Conservation as a Ministry

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You walk into a church you have never visited before and pick up the weekly bulletin. Looking down the list of church activities you see "Conservation Ministry." How could religious people, whether they be Christians or some other faith, see conservation as a *ministry*? We usually reserve that term for reaching out to the homeless, the sick, or the troubled: i.e., people. How could conserving land (or water and air) be a ministry? The essence of any ministry is reaching out to someone else and sharing one's life with that person. So whom do we reach out to when we conserve land? [1]

The Importance of Relationships[2]

Although we cannot delve into this principle in depth in this essay, religious people basically see things *relationally*. Relationships form the basis for the way they see the world,

[1] In this essay I use the term "land" to stand for whatever it is we are trying to conserve, whether forest, lake, grassland, ocean, watershed, or ecosystem.

[2] This essay has benefited greatly from the presentations and discussions of the Center Forum (http://cresewanee.wordpress.org), which has addressed the nature of faith-based conservation.

whether they are between people, between people and nonhuman creatures, or between all beings and God.[3] Walter Brueggemann points out from a Christian perspective that God always has involved land and people together in God's covenants.[4] In both the Old and New Testaments, God works in and through creation and even speaks through creation. According to Scripture our spiritual and physical health depend upon a right relationship with the rest of the created order. When we treat creation, both human and nonhuman, with love and respect, treating it with wisdom that comes from knowing it well, the entire created order prospers, or experiences *shalom*.

One cannot truly have a relationship with a machine. A relationship involves two parties that respond to one another. Most major religious traditions assume that nature is response-able—if we are open and are clean of heart, our traditions maintain that nature will respond to us. Stories abound of saints who have special relationships with animals and of trees that rejoice and "clap their hands."

Particularly since the Enlightenment, western civilization has considered nature to be an impersonal mechanism, or "clock," that humans can manipulate with impunity (though since the publication of *Silent Spring* we have come to realize that there can be physical consequences to us as the result

[3] Theravada Buddhists, who do not believe in a deity, stress the connectedness among all beings, human and nonhuman. Relating rightly to all things lies at the heart of the Buddhist approach to living an enlightened life.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1977).

of our impacts on the environment). Humans differ from "nature"; indeed, they stand apart from it. Having a personal and spiritual tie with nature does not enter into consideration. Yes, the Romantic poets and their successors tried to say otherwise, but for the most part society has proceeded as I have described very briefly here. So conservation in this perspective often implies carving out areas where we either manage the land in a way that minimizes our damage to nature or we allow nature to go its way without human interference ("untrammelled nature").[5]

In this day and age, therefore, religious people attempting to conserve land or water, if they are true to their faiths, will run counter to the prevailing culture. They will view their activities as maintaining or restoring proper relationships among people, nonhuman creatures ("nature"), God (for theists), and, where ecological processes are out of whack, the elements of the nonhuman order. In short, for faithful people, conservation is a ministry of reconciliation and healing, of maintaining or restoring right relationships.

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[5] While it is true that many conservationists have personal relationships with nature, the conservation profession tends to minimize that aspect when crafting conservation management plans. One common conservation goal consists of "restoring" nature to a "pristine" state on the assumption that at some point in the last few millennia humans did not affect the rest of creation. This is an increasingly controversial assumption in the light of more recent scholarship.

Ecology, which lies at the heart of conservation science, started with the assumption that humans were not part of the ecosystems it studied. More recent work has started to include humans as part of the natural order and considers that the nonhuman and human orders have co-adapted.

Getting to Know the Land

For us to restore the relationship between people and land, however, we cannot be standing on the outside looking in—we must *know* our land. This process involves three activities.

First, when Adam named the creatures God made, Adam gave them each a name that signified a deep understanding of their nature and their role within the created order. Similarly, we need to know who our neighbors are and learn to understand them. We also need to understand how they relate to one another.[6] So we need to understand not only the biology and geology of a place, but also its ecology.

Similarly, because people and land always go together, we must come to understand the history of their interactions in this place over time. What has happened here over time between people? How have people treated the land and how does that affect what we see today? Has this place experienced conflict or peace and hope? How has this experience been written on the land archaeologically, ecologically, and spiritually? What stories come to mind when people walk the land? What does the land speak to us of its history with humans?

Finally, how does the land speak to us now, history aside, and how does God speak to us through it? Just as you can speak to me and affect me in a variety of ways, so can the land. And, just as God can speak to me through you, so can

[6] The word "world," as in "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," includes not only the entire created order but also its arrangement or orderliness. In the Judeo-Christian tradition God cares not only about all God's creatures but also about the way things work together. God loves the beauty of the interrelationships and finds it good.

God speak to us through the land. After all, God has quite a history of speaking to us through burning bushes and various mountains (such as Mt. Sinai). Just as God speaks to us differently through the various people we know, every place, just like every person, has certain characteristics that give it its own personality. This in turn affects how it, and God, speak to us. A jagged, craggy mountain in the Rockies will speak to us quite differently than a short grass prairie or a beach, and so will God speak to us differently in each place as a result. So we need to get to know the spiritual personality of the place we are conserving and allow it and God to speak to us. In this way we will come to conserve the land and manage it in partnership *with* it.

These three activities of getting to know the land set the stage for conservation. We cannot conserve what we do not know, nor can the place educate us and guide us if we do not get in there and engage it. Because it is always people and land together, now we can decide whether or not there are critical biological and physical components that need preserving or restoring, key ecological processes to which we need to give attention, historical and cultural sites and stories that we must preserve, and particular attributes of the land that we need to take into account because of their spiritual significance for us. All these factors come into play as we make plans for how we will conserve and manage our land.

Religious Conservation as Ministry

As religiously motivated conservationists, we may not realize that we actually are engaging in ministry. We may

think in technical terms about ecological inventories, watersheds, and conservation easements, but our work has even broader dimensions.

The Ministries of Reconciliation and Healing

Religious landowners wanting to conserve their land are engaged in a ministry of reconciliation with it, of restoring lost relationships and forging new ones. Someone helping landowners desiring to conserve their land also engages in a ministry of reconciliation by helping the landowner come into relationship with his or her land. Whereas secular conservationists also may encourage landowners to know the ecology and cultural history of their land, religious conservationists add to that knowledge the spiritual dimension of re-establishing a loving communication with the land.

The ministry goes further than this, however. Let us say that you have been out of touch with a sister for many years either because of neglect or because of hurtful words that passed between you. The first step to re-establishing the relationship ("repentance") requires grief over the loss of the relationship and over whatever hurts you may have inflicted on her. Grief facilitates empathy with her and a desire to heal the relationship. The next step involves asking forgiveness for the lack of contact, accepting forgiveness, and, taking any actions necessary to heal the hurt that remains. That process may involve psychological counseling, restitution, prayer for healing of painful memories, and confession (sacramental and otherwise). In the latter case we ask God's forgiveness for the breach of the relationship and ask for God's healing of it.

When we have lost touch with our land and/or have abused it in some way, either personally or as a member of society (or as a representative of the human race), we also need to enter a process of reconciliation just as we would with people. This process involves experiencing grief, asking and receiving forgiveness, working to undo the effects of past abuse, and dealing with the cumulative wrongs that the land may have endured. As religious people we can do so in a variety of ways. Joanna Macy, for instance, has developed a number of rituals to help people experience empathy and grief with the nonhuman world. We, too, may devise liturgies of forgiveness and healing and, just as some traditions have developed ministries of healing with their own guidelines and expectations, so we may develop ministries to heal broken relationships with the land. If, for example, we own a former cotton plantation, we may choose to ask descendants of former slaves to participate in prayer for forgiveness for past injustices that occurred on the land and for a healing of the impacts of those injustices on the land itself. Each religious tradition may choose to approach this process differently.

Healing the relationship may also involve healing people. I know one young woman who came to a five-day Opening the Book of Nature (outdoor contemplation) event I was facilitating. Our first exercise involved just spending an hour or so around our campsite in silence. She, however, found the experience so frightening that the best she could do was to sit on the hood of her car in the dirt parking lot nearby. While she really wanted to help conserve land in her area, she found being out in nature terrifying. After five days of allowing God

to speak to her through nature, by the end of our stay she was wandering through the woods thoroughly enjoying herself. In her case healing her relationship with the land mainly involved healing her psyche and emotions.

Finally, we have come to learn that people and land always go together spiritually and ecologically. In recent years we have learned that areas we once thought were pristine "nature," such as the Amazonian rainforest, actually were heavily populated and manipulated by humans.[7] The distribution of plants in the Amazon, for instance, reflects in no small part the planting and "gardening" by generations of human inhabitants. In many ways humans and human cultures have co-adapted with the ecosystems of which they are part. Landscape ecology, the study of interrelated ecosystems over large regions, recognizes this co-adaptation by consciously including humans within the ecosystems they study. After all, people upstream from a forest with its meandering stream can have a huge impact on what happens in the forest below. Science is starting to recognize that humans are *part of* nature, not *apart from* nature.

Similarly, religious traditions emphasize the connections between people and between people and their land. But not all people who care about a piece of land live on it. The stories about a given piece of land may belong to people who live beyond its borders, people who for many years may have hunted or worshipped on that land. So religious conservationists need to engage the broader community both to understand

[7] See, for instance, Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

the land and to conserve it. Doing so has the potential to build community, to establish connections between people who care about the land for various reasons. Whatever one's faith this ministry of community-building is integral to conserving an area. While it promotes conservation, it also brings wholeness into society; it helps bring *shalom*.

So religious conservation's broad agenda attempts to re-establish connections both spiritual and physical between people and their land and, for Christians, between people, land, and God. Adapting the tools within a tradition, tools of ritual and prayer and of the power of community, religious conservation is thus a ministry of reconciliation and healing whose power we have yet to discover.

The Ministries of Justice and Feeding the Poor

Often the poor suffer the most from environmental degradation. They live and farm on steep slopes prone to erosion and landslides. Their cousins live in the flood plains downstream from these slopes and suffer when the rivers and creeks overflow, destroying buildings and crops. Because the poor have few financial or economic assets, they rely on the assets that nature provides, such as rivers, forests, and marshes, to provide them a living. When these are degraded or destroyed, the poor suffer.

Accordingly, conservation not only can restore a right relationship between humans and land but can also restore old (or create new) livelihoods for the poor. Conservation has the potential for righting wrongs the land and people suffer

and for providing the means whereby the poor can feed and clothe themselves.

The Ministry of Evangelization

How do we help people see that conservation involves more than conservation easements and appropriate management techniques, namely, also re-establishing right relationships with the land? Similarly, how might we help people interested in conservation but who do not follow a religious path get involved in the way that we have described above? How do we help people "get it"?

Jesus might give us a good model to follow. When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus who he was, he told them to tell John that the sick were healed, the dead raised, and the poor were receiving good news. Rather than trying to convince people from Scripture that he was the one they were waiting for, he healed the sick and reached out to the poor. He let people *experience* the kingdom rather than trying to convince them that it had come.

We can do the same thing. Research today increasingly shows that people are not convinced by logical argument, particularly when the logic runs counter to what they already believe. People do respond, however, to something that touches their hearts. So we need to give people an experience of what we are talking about. In a time when more and more people lack a felt experience of God, helping them encounter God in God's creation may be the most effective "argument"

we can muster for conservation.[8] When people love something, when they come to consider it sacred, they will want to protect it. Until then, even if they agree intellectually to the idea, they may not act on it.

We need to engage in a "come and see" ministry. Rather than trying to convince landowners of our approach, let us get them in touch with God through the out-of-doors.[9] When they have the experience and want to understand it, then we can offer them our understanding. We can help them name it.

So conservation also involves evangelization in the best sense of the word—an invitation to a felt experience of God and of our connectedness with all our fellow creatures. Rather than preach, we invite others to experience what we experience, to "come and see." Outdoor contemplation programs such as Opening the Book of Nature offer one such opportunity.[10] Exactly how we entice people to such events requires sensitivity, wisdom, and artfulness. That is something we can pray for.

Conclusion

Those of us engaged in faith-based conservation work understand that conservation involves getting people back in touch with nature and with its spiritual dimensions. Perhaps

[8] See Ronald Rolsheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

[9] Or, from a Buddhist perspective, let us get them to experience their connectedness with all beings and the deep spiritual transformation that occurs as a result.

[10] For information on Opening the Book of Nature see www.sewanee.edu/resources/CRE

a defining of terms would be good! What is "spiritual?" How does it differ from someone engaged in the land who is perceiving beauty and wholeness without a sense of God? When we engage in conservation we work as servants reconnecting people and land in the broadest and deepest context possible. We seek to open eyes, ears, and hearts to new dimensions of life and to bring about healing and reconciliation as a result. We help bring about a New Heaven and New Earth. That is a ministry indeed.