

Stewardship of the Earth: Co-Creating in the Bigger Field

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We have lost the sense of belonging in our world and to the God who creates, nurtures, and redeems this world and all its creatures, and we have lost the sense that we are part of a living, changing, dynamic cosmos that has its being in and through God. We have lost this sense - not intellectually as an idea but as a daily sensibility that accompanies and qualifies all we do, the unquestioned milieu in which we conduct our lives.

Sallie McFague in *The Body of God - An Ecological Theology*

Stewardship of the earth holds that there is an intrinsic value of all creatures. God created everything and gave the whole of creation intrinsic value by calling it good. Therefore the human being, made in the image of God, as the steward of God's creation, is not only to protect, nourish and sustain its own well being but also that of all creatures.

I was on retreat this summer for a week of silent prayer. Me and Fr. Vinny from Hoboken with 100 Sisters of St. Joseph were all at the SSJ retreat center called St. Mary by the Sea - right next to the Lighthouse at Cape May, NJ. The refrain of the opening worship service was "May we surrender to your tides of transformation". It was an appropriate way to begin. During the retreat I read the Gospel of Matthew and especially Matthew chapter 13. What I noticed is how many seed and growth passages there are in that chapter. There is the parable of the sower with the seed falling on different types of environments, there is the pearl that grows in the oyster, the treasure hidden in a field, leaven seed in the loaf, a net in the sea. All seem to point to our role as stewards. To be farmers: planters and harvesters and fishermen -- all are stewards. For they do not cause seeds or fish or pearls to grow. God causes them to grow. Yet we have a role to play. The summary statement that came to me was - "You are a God's steward and you are God's field".

In the midst of my field-farmer-steward-reflection, I had an extended time on the beach watching and listening. I watched and as dolphins danced in the waves, I noticed that several varieties of seagulls were nesting in the sands and grasses all around me. They didn't seem to notice me. None flew away. I was in their world. One seagull kept standing on one foot. Why do they do that? The seagulls were singing to each other. They stood around a huddle of young birds clumped together inside the circle in their teenage birdiness. High energy. Lots of activity. Was this the bird version of texting? The young ones kept moving while the older ones faced the wind. Preened their chests. Felt the spray in their faces. And watched the sea with an eye on their youngsters.

And what came through to me is that I am a steward of a larger field than I had been imagining. I am the farmer! We are all farmers. Much has been given to us so much is expected. A farmer cultivates the soil so the seed can grow. Then lets it go. We will be

known by our fruits. We are to tend those who are given to our care. To pay attention. To watch over, protect, and act. And to receive. All that is around us. All that has been given.

So my prayer was - OK God - I will tend your field. I will be a servant and take care of what you have given me. It is your field. And God said - no you don't get it (that was actually God's word!) it is **your** field. Now it is open. I have made this ground and these seeds. And you are to take them and plant them and allow something to come up. The field is yours. It is waiting for you and others to tend so the seed can take root and grow. *The field is mine?* I asked. Absolutely. It is yours. I give it to you. You are now the farmer-owner - not the hired hand, or even the steward (in the sense that you are not a co-owner) - you are the co-owner. *Is this true?* I asked. Yes. Treat it as if it were your own. Turn the soil. Aerate it. Give it some fertilizer. Watch over those in your care. Pay attention. Look out for each other. Work together. And trust. Trust above all else that He who created the earth and all that is in it will bring seeds to fruition in your field. Be a steward - a co-owner of this field I am giving you.

We are being given a bigger field than we have known or accepted in the past. As farmer/steward/field owners we are to: challenge people to be all they can be, to hold one another accountable to being bigger, to speak of messes and victories, to confess what we have received and ignored. Challenge people to be all they can be. Then hold them accountable for being that way. Co-creating stewards hold on and let go. They sow seeds not knowing what will happen. Seeds that don't have to grow in a field or in a religious institution. They grow wherever we are. It is not a place it is a people and a world. We are to be co-owners of all that is around us. The world is full of God. And it is up to us to take hold of it and not wait for somebody else - even for God - to do what is in front of us.

What is the field - or the fields - that each of our faith communities - and each of us - have been given to work? That is a question for all of us to ask and seek to answer. I contend that the field is out there and it is also in here. It is in here. We are the field. And those to whom we are given are the field. For the field is not an it or a thing or a place. It is a living. It is people and all created things. Animals, trees and plants. Birds and grasshoppers. Seagulls and even squirrels. Not to mention mountains, oceans and yes - fields.

Teilhard de Chardin wrote: *Plunge into matter – plunge into God. By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.*

Douglas John Hall in *The Steward – A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* points to the need to go from doing stewardship to being stewards. There is a big difference. Doing stewardship can keep it as a project, external, outside of oneself. Being stewards refers to identity. Who we are choosing to be in the world. It comes from an internal sense of myself and my relation to others. When I do stewardship I can be disconnected. When I

am a steward I am already connected to my calling. When I do stewardship my motivation may have nothing actually to do with stewardship except as a means to another end. When I am a steward, my motivation is my purpose. When I do stewardship, I can be 'one and done'. When I am a steward, all I do, even when it is not obvious, comes from a place of being a co-creator with God in the field I am given.

Hall addresses the need for a new emphasis on human and religious responsibility for and in the world. He claims the word stewardship is an excellent word for it connects to religious and non-religious people. This understanding of stewardship is one that can connect religious and non religious people in a common quest to care for this world in which we all live. To build partnerships and to work together across lines and barriers to live out what we have long preached and taught. The breadth and complexity of the need is requiring us to find ways to do make this happen.

Co- owning stewards are like the businesses that are owned by their employees today – as we are given the invitation – and mandate – to be co-owning stewards of our world with religious and non religious people. Yet religious people – and I am speaking particularly of Christians here- have always had trouble caring unconditionally, despite what we say or believe. Neither have we been free to be honest and say that we do not care, even when we don't. We exist in a kind of trap that freezes us in inaction. We have been and continue to be ambiguous about the world. What needs to change so that this care became not just a sentiment and a duty, but a way of being? What if, instead of an emphasis on just trying to survive, we showed up in the world as honestly being stewards of the bigger field? What if instead of trying to bring the world to us – to our religious institutions – we acted out of an humble and open care for this world – one which we have received from God whose care for the world is infinite? What if our communities began to think and plan and act and suffer for the enhancement of this beloved world? What if we began to act from a motive of service rather than our own self interest? What if stewardship became our very mode of operation – our identity and our stance – our way of being and way of expressing our faith?

There is a future for a religious minority that is rooted in the earth because it is centered in God. One that does not have an axe to grind or ideology to guard or an ulterior motive for its services – but can simply be there for humanity and for the earth and to truly be co-creators with God and each other in the bigger fields we are being given.

To be farmers and fishermen and stewards – co –owners of this field we have been given means taking seriously who we are being in the world. It is more than doing a mission project and moving on to the next thing on the calendar. It more than feeling sad about what is happening to the Bay. It is more than talking about the earth in our synagogues and churches and having Green committees. And it is more than taking bold actions to do something. The real change that we are called to embody happens on the inside. It begins within each one of us. Who are we being? And what are we looking to bring about by who we are being? If our actions – as well intentioned as they may be – aren't rooted in who we are – they will dry up and fade away.

Cynthia Bourgeault says that we have been poisoning the well from which our being flows. When we lock up everything including our hearts and become obsessed with privacy and personal safety, we are sowing fear in our fields. When we fill our planet with 70 hour workweeks and disregard family harmony we are generating stress in our fields. When we continue to ignore the results of the toxins we are putting into the earth – our land and our water – we are spreading selfish greed in our fields. We need to become conscious of what we are sowing in our emotional as well as physical and environmental fields. And how we are sowing it! We have the opportunity to sow life rather than death. We can sow connection, bridge building and learning from all, and to do so by living from the inside out. Significant action flows from deeper being. To be co-creating stewards of the bigger field, we need to address the paucity of attention we give to who we are being as religious people.

And what if the co-creating stewardship approach to field work took seriously and included all the diverse, strange, unique, multitude of creatures that there are in any given field? What if what came to mind when we thought of our fields was not one thing – but many – not sameness but difference? The old models we have followed since the enlightenment were unable to take the intrinsic value of individual beings seriously – the harmonious functioning of the whole has been viewed as more important than the autonomy of its parts. The systems we've inherited have resisted having parts of the whole acting independently. Someone must control – from top down – to insure smooth functioning. One body, one system, common outcomes – all connote sameness. Not difference. And the sameness – predictable outcomes – derive from, support and benefit whoever is in charge. What happens to being in this model? It is not invited to co-own, to take real responsibility, to grow into who it is intended to be. What might happen? We lose touch with feeling and passion – and compassion. Apathy takes over. We stay small and our fields remain small.

Instead of coming from the perspective that all are smaller parts of one field that has one owner – some one in charge – my suggestion is that we take Sallie McFague's fractal approach: all parts of the field are whole in and of themselves. Rather than all of us having a piece of the whole – each one is whole in and of itself and together we form the bigger whole. We are all whole aspects of one Being made up of and interwoven with all of the multitude of beings on earth. This is "The Body of God" as McFague calls it. All are needed for the greater whole to be alive and healthy and thriving. All are interconnected, interrelated sometimes in radical, profound, awesome and remote ways. As Jacob Boehme said in the 17th century – *I am a string in the concert of God's joy*. Each of us plays a clear and whole note which is beautiful on its own and when added together in the larger chord it creates a full sound that can only come about when sounded together.

There are clear Implications here for the way our faith communities are organized and function. The focus of our teaching and the expectations we hold for community members will need to be addressed as well. We do not have the time to explore these today. Suffice it to say that we need to wrestle with an organic approach to who our

communities of faith are and what is needed in order to equip, encourage, and promote the identity and action of co-creating stewards of the larger field in our synagogues and churches. This can be the subject of another talk at another time.

We all live in this world together. The earth is our home. We are not aliens and tourists. We belong here. This is our field. And so – we will want to care for it and love it. Co-creating stewardship is love made manifest. Like the love of God by which it is enabled, love also involves suffering with others – now understood as inclusive of all species, not only of our own kind. In this solidarity with the whole, in the love of God, we shall find not only our identity and mission but our own human fulfillment as well. This is the time to embrace our calling and to step out in love in and with God's bigger field.

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