soul, puts me in a place of reverence. The colors, shapes — all these are a gift reminding me there is never an end to the mysteries all around me. With this awareness, I understand better the need to care and protect our planet.

Therefore, if we nurture nature as she nurtures us, it means we must care for each other as brothers and sisters woven together by the love God has for all creation. It means also we must care for — as St. Francis of Assisi would say — our sister water, sister moon and our brothers the trees.

In this way we are caring for our future generations. Our children deserve clean air and a healthy environment. Let us stop harming our future generations! Let us give them the chance to experience God's beauty and glory.

We need to change our lifestyle and attitudes and replace our current philosophies of domination of nature with ecosystemic philosophies of partnership and boundedness with nature. And by promoting and protecting every life, we will be creating an inclusive, just, peaceful and loving society for all.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production** feature series. View the full series.