Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You're listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens, that's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment, and our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

Nate Hagens (00:00:33):

On last week's podcast, Ayan Mahamoud, a Muslim, remarked how there is an environmental ethic embedded in the Quran, which I didn't know. This week, religious scholar, Mary Evelyn Tucker, unpacks this from an academic perspective. What do the roots of environmental ethics and religions all over the world look like? How could we learn from the uniting power of religion to help us organize and mobilize against impending global crises?

Nate Hagens (00:01:07):

Mary Evelyn directs the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University and is also the co-creator of the film, Journey of the Universe. She is, as you are about to find out, infectious in her grace, warmth, and positivity. I hope you enjoy this conversation with Religion Ecology scholar, Mary Evelyn Tucker.

Nate Hagens (00:01:45):

Mary Evelyn Tucker, great to see you.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:01:47):

Wonderful to see you, Nate. You're looking good.

Nate Hagens (00:01:50):

You as well. We have interacted over the years just in anonymous, not anonymous, but blind emails. And I never met you in person until this summer. And now when I'm seeing your face, it doesn't conjure up religion and ecology, which is going to be the topic of today. It conjures up Danish beer and vegetarian food.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:02:17):

Exactly.

Nate Hagens (00:02:17):

That's the mental memory I have of our great conversations this summer.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:02:23):

I love it.

Nate Hagens (00:02:24):

So, let's get right into it. So, 25 years ago, you founded the Forum for Religion and Ecology, first at Harvard and then now at Yale. So, was your interest and passion always at the nexus of ecology and religion, or did you begin with religious studies and then realized this critical dimension of faith in our relationship with nature and that faith is a powerful tool for being shepherds of the planet, et cetera? In any case, maybe tell us about the project, why it was started, what it has influenced, and what's going on with the project now?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:03:02):

Great. Well, thanks for a chance to talk about something close to my heart and my energies. And my husband, John Grim and I were trained as historians of religion in our PhD work. He specializes in indigenous traditions and mine is Asian religions. And we came to a post tenure moment and we said, "What can we do that might be efficacious, helpful for the environment?"

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:03:26):

We're not scientists, we're not policy people, but we have studied these religions with extraordinary teachers, and I mean all the religions, and we've traveled widely in Asia and elsewhere to study them on the ground. So, we went up for a sabbatical to Harvard at the Center for the Study of World Religions. We said, "Let's start some conferences that would examine what the religions have to say." And we began with Buddhism, interdependence, inter-being as Thích Nhất Hạnh likes to say.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:03:57):

And Confucianism, which is my own specialty, what's the common good? What can we contribute to the society as a whole? So, we began with those two conferences. They were challenging but wonderful conferences. And then someone came up to us and said, "You've got to do this for the rest of the world's religions." I was like, "Oh my goodness." And so we began a series of 10 conferences there and 10 volumes, and this was very collaborative work. I want to say that over and over again.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:04:27):

And everyone to a person said, yes, they'd like to come, they want to contribute. And no one was paid anything except their airfare, et cetera. But it was this sense that if we study these traditions, not just for our CV and some new article and so on, but it's how they can be partners with this huge environmental movement that was already well underway.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:04:53):

So, we'd like to say, in some ways, religions were late but necessary, and science alone is necessary but not sufficient. So, we need this moral force, we need this engagement of values and worldviews. So, we

examine the text and the history and the traditions, and I can stop there, but go on there. We established a website and we've got online courses and so on. But that's the framing, the beginning, the foundation of this work, if you will.

Nate Hagens (00:05:22):

Yeah. Well, we will highlight all your course material and your website in the show notes. So, I think I told you this the last time we spoke. I grew up Catholic and I got my environmental education though not on Sunday mornings at church, but on Sunday evenings watching Marlin Perkins, Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom. I honestly don't even know what the ecological teachings in Christianity are and how those compare with other religions.

Nate Hagens (00:05:54):

The other thing is a mutual colleague, Ayan Mahamoud, I just did a podcast with her who instructed me, because I'm naive in these things, that there is an environmental ethic in the Quran with the trees and the animals and the creatures, which I was also unaware of. So, can you just give an overview of the environmental, ecological threads within Christianity and other religions, especially in the Eastern religions?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:06:23):

Sure.

Nate Hagens (00:06:24):

Is that an impossible question?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:06:26):

No, no. It actually follows from the first, because what we were trying to do at Harvard is exactly answer Nate's questions and our own. In other words, there was no field of religion ecology 25 years ago. So, we were trying to establish a field that would explore what these religions had to say on the environment. And we also wanted to encourage a force on the ground of projects of carbon based audits of churches and synagogues.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:06:54):

So, there's a theoretical and a practical side, ideas and action continually flowing through this. And what we discovered in the religions where we had both environmentalists and scholars and practitioners, this wonderful fusion. What we did discover, there's enormous resources in all the world's religions. Some people will highlight indigenous traditions or Buddhism and so on, but really all the religions have something to say.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:07:21):

And if I could begin with Christianity, because that was the largest conference, it's the largest religion in the world, two billion people, one of the key things is we've begun in biblical studies, more than begun, well established the research on Genesis, so on text, reinterpreting dominion as stewardship, as creation care, not as overseeing and exploiting. So, text had to be reinterpreted. In Islam, it's the notion of trusteeship for the whole community of life, a beautiful word, trusteeship.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:07:58):

And then again, we come to Christian theology. So, now we've got robust ecotheologies of the sacredness of creation. On our website, there's enormous numbers of books and articles published on this and divinity schools and elsewhere are using this. And then even liturgies, there's liturgies now a season of creation to celebrate creation. There's an Earth Mass that was done in New York with Paul Winter for 20 some years and bringing in the animals and so on. So, fantastic changes in liturgy are beginning to happen.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:08:32):

And then this flows into ethics, okay? Because we have not really had an ethics for the more-than-human world. It's very human centered, both in our philosophy and our religions. So, now we have eco-ethics, a whole new field in religion and philosophy. And one of the most important developments from that is that it's not just social ethics now, it's ethics for the environment.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:08:58):

So, it's moving towards eco justice that combines a sense of care for the Earth and care for humans. So, this new synthesis is hugely appealing to young people, environmental justice and eco justice.

Nate Hagens (00:09:12):

Whether they're religious or not?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:09:14):

Oh definitely, definitely. Because environmental justice actually began with the Christian communities here in this country, in Warren County in North Carolina. And we've just had the EPA create a whole new section on environmental justice, but it was the religious communities in minority areas that pressed for this. In Cancer Alley in Louisiana and on and on, and water issues.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:09:38):

But I want to say why these ideas are moving into practice very rapidly with these traditions, and that's the really hopeful sign. So, in institutional changes, you have these energy audits, you have measuring carbon footprints. And religions around the world have some of the largest institutional footprints of schools, of educational places, and certainly of places of worship and so on. So, as they change, that's going to be a major shift.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:10:08):

As well, they have financial leverage, the divestment and investment in sustainable energies. Again, the religious communities are all over this. They started socially responsible investment, because they wanted their pensions to be in responsible areas. So, we have now $40 trillion in divestment from fossil fuels, for example. And a third of that is from the religious communities. It's quite astonishing and continues to be a powerful moral force.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:10:37):

And finally, there's all kinds of restoration projects that religious communities are working on. Wangari Maathai, for example, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in Africa, was both a Christian and indigenous. And those roots contributed to her tree planting the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which won a Nobel Prize. She was empowering women, she was reforesting and so on. And of course, that has spread in so many communities.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:11:06):

And river cleanup is an easy thing to do even in urban settings, and religious communities are doing that. And restoration projects, inner city issues of water, Flint, Michigan, Jackson and so on, religious communities are very involved on the ground in these kinds of issues.

Nate Hagens (00:11:24):

I'm going to get back to that, but I want to highlight something you said a few minutes ago. Mary Evelyn, we are friends, but I know just the scratched surface of your topic, so forgive some naive questions. But while you were speaking, I just looked up on trustee Google here, Genesis 1:26, "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth.'"

Nate Hagens (00:11:59):

Well, from an ecological systems' perspective, I would say mission accomplished. We have done that. But what you're saying is, now religious scholars are changing the perception of the text, of the words, of what was meant by subdue and dominion. And then a related question is, when these words were written by humans all those centuries ago, the Earth was not full ecologically. And so it was a different environmental time when those things were written. What do you think about all that?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:12:33):

Well, that's exactly to the point, and that's why I led with the dominion passage, because everybody comes to that. So, you're hitting the really hot spot. And we have to remember though, other religions don't even have a passage close to that. And when we get to the Asian religions, I'll illustrate that. So, this text is definitely being reinterpreted and widely reinterpreted.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:12:56):

It's not to say some people don't still hold to this very anthropocentric human centered view. And it is a problem, there's no question. And it's not only religions that have had this view. Economics, progress without limits, all of that has contributed to it. So, dominion has its footprint in many, many fields of politics, economics, society as a whole. But in reinterpreting, we'd like to say we're reinterpreting text, reevaluating their present circumstances and relevance, and reconstructing. And yet that has gone on in religions forever. That's why theologians, that's what they do, biblical scholars.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:13:38):

We've had to do it for women's issues. We had to do it in rethinking slavery and civil rights. And that's why, to me, I was very involved in the civil rights movement in the '60s in Washington DC and so on, and Anti-Vietnam War. And when the religious leaders came on to say segregation, separate but equal is not justice, we had an apartheid society.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:14:03):

So, the moral force to change a worldview is going to still take a long time, but that's what we're trying to inflect into, infuse into, be in dialogue with environmentalists, policy people like yourself. What is this energy transition? But I want to come to your other really important point about population. And I think that is still a hot button issue for everyone. People in the environmental movement don't want to touch it, women's groups are very sensitive about it and so on.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:14:36):

But there was a project at Marquette led by Dan McGuire to look at population issues, natalism and fecundity and so on in all the world's religions. So, even that is being reexamined, and so it should. My husband and I don't have children and we feel our students are our children.

Nate Hagens (00:14:54):

I feel the same way.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:14:55):

Yeah. Many ways to nurture, right?

Nate Hagens (00:14:58):

So, we face many cultural conversations right now where the quiet part cannot be said out loud, because it's too jarring with the roles and rules of institutions and government people. With respect to population and ecology, our current Pope deeply cares about animals and nature and climate change. But the quiet part out loud is the population thing, which I don't think he can really go to, because how do we protect current nature and future generations of nature with an ever-growing human population and an economic system that grows. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:15:46):

Yeah, but I think the Pope has said, it wasn't exactly a felicitous phrase, but people shouldn't just reproduce like rabbits. If you recall, he said that quite a few years ago.

Nate Hagens (00:15:55):

I didn't know that, but go on.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:15:57):

Yeah, he did. He did. So, he understands this issue. And most religious people that I know understand this to be exceedingly important. Again, I want to put it in the context though, Limits to Growth got so much pushback. Economic limits, limits to human consumption, there's all kinds of limits that we have not dealt with. And that problem that you're putting your finger on, but I just wanted to extend it, is maybe one of the key problems that religion may in the long term help with, because they've understood limits that materialism, consumption, consumerism will not satisfy the human and something deeper is needed.

Nate Hagens (00:16:42):

If you know my work about The Great Simplification and how we're going to have to respond as individuals and as communities, there's a lot of overlap with what Jesus was saying. I mean it's about community and not possessions. It's about belonging, not belongings. So, these insights have been known for a very long time with our fore bearers.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:17:05):

Yes, exactly. And I want to pick up, just your point about Pope Francis, because his encyclical Laudato si' is, according to Bill McKibbon, one of our great environmentalists, the most important document of the 21st century. And in part, because again, what you're pushing towards and highlighting, which I'm grateful for, because that document is the first one to bring together what I was speaking about earlier, that we have social justice in many of the world's religions. We have environmental concern from a science community and policy community, but these have not come together.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:17:43):

And that's true even at our School of the Environment here. We're environment strong, divinity, social justice. But finally, what that encyclical did was put forward what he calls an integral ecology, where the key motto is cry of the Earth, cry of the poor, this eco justice. And that came out of a book in our series on ecology and justice by Leonardo Boff, Brazilian theologian, of some note, and that's the title of his book.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:18:13):

And it was because Thomas Berry said to him, our teacher Thomas, he said, "Leonardo, we can't save people or help the poor without healthy ecosystems and so on." So that conjunction of people and planet is now gaining traction, again, both in theory and in practice. And that's a huge contribution of that encyclical. And all the world's religions, by the way, have made statements to affirm it. Our dean here had us do a incredible public seminar even before it came out.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:18:49):

So there's been a great deal of interest in that document, which is beautifully written. Amitav Ghosh, a leading literary figure in India, highlights it at the end of his Great Derangement book and so on. So there's lots we can build on from Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home.

Nate Hagens (00:19:07):

Just a personal question. In all of our years of emailing and interaction, you are one of the most gracious, kind, respectful, nice people that I've ever come across. Were you always that way or did that happen when you started reading religious texts and such?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:19:26):

Oh, that's a very dear question. I don't know exactly. My grandfather, he was a professor at Columbia of European history. He was asked by Roosevelt to be our ambassador to Spain in the Second World War. And that is diplomacy on huge level because of Franco and the Germans and so on. So diplomacy was a very important thing in our family. Both my grandmother and mother were very, very gracious, and sometimes they had to tame me a little bit because of my strong political views.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:19:57):

But working in academia where you know the frustrations and the silos are always going to be present, I have to be that way. But I've got a great sounding board in John Grim. So every meal, we're talking about how can we do this? What's the next stage? He calms me down.

Nate Hagens (00:20:14):

Excellent.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:20:14):

He keeps me balanced.

Nate Hagens (00:20:17):

Excellent. Okay, so getting back to what you were saying. You mentioned Catholicism and the Laudato si'. What is the environmental ethic or the teachings in some of the other major world religions?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:20:32):

Well, thanks for that question because I left the US after the '60s when Nixon was elected. And I went to teach in Japan, and with great disillusionment, by the way, and worry about our democracy, frankly, just as we are now. And I wanted to seep dip myself into the culture and the religions and practices of Japan and it was terrific. And in a college, you learn so much from the students that way.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:21:01):

So I began practicing Buddhisms. And Buddhism, Kyoto, none of these places were touristed like they are now. So Buddhism, for example, is a tradition where it has a deep sense of interiority, calming, so that you can actually feel and sense the inter-being of all reality, the interdependence, which is their fundamental teaching. So there's no static self. We are constantly in relationality with everything. Now, it's a fantastic teaching and it has a lot to offer our environmental movement.

Nate Hagens (00:21:37):

So they don't say it as such, but it's a systems ecology lens.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:21:42):

Beautiful. I would say that's exactly right. And Joanna Macy, one of the great systems ecologists was trained in Buddhism too. So she puts this together all the time. That's fabulous. And the other tradition that really grabbed me from East Asia is Confucianism. Because when I came back to the States and began studying with Thomas Berry in Columbia with his friend Ted Berry, he was a Confucian scholar, and I was like, Buddhism is terrific and it's still important in my life, but I wanted to also know what is the social and political and educational teachings where you can actually make change, institutional change.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:22:21):

And Confucianism has that. It's probably affected more people over time than any other tradition just because of the size of the population and the antiquity of the culture. So Confucianism has this magnificent and very simple, clear idea that we are part of the cosmos, Earth, and humans. We complete that process. We are responsible mind and heart of the universe, which is really a beautiful idea. Students love this. And concentric circles put us in this relationality to family, society, education, politics, nature and the cosmos itself.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:23:02):

Everything that we cultivate in ourselves, spiritual, moral, but also educational, affects this larger concentric circles, mutually affecting. So the cultivation... I'll stop here because I love this tradition, but the cultivation of the individual is for a larger common good. It's not for your nirvana, your salvation, it's to be in communion with, in connection with, in an efficacious way. And it's why education is so important in the Confucian tradition.

Nate Hagens (00:23:34):

So relative to Christianity, Buddhism is, by definition, less anthropocentric.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:23:40):

It's a great question. The way one of the great Confucian scholars puts it as anthropocosmic. It's an anthropocosmic tradition that puts us in these dynamic living ecosystems and the beauty and extensive space of stars and galaxies and so on. So you can see a connection to evolution. And our film Journey of the Universe last showing had online 77,000 people listening to it, because they have already a cosmology that's coherent with evolution and so on. So how we put these together is also of great interest to us.

Nate Hagens (00:24:22):

How many people are Buddhist or generally Buddhist in the world roughly? Do we know?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:24:28):

Gosh, that's a great question. I don't know if I could say 15%, because of course it's all over Asia. By the way, the religions in China are coming back in great force. There's huge numbers of Buddhist, there's even Christians in China now. But...

Nate Hagens (00:24:44):

What do you mean they're coming back?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:24:46):

Okay. So when Mao took over, he wanted to get rid of all traditions, Buddhist, Confucianism. And some people felt Confucianism was holding China back from modernity and so on, by some of its ideas. Like all religions, they've got progressive and conservative notions. So Mao wanted to wipe out religions, there was burning of books and all kinds of things. Anti-intellectual. Intellectuals really suffered. But now, since the '80s, when religion was declared possible and so on, there's a huge resurgence of Confucianism, for example.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:25:21):

Many philosophy departments in China are keenly interested in re-examining it because they're not so interested in Marxism per se. They want to see what it is that their traditions have to offer. So there's a movement called ecological civilization in China. I've been to many conferences on this topic. And against great odds, because China has become a huge consumption society and a huge exploiter of natural resources and so on. And the Belt and Road project all across central Asia and into Africa is the largest industrial project in human history of which Americans know almost nothing.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:26:00):

But the counterpoint to that, again, is this effort, and it's towards limits and culture and cultivation and values, is this revival of Confucianism. They're teaching it in their schools now. They're literate with their classics which had been lost. And this revival is not just on the horizon. It's right now, and it's quite fascinating.

Nate Hagens (00:26:25):

I don't know that we could ever eradicate a religion. I think it's in our DNA to have strong beliefs and strong community. And so that self organizes somehow around a community of beliefs. Yes?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:26:42):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:26:42):

Yeah.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:26:43):

Yes. And if I could just affirm that... And your word DNA is so perfect, Nate, because Tu Weiming, one of the great Confucian scholars, a teacher and colleague of ours who was at Harvard all through our conferences. And then he went back to Beijing, to Beijing University to set up an institute for humanities. And he's been part of this revival. Huge spokesperson. And he calls Confucianism the DNA, not only of China, but it's all across East Asia, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore. They're all imprinted with these values that I described of family and society and a common good.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:27:21):

So you can't eradicate this, right? And the other example would be, again, this is more complex, but the Orthodox traditions, not only in Russia but the Greek Orthodox tradition. One of the great leaders in this movement of religion ecology has been Bartholomew, who's called the green patriarch. And he's the one who's led eight conferences on water issues, bringing together scientists, policy people from the EU, the UN, religious leaders. And he says, "Earth is icon, Earth is sacred." And he says, "What we are doing are crimes against creation. This is ecological sin." And he's a very good friend of Pope Francis in this.

Nate Hagens (00:28:04):

So you watched my Creatures United video from last week.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:28:08):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:28:10):

So based on what you're saying, it almost seems like that message, that the natural world is sacred, will be way more effective coming from a religious tradition than from a scientific one to change people's minds and hearts and behaviors.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:28:28):

That video is so beautiful. The pictures, your words, carefully chosen, beautifully spoken, all the statistics. It's a marvelous and hugely important video. And as I said, our friend Tom Lovejoy, who invented by a diversity, he would've loved it. He and E. O. Wilson just passed away in December as we know around Christmas time. But this was so close to their heart. So I want to just say some scientists would use this language, certainly Tom Lovejoy would.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:29:00):

And it's very important even that you used it in that beautiful video because it says the language of what we value, of what gives us awe and wonder and beauty. It's not just over there with the religions, it's a human response to this extraordinary biodiversity. And this is where we need the extension of ethics, you see, to include the value, intrinsic value, ecosystems value, all kinds of new valuing for species.

Nate Hagens (00:29:33):

Not to get too far down sidetrack, and I don't remember the exact quote, but E. O. Wilson, in Social Conquest of Earth, had something along the lines of the one thing that can never be reconciled in the human sphere is the clash or the dissonance between religion and science. But it almost seems on the environmental issue that we are discussing and that the Pope wrote about in Laudato si', and the world is becoming more aware of, that we do need such a merger of religion and science, at least on that issue.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:30:11):

Yes. Well, absolutely. And of course, thank you for the very important question. This is a long term discussion. Stephen Jay Gould at Harvard used to say there's two magisteriums, separate, not equal. And that's part of the issue. I think the hierarchy that's been established in academia of science and engineering on the top and everything else, especially humanities way at the bottom, has not really helped this conversation at all. And I'm not saying it's simple, I don't have an answer in a box. But maybe we can talk a little bit about Journey of the Universe as an attempt to go beyond that kind of dualism and silo mentality.

Nate Hagens (00:30:52):

So Journey of the Universe is a film that you created.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:30:56):

Right. So it's a film, it's a book that Yale published in their science division, it's a series of online courses, it's a website, it's a newsletter. And in some ways, it's a movement among people who are trying to have that sense of the unity of the extraordinary gift of science in understanding ecosystems, much less galaxies and stars. So it's affirming scientific knowledge and approaches, but it's also saying we are meaning making animals. We are dream makers. Imagination lights us up.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:31:36):

Look at the response to the web telescope. Scientists were weeping. Why? Because it's awe, wonder, beauty, mystery, dare we say, deep mystery. And a scientist, years ago, said, "I love your film Journey of the Universe in that fusion of awe, wonder, beauty, and a suggestion of meaning." And he says, "But I can't talk about beauty in my class or awe or wonder." I'm like, "Why not?" You see this is part of the problem.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:32:04):

So my co-writer and the narrator is Brian Swimme, who has a degree in mathematical cosmology and the physics of the early universe. And he spent 10 years studying the science of evolution from stars and galaxies down through geology, biology and the human. And he did a book with Thomas Berry called The Universe Story, which was the first to say this is a narrative, this is a story, and all societies have had creation stories. So let's look at this as our story. And Berry said, "We need that new story." So then we made it into a film. It was on PBS for three years. It's on Amazon and a little book.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:32:48):

That's very poetic, I would say. And that's the project. I can talk lots more about it, but I hope it will be helpful and useful to people. It's inspired a lot of our students, because one was here in my office and he starts to read a passage from Journey of the Universe and he starts to weep and he says, "Now I know where I belong." Which is where we end the movie. We belong here, we've always belonged here.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:33:14):

So that sense of alienation, dissonance, dismemberment, that science-religion mentality leaves us with, that it's all random, purposeless, meaningless, mechanistic, reductionistic. Have a nice day. Where does that leave us for the work that we need to do and be inspired to do? That's the question.

Nate Hagens (00:33:38):

Okay. So, Mary Evelyn, we were recently together at a poly-crisis conference talking about all the aspects of the human predicament. What sort of insights does your lifelong study of comparative religions offer with respect to our current poly-crisis?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:33:58):

Wonderful question. And quite a conference it was. Well, I think we have the science on climate, many, many other issues. We have lots of policy papers and ideas and think tanks. We've got law, the legal system, even though it works slowly. We've got new green economics emerging, we've got technology that's really emerging and you know that well. So the transition is in place in certain ways. But I still feel this - a sense of norms, values, a moral force is not quite there. And that's partly why we can't get political action too, because we're very stuck.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:34:42):

But if we can somehow go deeper and say it's a question of where is the true transition going to come from. And everything is driven by the way people think, feel, act, and their worldviews. Every society is saturated with worldviews and values. That's why religion and culture interact all the time. So we need this new synthesis, we need to come out of our silos, and we very much need the science and policy people to say, "We can't do this alone." I can give you examples certainly of this.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:35:23):

A rainforest group that emerged after the Norwegian government felt after 12 years and $4 billion of assistance for protecting rainforest, they couldn't do it without the human and values piece. And this emerged at a Vatican conference on Laudato si'. The rainforest action people were there, the NGOs, the Norwegian government, environment, and UNDP, our religion and ecology group. And they went back to the Norwegian government and said we need to form an Interfaith Rainforest Institute, IRI, Interfaith Rainforest Institute. And from that has come an amazing partnership where the leading stewards of the forest, indigenous peoples, are highlighted, protected from human rights abuse, and the voices of other religions are coming in as partners in this work.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:36:21):

So it's the first of its kind that's leading with the science of deforestation and so on, and ecosystem disruption. But it's saying, "Who are the people who have lived there for centuries?" Traditional environmental knowledge and their spiritual worldview is critical to the future of these regions. So that collaboration in the Amazon, in Indonesia, and in the Congo has created on the ground working groups to bring together of science policy, religion, worldviews and so on in remarkable ways.

Nate Hagens (00:36:57):

So is it possible that there could be an interfaith ecological movement? In my experience, people that are religious accepted that there are other religions, except for atheists, they're a separate group. But could there be an interfaith ecological movement like you were just describing? Is that possible on a much larger scale than you just mentioned?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:37:23):

Definitely. And people are proposing this actually. So it's a great question. There's been groups who... Religions for Peace as an international group and now they're doing peace in the environment. Everyone's moving into this space. There's United Religions initiative. And people have called for a UN type of movement of this sort. So the good news is, what we with many collaborators have tried to identify is, what are the resources in each one of the world's religions and indigenous traditions, but also this multi-religious movement that has emerged frankly in the last 60, 70 years.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:38:01):

Before, even Vatican II, there was a sense in the Catholic tradition, there was no truth outside of Catholicism. That has shifted hugely, inter-religious dialogue, has grown between all the world's religions. And now panels wouldn't even be possible on this topic of the environment without representing as many of the world's religions realistically. So that is an extraordinary new movement of inter-religious interfaith dialogue on the fate of the planet. And we have said for years, there's nothing more important for religions coming together if it's not for the intergenerational justice of all species, of all life. So it is pulling communities forward that formally we're not even talking to each other.

Nate Hagens (00:38:52):

Well, you mentioned earlier the importance of meaning. To me, that is the meaning, is the sacredness of our one blue green planet that is rotating.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:39:05):

Yes, exactly. And I just love that. And that's why your species video is so important. And another example of this is, in the Middle East, there's a group called EcoPeace Middle East, and they're working with the Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the Jordan River and all kinds of water issues in the Middle East. They've proposed a blue green plan, which Tom Friedman, New York Times reporters picked up on and so on.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:39:35):

And we had a conference in Rhodes a few years back where we had representatives of all these religions and other academics who were specialists in the region. And it was amazing, Nate. It was the first time Israelis and Muslims had been in same room for some of them. And it was this human connection over, oh my gosh, what's going to happen if we don't have water? Et cetera. So it's coming together, leaving some of the political divisions behind, and it's an extraordinary movement there.

Nate Hagens (00:40:09):

So the group-ish nature of us from an evolutionary perspective and the tribal nature is cooperation within the group and competition between other groups.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:40:22):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:40:22):

So it's almost like in an economic story, we are competing with other tribes or other nations for resources. But maybe if we view the natural world as sacred, that might be something that we could unite around that's not a competitive way.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:40:41):

Yes, exactly. Exactly. And water is just one huge example of this. I mean the rivers in India are considered sacred and yet they're polluted. We did a conference there on the Yamuna River and went down to the birthplace of Krishna, Vrindavan, where religious leaders are trying to work on this issue. We also worked with hydrologists at TERI University in Delhi. And it was so interesting, again, this personal connection, Nate. The scientists in Delhi, all of a sudden on the second day were talking about their ashrams and their religious practices, and they left behind their scientific so-called objectivity and something new emerged. And they were weeping with this conjunction that still has a long way to go, but it's a conjunction that's possible.

Nate Hagens (00:41:29):

So on Coursera, Mary Evelyn, you have many online classes on religion and ecology. And in the intro on your website, you offer some teaser questions, which I'm just going to ask you briefly here and perhaps you can share just a short answer or thought. One of the questions is, what orients and grounds humans?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:41:51):

Well, from my view, it's the cosmos, it's Earth and our human role. That's what many religions have said and it's what orients me.

Nate Hagens (00:42:02):

What motivates and inspires us?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:42:04):

A sense of belonging to something larger and participating in that sense of dynamic living ecosystems that we can hopefully restore, work with. And with the energy, it's energy systems, this is air, water, soil, and so on. How can we make sustainable energy working in alignment with these ecosystems to do that. So wind power, water power and so on, and solar power. It's all using the powers of Earth for a more flourishing future.

Nate Hagens (00:42:40):

I would argue that that flourishing future is going to have a much smaller material and energetic footprint though.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:42:46):

Yes, definitely. Absolutely. And that's the importance of your work, The Great Simplification. No doubt. Exactly.

Nate Hagens (00:42:54):

Oh my gosh, are you a diplomat.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:42:57):

No, no, no. That's absolutely true though. It's not like we can all get EV cars and plug five cars into our... It's craziness.

Nate Hagens (00:43:05):

Yeah, I know. I know.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:43:06):

Yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:43:07):

A couple more of your teaser questions. What awakens our imagination?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:43:11):

The natural world, the all wonder beauty and so on. You live in California because of the beauty. You go out wherever you might be on a beach to see the sunrise and sunset. Everybody's moved by these kinds of things. And so awakening our imagination to the complexity of these systems and some humility that we barely understand them, and yet we can work with them and we can say less is more, back to your point.

Nate Hagens (00:43:44):

Less is more, assuming that you're already above some minimum threshold.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:43:49):

That's so true.

Nate Hagens (00:43:50):

Otherwise, less is bad.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:43:51):

Yeah, yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:43:51):

Yeah.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:43:51):

Totally.

Nate Hagens (00:43:52):

So the last question on this that you have on your website is, what moves us to action? That's a big one, right? That's a hard one.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:44:01):

It is big. And I think story, that we feel we're part of something that's coherent, mysterious, sacred, beyond our full understanding, that moves us to action. And as well, I think the call to justice in many of the world's religions is very, very important. Again, next generation are all about, they want the action, they want to do something. We're very pragmatic in the US. But this eco justice is creating all kinds of new communities, movements and so on. GreenFaith is a great ecumenical and inter-religious movement that's calling young people and leaders and communities to action on these issues.

Nate Hagens (00:44:46):

I have to admit, I've never heard of any of these things that you're mentioning. Maybe I'm too siloed in my biophysical economics world, but I think it's great to hear of them. So what role do you think religion is going to play in coming decades as more people in the world recognize or feel physical limits to growth and ecological limits to growth? It seems to me that in times of anxiety and transition that people, like you said about China, they move towards a religion as opposed to away from it. What is your speculation in coming decades?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:45:27):

Well, I would say there's two possibilities. I'm not trying to be a futurist because no one can predict, things are so changing. But I do think if 85% of the world's people are part of religion, we can't take it off the table. This is, as I say, it's the problem with academia that does, it's the problem with secular environmentalism, completely dismisses people who might identify as religious as benighted, as stupid really. Which is so condescending. It just is incredible.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:45:58):

So I think we've really got to identify that blockage and that problem. And even if it's instrumental… Ed Wilson was very instrumental in a certain way. He would say, "Mary Evelyn and John, bring the religious people on board. We need them." And okay, that's all right. But we have to go deeper than that.

Nate Hagens (00:46:16):

He wrote a book, I'm sure you've read it, called The Creation. It's on my bookshelf. What an iconic figure, right? He was born a southern baptist and then invented sociobiology and everything. I mean what an amazing story.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:46:31):

Yes. But he was limited to… And we said this to him at Harvard and with great respect, "Ed, your southern baptist upbringing does not describe all religions." And most people don't get beyond their initial up to 12, 13 years old, and later, they just leave it behind because it seems so simplistic. And so you can't make judgements about religion from your early childhood experience. And I would say, by the way, just to answer your question, we need to attend to bring forward the liberating ideas of religion from the world's religions. And we also have to speak to be in attunement with what the spiritual, not religious, which are many, many of our youth.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:47:16):

And I think there's enormous possibilities here in the nature writing movement. I just want to insert this here because it's so evocative. We did a webinar here at Yale with some of the key nature writers, Robin Kimmerer; Braiding Sweetgrass, Robert Macfarlane, great UK nature writer, and David Haskell; Song of Trees. And they were all talking about the communication of trees and forests and so on. 9,000 people signed up for this webinar. Yale had never seen anything like it. Because this sense that it's a living, animate, communicating world is something that's emerging from science.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:47:57):

Suzanne Simard is talking about the forest in this way. And that many of this weaving of knowledge like Braiding Sweetgrass, scientific knowledge, indigenous knowledge, a communicating living world of which we have reciprocities and obligation. So that is hugely evolving and very important.

Nate Hagens (00:48:22):

So at Yale, you span divinity and ecology. Do you think the academy writ large universities around the world could potentially embrace interdisciplinary ways of understanding and solving problems? Can they play a role, universities, in the poly-crisis or are they structurally too hierarchical, siloed and reductionist?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:48:49):

There's days when I think this, the reductionism and siloed, and others, I'm like, "Okay, there's possibilities." And we consider ourselves, Nate, ninja in these different silos in a very bureaucratic Yale. And we feel that we've got one foot at Yale, one foot outside of Yale. So we can be in touch with and learn from people like you and what's going on. But yeah, you had a question to follow up or?

Nate Hagens (00:49:15):

Well, I was just going to say, as you're speaking, I'm visualizing that the answer to our ecological crisis is a lot more of humanity needs to become Buddhist ninja.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:49:26):

That's great. I love it. I totally love it. But I do want to just say quickly, the hope here is, and it's definitely happening at Yale, the divinity school students are all over this. They're pressing for more hires in this area. There were no graduate programs, there's no field 25 years ago. There's now 14 MAs or certificate programs across the country, which is, we just discovered this two months ago. It was amazing. So the next generation and new hires, we have some great, great people emerging at Yale, both here at the School of the Environment, in the humanities program. So that gives me a lot of hope. They are already fusing going beyond silos, which is great.

Nate Hagens (00:50:10):

So, given your lifetime of personal and community experience on these issues, do you have any personal advice to our listeners at this time of a global poly-crisis?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:50:24):

I think we have to have realism, and we'd call it hope. So there's realism about what we're dealing with, and yet hope with people who, like you, are doing interview after interview, trying to bring the knowledge forward, highlight different ways of knowing. And this is one of the things that did come up at our conference. One of the first talks was on the need for different ways of knowing, not just scientific, materialist, reductionist knowing.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:50:50):

And I think if we can keep open this true respect for various ways of knowing, we are going to release the creativity, imaginative creativity, technical creativity already is, financial creativity, but it's a creativity of the human spirit that represents, I think, if I'm not saying too much, a certain kind of breakthrough in worldviews that says, "Okay, we're at this moment of breakdown, but we can also breakthrough." And that's the great hope of new community coalitions and creativity.

Nate Hagens (00:51:28):

Can you just briefly explain to me what you mean by different ways of knowing? And if people know things differently, how do they arrive at a unity of response and action?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:51:40):

Great question. Different ways of knowing means all the disciplines within academia. Science, social science, humanities, technology, engineering, all of these need to have more fusion, more dialogue. That's one thing. But I'll give you an example, since we love species, clearly. The animal behavior world has completely exploded, to say. Ever since Jane Goodall said, "These chimps, they have relationalities, they have personalities." She named them. That changed the face of science as some objective study. Okay? And she was not well received. Neither was Suzanne Simard in studying forests and so on.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:52:25):

So the breakthrough is partly the sense that how do migrations happen? What's the intelligence there in the world beyond us? Turtles, fish, how do salmons find the same river up and lay their eggs and so on? These are astonishing intelligences from the world around us. So different ways of knowing that are emerging from animal behavior, from forestry and the various sciences, people are keen to understand this. It's exploding all around us.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:53:00):

And if we tune into that, I think we will have a sense. We're not the only, so-called, "I think, therefore I am." This split of Descartes has been disastrous, because we live within multiple intelligences, varied sentiences, and that sensibility will fundamentally change the way we value nature, care for it and use it wisely. That's what we have to do. So the sentience, the interiority of everything, plants, animals, water, birds, fish, that's part of our reentering as kinship that you also used in your video. That's very exciting. We're belonging. How marvelous. We're not just standing outside.

Nate Hagens (00:53:52):

So you've long been a teacher as well as a scholar, and you're currently at the Yale School of the Environment. So you have had a lifetime of interacting with young people. As you mentioned, you and your husband view your students as your cultural children, as do I. What specific recommendations, Mary Evelyn, do you have for young humans, 18, 20, 23 years old, who become aware of limits, climate, the environment, what's happening in our human enterprise and with respect to the natural world? What advice do you tell your students?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:54:28):

Well, I just gave a whole series of talks yesterday at a university down near New York called Iona. And I think many of us realize that eco anxiety is really overcoming many people, but especially young people. Like COVID has been so difficult and so on. And they are massively worried, of course, about the future, and so they should be. But what gives me hope is, those who are standing up, Greta Thunberg, and the whole Fridays for the Future and Extinction Rebellion and Sunrise Movement, these are very, very important. And it came to me early on because I was so politically active in these issues

of civil rights and Anti-Vietnam War. We can't burn ourselves out. And that's where there's chaplaincy now at the divinity school for eco-anxiety.

Nate Hagens (00:55:17):

What does that mean? Chaplaincy?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:55:20):

So psychology has been talking about eco-psychology for some time. And now, the anxieties that are emerging, especially with young people, and exploding in the need for therapy, for care and so on. So it's not chaplaincy for your soul, it's chaplaincy for how you can be a happier, more integrated human being amidst the problems we're facing. I'm sleepless myself about these problems, so I understand and identify with them. And I like to say we're giving you an intergenerational handshake to do this together, to make this transition a great simplification. But I think there's all kinds of ways, meditation, tai chi, qigong, swimming, lots of ways we can take care of ourselves through this process.

Nate Hagens (00:56:08):

So you just mentioned that you are often sleepless, as am I, of all these issues. Just out of curiosity, what are you most concerned about in the coming 10 years or so?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:56:18):

In the proximate future, democracy. To be honest, that's a huge, huge issue. And we can't do a lot without better democracies. And around the world, the populism of authoritarian figures is really horrific. But that's part of this pull back to fundamentalisms, to something secure and so on. So again, with some compassion, if we can midwife and birth a sense of a future that's inclusive and that's not just consumptive, that's part of what religions can do, I think. But it's going to be quite a task and not an easy one. And I think, to see the destruction of ecosystems, to see the environmental injustices is heartbreaking, continually heartbreaking. To read the newspaper, for me, I just read the headlines and try and absorb what I can, but I filter.

Nate Hagens (00:57:15):

I can't watch some of the nature shows that I grew up watching now. Like the shows now, like BBC Planet Earth, are just so stunningly beautiful. I get sad when I watch them.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:57:26):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I didn't grow up with television. And in our marriage of 44 years, we haven't had television. Because I think, while it-

Nate Hagens (00:57:34):

Me either. I have no TV. Not since 1998.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:57:37):

Yeah. So interesting, Nate. We have to protect ourselves sometimes. But you can stream so much, for sure.

Nate Hagens (00:57:44):

Yeah, exactly.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:57:46):

That's part of the self-care though, filtering the assault of sad bad news.

Nate Hagens (00:57:52):

So I know we're just about out of time, but I have a final question. If you were benevolent dictator and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what one thing would you do or implement to improve human and ecological futures?

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:58:09):

Well, I'd like to maybe respond and complement to your great simplification and your commitment to energy in a equitable form and so on. Because I think this is one of the great transitions. But I also would like to suggest that it's the physical transition of energies, from destructive energies to creative energies, aligned with Earth processes. But it's also a human energy transition. And that human energy transition that hasn't yet been fully visible, not yet integrated into environmental thinking, means that we have to sustain something for the long term. We have to sustain the eco-anxiety and the despair threats type of thing.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:59:01):

And what is that going to require? I mean, it's why we made Journey of the Universe, okay, to be honest, to say that our grandparents didn't know this well. And even our parents that this is a 13.8 billion year unfolding process, 10 billion years just of galaxies and stars. The web telescope is giving us these amazing images. 4.6 billion years of Earth evolution. One billion years for the first cell. I mean, every sentence there needs unpacking in both the science of it and the awe of it. And that sensibility, I feel, is one, generating sensibility for human energy to be aligned with, work with, to do what Thomas Berry calls The Great Work.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (00:59:56):

And this will give us a zest for life amidst the poly-crisis, which we need deeply. A zest for life. A friendship with people like you, Nate, who are doing such amazing work in this regard. And so, I see it as very complimentary. The religions can step up to and match that energy transformation and the simplification that you're calling for. What an amazing collaborative effort that could be.

Nate Hagens (01:00:29):

I will say amen to that. Do you have any other closing thoughts, advice, wisdom for our listeners today? This has been super great and informative and I so respect your grace and enthusiasm and energy on this topic of our lifetime really.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (01:00:49):

Well, just to riff on what I just said, I'm so grateful for what you're doing because it's a space that other people aren't really speaking about because it could be technology just for more growth, et cetera. And so what I do want to say, again, is that how we can interfuse, mutually enhance, support, synchronize and synthesize these different perspectives will be increasingly important. And how these mysterious energies of mystery where we're dwelling, that we can allow that to infuse the practical changes so the principles and the moral force and the mystery somehow coming into conversation, even though they're going to be doing very different things.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (01:01:38):

But just saying. I like to say, "Okay, market-based solutions are going to be important." I just heard an incredible talk about that for forest at noon. I want to affirm the solutions that are out there and say, "Here's one that can be a yeast to these various solutions. It can be a compliment, it can energize and broaden the solutions that are already on the horizon."

Nate Hagens (01:02:04):

Thank you so much. Please let me know in the future, offline, we should continue this to see how we can integrate our work. Because I hadn't heard a lot of the things you've said on this and I do think that this is a fertile pathway to change our consciousness in what we face. So thank you for your lifelong work on this and continued work.

Mary Evelyn Tucker (01:02:27):

Thank you, Nate. It's just a pleasure. I really look forward to those conversations online or offline. Thanks a lot.

Nate Hagens (01:02:33):

Thanks Mary Evelyn.

Nate Hagens (01:02:35):

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