Opinion
EarthBeat



(Unsplash/Bintang Dwi Cahyo)



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Last June, a tree threw a pine cone at me. The cone dropped into my lap with such force that someone seated next to me thought my camp chair broke. I can only describe the experience as shocking, almost violent.

I was attending a five-day immersion for forest therapy training in southern New Hampshire. We had just spent the last 15 minutes meditating on the clouds. Seated on the ground in a circle with 20 other participants, I was listening to someone speak about their observations about the exercise.

Then out of the blue — literally the blue sky — a pine cone shot into my lap. There were some gasps from the circle, along with some laughter. Then someone in their kindness asked, "Are you OK?" I responded, "Yes," in a quiet voice, not wanting to interrupt the meditative group sharing.

At that moment, I was amused by the unexpected incident. It was not obvious where the cone came from or how it fell. It was not a windy day. The most likely possibility was a crown of exposed branches at the top of a 100-foot pine tree on the edge of the field.

After the group sharing, some participants commented on what an unusual occurrence it was, particularly the precision of the cone's target. One person even said with slight envy, "That is so cool."

> To listen to the Earth is to hear both her songs and her cries.
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As part of our training and practice of forest therapy, we were intentionally opening ourselves to messages from the more-than-human world through the senses. I had gone into the day with the intention to deeply listen to where the land was calling me and what I was called to do.

It was similar to how Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* invites us to listen to a message in creation: "This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since 'for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.' "

Generally when I am listening to the message in creation, I attune to creation's beauty. However, as I held the pine cone in my hands, feeling the stickiness of the sap, I began to feel another message, a message of urgency and a call to wake up. Chicken Little's cry, "The sky is falling!" came to me, knowing that in some way our sky, our climate, is falling because we have caused it to fall.

As the sap made my fingers gently stick together, a message came to me: "Do not get stuck in this contemplative practice just for yourself, to feel good." Throughout the week, I had been immersed in the beauty of creation: the gorgeous blue sky and wispy clouds, a morning paddleboard with the mist rising from a calm lake. This beauty was stunning, reminding me of the glory of God.

Feeling the sharp spines of the pine cone I knew that reaching a meditative calm can feel relaxing, but it should not allow one to be complacent. I was being pricked into staying awake to some of the harshness of what our world is facing. To listen to the Earth is to hear both her songs and her cries. We cannot allow our privilege to shield us from this truth.

After that group sharing, we were invited to go out and spend time with a being on the land. I decided to find the tree who sent me this pine cone message. I traced my vision from the crown of pine cones down the long trunk until I found the base of the tree about 15 feet away. I made a path through the ferns and some dead plants, ducking beneath low branches until I found her trunk.



(Unsplash/Kemal Berkay Dogan)

As I touched her ridged bark I whispered softly, "I'm here, I'm listening." And unexpectedly, tears formed in my eyes, as if physically feeling her rough trunk I was able to connect with her pain. I began crying for what we have done and are doing to our planet. I cried for our children and the world we might be leaving behind. I cried that this tree was so desperate that it pelted a pine cone at me. I felt the call again to urgency. And I knew also that I could not separate my tears from joy.

As I think about this incident, I am reminded of a quote from Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*: "Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it."

There is ample suffering in our world to attune to: extreme heat waves, deaths and flooding from Hurricane Debby, wildfires. And this is just in the United States. How can a message from a pine cone help?

For me, it was a reminder that nature continues to speak to us. That God is constantly communicating to us through God's creation.

Even I, working full time on climate, need to be reminded of the urgency of this work. The message to me was a renewal of my commitment to climate justice work at the Laudato Si' Movement. It can be easy to get focused on the daily responsibilities, which for me at this time often includes approving expenses, editing documents or facilitating meetings. The pine cone was a reminder that to be faithful means to continue to listen. To continue to contemplate with creation, to see what God is saying to us, to "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," as Francis says in *Laudato Si*'.

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One way to do this is through the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* — slow, contemplative praying of Scriptures. In this traditional practice, one first reads the text (*lectio*), then meditates on a word or phrase (*meditatio*) and prays (*oratio*) with a question or insight that arises. Finally, through the grace of God, one might be led into contemplation (*contemplatio*), simply resting in God's presence.

How to pray 'lectio divina' with creation

Read/*Lectio*: First "read" creation by walking or looking around slowly, taking in with the senses what is around you. Notice the different colors, shapes, smells, textures.

I "read" the incident of the pine cone being pelted at me as a narrative of this pine tree wanting to share a message with me.

Meditate/*Meditatio*: Notice if something attracts your attention and allow yourself to linger there. It might be a flower, a tree or cloud formations in the sky. Use your senses. Reflect on how you experience God's presence within or through this element of creation.

I meditated on the sap from the pine cone. I physically touched the bark of the pine tree.

Pray/*Oratio*: Enter into dialogue with God or this creature as a reflection of God's presence. You might ask a question such as, "God, what are you saying to me through this tree?" Or you might just give God thanks for the beauty of this creation. Then allow yourself to listen. Allow yourself to be open to what God might be saying to you through creation. Don't worry if you don't hear anything. Just be open to what might arise, without forcing anything.

When I prayed with the tree I heard the cry of the Earth, God's cry through the suffering of the Earth.

Contemplate/*Contemplatio*: After some time, let go of any words or thoughts and just allow yourself to rest in God's presence. You might close your eyes and simply relax.

After my tears and prayer, I sat at the base of the tree. I allowed my emotions and thoughts to wash over me. I rested in God's presence.

The pine cone I prayed with now sits on my dresser. It is a reminder of the message in creation and the need to continue "to dare to turn what is happening to the world into [my] own personal suffering."

This story appears in the **Contemplation With Creation** feature series. View the full series.