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### Creation Care, Human Wellness, and Sustainability

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that creation care contributes to human wellness and to sustainable living on earth. Within contemporary contexts, humans are suffering spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. This distress impairs wellness and reduces peoples' capacity to contribute to sustainable solutions and earth-positive impacts. Creation care entails conscious and intentional activities that are carried out for the health of the created world. Creation care contributes to human wellness, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally by offering spaces, environments, co-habitations, and interdependency among its components that support human wellness and sustainable living. Creation care helps fight spiritual, mental, and emotional distress so that people can be well. This thesis should stimulate all people, Christians, and non-Christians, to approach creation and its care not just as a spiritual, religious, theological, or ethical practice, but as a potent tool for human wellness and for the earth's sustainability.

Creation Care, Human Wellness, and Sustainability

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

By

Omoike Eric Aizenofe

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Omoike Eric Aizenofe, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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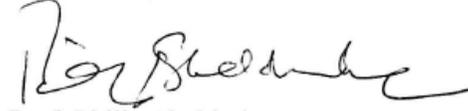
July 8, 2022

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“So, then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy” (Rom 9:16 KJV).

This work is dedicated to the Creator of the heavens and of the earth. To God be all the glory, honor, and adoration.

Also, I dedicate this work to my late mother, Lucy Aizenofe; late brother, Eboizinagbe Aizenofe; late sister, Ebikere Aizenofe; my late brother-in-Christ and mentor, Pastor Joshua Okpanachi Adah; and my late father-in-law, Elder Monday Udo-udo Thomas. I miss you all so very much.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Thesis Question**

How does creation care contribute to human wellness and the earth's sustainability? Creation and its care have the capacity to keep humans healthy through components, structures, and spaces where interdependence and the cultivation of relationships continuously take place. Creation care is a source for human wellness and a sustainable earth that is able to replenish itself. Christian theology posits that humans were given a divine mandate at the beginning of creation, and this mandate was the foundation of the interdependence in creation, which paves a pathway for human wellness and a sustainable earth. However, it seems that this mandate either has been reinterpreted over the years or has been lost outright. People are now faced with various sicknesses that rob them of their wellness, and they are equally faced with a potentially unsustainable earth.

#### **Creation Care and Aspects of Human Wellness**

I will define *creation care* and some aspects of *human wellness*. Human wellness has multiple dimensions that include spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and many more. Also, I will define the aspects of human wellness that I will focus on in this thesis.

### Definition of *Creation Care*

*Creation care* is care “for” creation: conscious, intentional, and specific actions that foster the health of the created world.<sup>1</sup> These activities are part of the responsibility that humankind was given to care for creation—that is, to carry out definite and loving actions, such as cultivation, dressing, and tilling the earth, among others, in order to keep creation healthy. Humankind was made to be in relationship with the rest of the creation. This is evidenced by the fact that humans gave names to other components of creation, as found in Gen 2:19–20. One can only give names to other created beings with which one has a relationship. For example, when parents name their baby, it is done out of love, relationship, closeness, and connection to the newborn. Therefore, creation care includes all specific positive actions—loving, relational, connective, and therapeutic care—that humans were made to give to the rest of creation, which ultimately cause creation to flourish and sustain the existence of humans as the two exist in an interdependent relationship.

### Definition and Kinds of *Wellness*

The Global Wellness Institute defines *wellness* as the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health.<sup>2</sup> Creation care contributes to the core aspects of human wellness: spiritual wellness, physical wellness, and mental wellness. Although these aspects of human wellness are distinct from each other, they are connected and function wholistically. That is why lack of spiritual wellness may result in physical sickness or mental health problems that may deter the ability of humans to

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1. Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2018), 24.

2. <http://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/>

engage in activities that sustain the earth. Creation's components, structures and spaces offers contributions to the wellness of humans spiritually, physically, and mentally. I will now clarify these wellness areas.

*Spiritual wellness* refers to how healthy one's relationship is with God. Our spiritual background equips us with beliefs that develop relationship with God. This relationship may become strong or weak, depending on how it is maintained. The aliveness and health of our relationship with God affects the aliveness and health of all other relationships: with ourselves, with other people, with God's wonderful creation, and with the important institutions of our lives.<sup>3</sup> The health of one's relationship with God is influenced by spiritual practices, rituals, and activities that are conducted individually or collectively. Some of these activities are conducted in temples, caves, forests, and home environments. Consistent and devoted participation in these spiritual activities grounds a person's beliefs and builds a relationship with God that is healthy, and it puts such a person in a place where he or she can face difficulties, suffering, and pain. Also, persons who have a strong relationship with God may possess mindsets and attitudes that help them make better decisions and act in more positive ways for themselves and others. This is because a person who is spiritually healthy has the capacity to see situations and envision solutions beyond one's very self. There is a connection to a divine or holy being, or a connection to a sacred location, that may bring succor or resolutions to inner turmoil, dissatisfaction, setbacks, or grievances.

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3. Howard Clinebell, *Anchoring Your Well Being: Christian Wholeness in a Fractured World* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 41.

*Physical wellness* is the “commitment to self-care through regular participation in physical activity, healthy eating, and appropriate health care utilization.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, healthy living includes healthy food and water intake, exercise, good sleep or rest, and play. Physical activities, such as play, give vitality and strength to our physical bodies. These activities force our organs to continue to function in active states, burning calories that give energy and keep the body in proper shape. A strong and healthy body enables a person to be able to carry out tasks that are essential to his or her survival on earth. A crucial aspect of physical wellness is having access to healthcare in times of sickness or when parts of the body are being challenged. Also, having access to prompt checkups, regular tests, timely results, diagnoses, and doctor’s visits adds to having wellness that is not just seasonal or at a particular age. Many persons suffer some types of sicknesses at particular times of the year. Others experience sickness at some particular ages.

*Mental wellness, or mental health*, “is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”<sup>5</sup> *Mental wellness* is often used interchangeably with *emotional wellness*. This is because both deal with one’s feelings and behaviors, as well as how these feelings are processed and expressed. The capacity to recognize one’s abilities and feelings enables one to discern if one can handle particular tasks. When feelings are determined and expressed, then a person may choose to remain with those feelings, even if they are negative, or move in a

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4. Kelley Ann Strout and Elizabeth P. Howard, “The Six Dimensions of Wellness and Cognition in Aging Adults,” *JHN* 30 (2012): 197. <https://pdf.zlibcdn.com/dtoken/3b8584a6bd57ed177c7e9a6f4d5105c2/0898010112440883.pdf>.

5. World Health Organization, “Mental Health: Strengthening Our Response,” *Who.int*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>. n.p.

direction to find the good within those negative feelings. This can help determine how well one can cope with the normal stress of life with its often-negative feelings. Being able to cope positively with stress enhances the capacity for better productivity and meaningful contributions to our communities.

### **Some Key Components of Creation**

Food is one of the most important components that sustains human life and wellness. Genesis 2:29–31 tells us that all herbs, trees, fruits, etc. have been given to us as food. Later, Gen 9:2–3 says that the animals also are food for humans. In order for people to live in wellness, they must have access to food in its diversity and in a natural state. Food in its diversity means in its various nutritional classes, such as carbohydrates, proteins, fats, and vegetables, which provide what the body needs to function in a health manner. Food in a natural state is obtained and consumed fresh when grown locally. Unfortunately, most food that are obtained and consumed from stores have been in-transit for many days, or even months, before arriving at their destination. These produce items arrive with less freshness and nutritional value.

Water makes up seventy percent of the earth's composition and accommodates all aquatic life. Stephen T. Um explains, "Water is primary for the survival of plant . . . and animal life, . . . and along with bread, water has long been understood as the minimum sustenance necessary for human life . . . and a lack of either element spelled dire need and eventual death."<sup>6</sup> Although water makes up a huge portion of the earth, not all water is drinkable without being processed. On one hand, some parts of the earth are able to process drinkable water, but excessive waste has remained an issue. On the other hand,

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6. Stephen T. Um, *The Theme of Temple Christology in John's Gospel*, LNTS (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 17.

some parts are in dire need of drinkable water for people and animals. This is worsened by global warming, which dries up underground water in some areas. Thus, lack of water or consuming impure water does not support human wellness. Polluted water poisons fish that serve as food, which may be eaten by people and cause them to fall ill.

Another major component of creation is land. According to the story of creation in Gen 1:9–12, land was separated from the seas. It brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, fruit trees bearing fruit, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed. Land also supported birds, livestock, beasts, and creeping things. Land provided the space for humans to interact with other parts of creation so that humans could support them, and also be supported. This connection was crucial for people to be in a state of wellness—spiritually, mentally, and physically. Land also provided healing directly to humans, either through them caring for or tending it, or indirectly through the fruits and herbs that land produces. The process of caring for land soothes the human soul with the effect of alleviating stress and rejuvenating mental wellness. Consuming fruits and herbs ensures human wellness and people’s capacity to relate to other parts of creation in sustainable ways.

Food, water, and land are among many components of creation that humans depend on. Others include animals, trees, mountains, solid minerals, etc. In the next section, I will look at traditional and modern scholarship that has made various connections between these components of creation and humans wellness.

## Traditional and Modern Scholarship

### Assisi: Interdependence and Caring as Expressions of Spirituality

Francis of Assisi was a medieval spiritual father who stressed the fact that there was much interdependence between creation, and its components and God. For Francis, humans sought to understand God, the Creator of all things, but neglected other components of creation and did not acknowledge that these components contributed to their wellness. According to Roger D. Sorrell, “While creation and humankind each had a certain autonomous character, creation at times served people and humankind depended on the aid of creation.”<sup>7</sup> For example, land as part of creation provides the means whereby people can grow food, as well as a space where individuals can practice meditation for spiritual and mental renewal. In turn, humans nurture the land, cultivate it, and care for it. This interdependence involves the way in which components of creation such as land and food are able to provide humans with basic needs that contributes to their spiritual, mental, and physical wellness.

Francis was noted to have said one day, “Let us give our sister cricket leave to go now, for it has made us sufficiently happy; we do not want our flesh to glory vainly over things of this kind.”<sup>8</sup> Being happy, a positive emotion, facilitated by the sound of the cricket, may promote a state of human wellness. Also, Francis was famously known to have cared for a wolf that tormented a community. He was said to have made peace with the wolf.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, Francis’s choice of words in speaking to the wolf, coupled with his

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7. Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 130.

8. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 49.

9. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 133.

non-violent disposition, may have softened the wolf's heart. In addition, Francis was said to have spoken to birds, referring to them as he would to people. Sorrell explains that the substance of his "sermon to those birds was this: 'my little bird sisters, you owe much to God your creator, and you must always and everywhere praise him.'"<sup>10</sup> In these occurrences above, we see Francis displaying various forms of relationship that exist between components of creation and humans. Francis reiterated that "God's goodness works through creations to aid people physically and spiritually."<sup>11</sup> He consistently drew attention to the importance of creation to human wellness.

#### Schaffer: Caring Rather Than Exploiting

Francis Schaffer was an American evangelical theologian who lived from 1912 to 1984. He was a voice against initial Christian thoughts on exploitative dominion of creation by humans. Francis Schaeffer's work on how creation has been impacted negatively by people has increased awareness of the need for healthy creation. In his book, Schaeffer built on the famous essay by Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in which White proposed that "the Christian notion of a transcendent God, removed from nature and breaking into nature only through revelation, removed spirit from nature and allows, in an ideological sense, for an easy exploitation of nature."<sup>12</sup> For Schaeffer, creation, or the earth, is sick due mostly to human activities and to a dominion attitude by Christians that is destructive. Schaeffer mentions a few of these activities including careless actions, monetary greed, and haste to do things much faster

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10. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 60.

11. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 34.

12. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution, and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970), 23.

than what the environment can take.<sup>13</sup> There has been a continuous exploitation of creation and its components without balance by humans. Consequently, creation has begun to die both spiritually and physically. According to Schaeffer, this includes the “death of ‘joy’ in nature” which leads to “the death of nature itself.”<sup>14</sup> With creation dying from the destructive dominion of humans, human wellness equally suffers.

When creation is unable to provide a rejuvenating atmosphere and resources to humans—spiritually, mentally, and physically—this sets up negative multiple effects on human wellness and humans’ ability to contribute to sustainable solutions in their abode or communities. Schaeffer believes, “The Christian is called upon to exhibit dominion, but exhibit it rightly: treating the thing as having value in itself, exercising dominion without being destructive.”<sup>15</sup> His point was that Christians should put belief into practice in order to save the earth and humans from destruction. He brought to light the interdependence between creation and humans in showing that when creation is well cared for, it promotes multiple positive effects, such as the joy stated above on human wellness.

### Clinebell’s Ecospirituality and Well-Being

Howard Clinebell was a more recent voice on the interface among creation care, human wellness, and sustainability, he approached this from the perspective of wholeness/well-being.<sup>16</sup> He advocated that human wholeness emanated from the working

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13. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 49.

14. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 10.

15. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 72.

16. Howard Clinebell, *Well Being: A Personal Plan for Exploring and Enriching the Seven Dimensions of Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 3. Clinebell uses *wholeness* and *wellbeing* interchangeably, and he also often uses *wellness*. However, in a sequel to this book (*Anchoring Your Well*

together of the mind, body, spirit, love, work, play, and the world (earth). Clinebell likened human wholeness to a flower, with its central core as the spirit and God as the sun. This spirit, which he stated must be developed, helps position the mind, body, love, work, play and earth in unity for growth that is energized by the sun. Clinebell declares, “Our most powerful well-being need—often hidden from us in our secularized world—is to develop our spiritual powers and potentialities.”<sup>17</sup>

Creation and its care set the space and structures for people to develop spiritual powers and potentialities. When we look at the story of creation in Gen 1–3, God set every component of creation up for relationship with one another. God’s relational love with humans was evident in his walk-around-the-garden visits with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8). Clinebell notes that since human “health and that of all God’s creatures ultimately depend on the health of the environment, loving the planet is really another way of loving yourself, other people, and all living things.”<sup>18</sup> Here again, we see human health, and that of other components being dependent on the health of the environment. That is, when creation is cared for through love, it positively impacts human wellness. Humans equally benefit from this positive emotion; they learn to love self and others.

Clinebell encouraged people to make their lifestyles more earth-caring, thus protecting the health of God’s whole creation and its sustenance. Life in all its fullness will be possible in the future only if we understand that Christian wellness must include

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*Being*, 19), Clinebell states that wellness has a limit. He states that there could be decline in wellness, but that humans could still express healing love and spirituality in the ways that they live. Thus, for Clinebell, wellbeing may or may not include wellness.

17. Clinebell, *Well Being*, 20.

18. Clinebell, *Well Being*, 6–7.

protecting the wellness of God's earth.<sup>19</sup> This may be Clinebell's most direct thought about the interdependence of creation care, wellness, and a sustainable earth. Protecting the wellness of God's earth implies protecting the creation of God. For Clinebell, human wellness was tied to protecting God's creation. When creation is cared for, its space and structures are protected and able to meet human wellness needs such as food.

The three scholars above make various connections between creation, and its care and human wellness. Francis of Assisi posits that God's goodness works through creation to aid people physically and spiritually. Francis Schaefer opines that a sick earth or the death of nature negatively impacts humans and their ability to positively benefit from creation. Clinebell maintains that the health of humans and other components of creation is dependent on the health of the environment.

### **Thesis Statement**

In this thesis, I will argue that creation care contributes to human wellness and to the earth's sustainability. In creation care, thoughts, attitudes, actions, and lifestyles are gradually formed that are essential to human wellness and the earth's sustainability. These include such actions and lifestyles as cultivating the land, gardening to produce food, rearing animals for food, keeping animals as pets or companions, practicing solitude, meditating, and praying. These are interdependent care-giving activities in which people both give and receive care from creation. For example, someone who cultivates the land can take time to sit on that land in order to meditate on the goodness of the Creator, to reflect on his or her life, to get some rest in the process, and to get re-energized to continue caring for the land. When creation receives care, it sustains the

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19. Clinebell, *Anchoring Your Well Being*, 26–27.

earth and humankind. However, if creation does not receive care, then both people and all other parts of creation are affected negatively. Humanity suffers from spiritual, physical, and mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, hunger, climate change, and pollution. These may be the reasons why the earth grapples with how to remain sustainable as people continue to experience a poor connection with God the Creator, stress, PTSD, land, food and water shortages, poverty, and waste. There is need to care for creation so that creation can care for us and sustain the earth.

### **Method**

Drawing from Clinebell's work on the connectedness of mind, body, spirit, love, work, play, and earth, I will explore creation care, human wellness, and sustainability, primarily via literature review. I will analyze how creation care contributes to human wellness in terms of spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness, as well as the earth's sustainability. Mental wellness includes emotional wellness, these terms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. It is possible that since most public and private attention is given to physical and financial wellness, there is little awareness concerning the impact of creation care, and the beneficial spiritual and mental practices that it supports and encompasses, which are vital to human wellness and the earth's sustainability.

### **Chapters Outline**

In this chapter, I have posed the research question and thesis statement, introduced relevant scholarship, and summarized the method of research. Chapter II will show how creation care helps humans live sustainably on the earth. Chapter III will analyze the role of creation care in spiritual and mental wellness for sustainable living.

Chapter IV will summarize, conclude the thesis argument, and will consider ways in which this thesis could be expanded. In the next section, I will propose some of the contributions of the thesis.

### **Contributions**

First, this thesis should stimulate all people, Christians, and non-Christians, to approach creation and its care not just as a spiritual, religious, theological, or ethical practice but as a potent tool or “a type of medicine” for human wellness and for the earth’s sustainability. Spiritual wellness could be a helpful indicator in determining why people who are furnished with detailed information that may help them live well and impact the earth positively, still are not able to use this information accordingly. Also, spiritual wellness may be a catalyst to change patterns that can help people use the information that they already have for their total wellness. Human wellness may be enhanced by deliberate use of creation. For example, Steven Chase gives a description of a person who said that “when she felt sadness or grief, she invariably made her way to a certain wilderness place where she knew she would not be disturbed, where the earth, the vegetation, the cyclical dynamics of growth, decay, death, and resurrection seemed to absorb her sorrow.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, creation has the potential to provide spaces for healing.

Second, the importance of mental or emotional wellness can be supported and enhanced by creation care. Many people suffer from mental health challenges, including negative feelings and emotions, some without even being aware of it. This is because at the onset, mental illness may not present visible symptoms. However, it tampers with the quality of life that an individual lives on a daily basis. Many live with fear, anxiety, and

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20. Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011), 8.

so forth. These are made worse by the constant stigmatization received at the hands of some healthcare providers, some friends, and some family members when these people seek help. Mental wellness may be the hope in fighting emotional challenges that destroy creative thinking and the energy that is needed across the world in order to put sustainable infrastructures in place. It may also be used in engaging mental illnesses that send many people to emergency rooms or cause harm to others. Creation care that incorporates a variety of spiritual care principles may bring new perspectives to offer better care for improved mental wellness.

Third, the earth's sustainability is proportional to humans' attention to creation's components, of which land is a core part. Land is central to the earth's sustainability, as almost all components of creation depend on land for survival. When creation receives proper care, it promotes human wellness that utilizes land appropriately. Adequate food, water, and energy can be produced for present and future use. Land can also be harnessed as spaces for healing of both spiritual and mental health challenges. It is imperative that land spaces within cities and in rural areas be designed intentionally to help people solve problems that bother their spiritual and mental functioning.

In the sections above, I provided definitions for creation care and human wellness. I cited relevant scholarships, thesis statement and method. Also, I laid out contributions that this thesis may have on the stream of literature and on human wellness including capacity to contribute to sustainable solutions and earth-positive impacts. How does creation care help humans live sustainably? This I will take on in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER II

### CREATION CARE AND SUSTAINABLE LIVING

#### **Introduction**

Sustainable living is non-negotiable if humans are to continue to survive in a world that is beset by spiritual woes that also include a physical aspect. By “spiritual woes,” I mean that humans are finding it difficult to use their knowledge of the divine to cope with the normal challenges of life. They are unable to engage in spiritual practices to deal with stressors, and they succumb to anger, anxiety, guilt, traumas, etc., which lead to a physical aspect that leaves little or no energy for them to contribute meaningfully to their communities. So, they are less energized and take careless actions that destroy creation’s components and sustainability. For example, the use of synthetic fertilizers and genetically modified seeds to grow food has resulted in land pollution and overly complex food products that are harmful to creation. Pesticides have been known to flow into streams and rivers where they have interfered with and disrupted normal aquatic life. Additionally, the unbalanced use of coal has led to global warming and climate change that have dried up rivers and wetlands.

In this chapter, I will show how creation care helps humans live sustainably on earth. First, creation care may bring people to a place of awareness of creation and of self. Second, creation care is vital to human formation, both spiritual formation and mental/emotional formation. Third, creation care develops in people the ability to care for land and food, which are essential to human sustenance. With an awareness of creation

and of self, spiritual and mental formation can occur in spaces within creation via spiritual practices, such as meditation and mindfulness. Individuals who become well-formed spiritually and mentally have the capacity to absorb the stressors of life, and they are energized with increased ability to care for their land and food, which sustain them.

### **Awareness of Creation and Self**

Calvin DeWitt explains, “Awareness means bringing things to our attention.”<sup>1</sup> It implies having knowledge of something through alertness in observing or in interpreting what one sees, hears, feels, etc.<sup>2</sup> Attention is the act of keeping one’s mind closely on something, or the ability to do this—in other words, mental concentration.<sup>3</sup> DeWitt goes on to say that awareness involves “seeing, identifying, naming, and locating.”<sup>4</sup> It forces us to acknowledge the existence of creation and its tendency to flourish. Awareness causes us to see, identify, and name things, which gets our attention, and to keep our minds closely concentrating on those things that we see. For instance, I had heard so much about an animal called “skunk.” When I eventually saw it, my attention was so arrested that I was engrossed in how it was created. The hairy strong tail and the stripes that adorned the dark color beneath were breathtaking, and this evoked certain feelings/emotions in me. A mixture of the awesomeness of the Creator, the ingenuity of the Creator, and the re-energizing beauty of creation filled me.

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1. Calvin B. DeWitt, “Creation’s Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity,” in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 72.

2. Victoria Neufeldt and David B. Guralnik, eds., “Awareness,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Webster’s New World, 1988), 95.

3. Neufeldt and Guralnik, “Attention,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 88.

4. DeWitt, “Creation’s Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity,” 72.

Awareness comes when we are able to identify things around us, whether animals, plants, non-living things, or when we hear about them. Even though I had never seen a skunk prior to that evening, I had heard about it, and I had some knowledge of its appearance and lifestyle. Therefore, my seeing it plus the previous information that I had helped me identify it physically. After identifying it, my mind was able to stay focused on it, and I observed keenly all that it was doing at that time. I became aware of other components of creation in that environment—squirrels and birds—and how they were all trying to find sustenance. In locating certain components, we can become aware of their habitats and how they survive. When we give attention, or concentrate mentally, on these components, we learn more about them and how they are connected to human sustenance.

As the level of our awareness is explored, it may impact our self-awareness. Alain Morin states that self-awareness refers to “the capacity of becoming the object of one’s own attention.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to explain that “one can focus on one’s emotions, thoughts, personality traits, preferences, goals, attitudes, perceptions, sensations, intentions, and so forth.”<sup>6</sup> While awareness can be general and external, self-awareness is restricted and internal to a person. When we see, identify, and locate various components of creation, and they stir up emotions in us, then we can become the object of our own attention. We now pay attention or keep our minds focused on ourselves and the emotions that are being produced. When this occurs, people tend to regulate and to use their thoughts, emotions, or attitudes in positive ways that can cause creation to move towards a more

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5. Alain Morin, “Self-Awareness Part 1: Definition, Measures, Effects, Functions, and Antecedents,” *SPPC* 5 (2011): 807, doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2011.00387.x.

6. Morin, “Self-Awareness Part 1,” 808.

sustainable state. One major adaptive function of self-awareness is self-regulation, which, according to Morin, “includes altering one’s behavior, resisting temptation, changing one’s mood, selecting a response from various options, and filtering irrelevant information.”<sup>7</sup> Becoming self-regulating implies that when we care for creation by being consciously present in it, seeing, and identifying, then we can adapt or alter our behaviors for its wellness, and in so doing, our own wellness is impacted. We can move from old destructive or nonchalant attitudes to constructive intentional attitudes, behaviors, and practices.

The import of this section on awareness is to stress that paying attention to self, creation, and its components contributes to the earth’s sustainability. By paying attention to oneself, one can monitor his or her emotions, behaviors, moods, attitudes, and stress levels, with the opportunity to give responses that sustains the earth. By paying attention to creation, we see, identify, observe, name, locate, and learn more about the things we need to do to support it. For example, by paying attention to crop yields and the nature/texture of the soil, one can determine whether to continue using that land to grow food or to let the land rest and rejuvenate itself. This contributes to the earth’s sustainability.

## **Spiritual and Mental Formation**

### **Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation is a Spirit-led process of becoming like God. Spiritual formation includes mental formation, with spiritual practices or disciplines being core parts. These are practices that people partake in that increase their spiritual experience

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7. Morin, “Self-Awareness Part 1,” 818.

with God. Dallas Willard declares, “Spiritual disciplines, ‘exercises unto godliness,’ are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of [God’s] life and power, without harm to ourselves or others.”<sup>8</sup> Willard divides these disciplines into two main groups: “disciplines of abstinence,” which include “solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice;” and “disciplines of engagement,” which include “study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.”<sup>9</sup> Some of these activities are interrelated, so that one may not be fully utilized without others. For example, prayer and fasting are activities that usually are conducted simultaneously, although they can be done separately.

Spiritual disciplines and/or virtues lead to spiritual growth, which is an element of spiritual formation. Without spiritual disciplines there is no spiritual growth, and formation cannot take place. Spiritual disciplines are like tools that can be used to prepare the garden bed before planting can take place. The agricultural metaphor of planting gives a vivid picture of the growth pattern. The disciplines or practices are the rigors involved in using the tools, including the physical labor required to get the plant into the soil. The soil is what gives life to the plant. Thus, when people show love, fast, and pray, they go through rigors that position them in the soil. They demonstrate their desire to grow, and their commitment do the watering, and God gives the increase. Jeffrey Greenman clarifies, “It is God’s own work, through the Spirit, to bring about Christ’s character in us, and it is our calling to cooperate with God in this process as we share in

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8. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 156.

9. Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 158.

the divine life given to us (2 Pet 1:4).”<sup>10</sup> As God’s character becomes formed in us, we grow spiritually, and we are able to see creation through His eyes. We see creation through love as God’s character of love is in us because God is love (1 John 4:16). We have love for ourselves, our neighbor, and for every component of creation, and this causes us to care for creation in ways that make the earth sustainable. Creation is sustainable when we attend to it through God’s love. I will now examine the spiritual virtue of love which is important for spiritual formation.

### ***Love***

This is a God kind of love that is shown to both living and non-living things. It takes this kind of love to care for components of creation that cannot say thank you. Interestingly, creation has a way of thanking humans when it is loved and cared for. This simply occurs through doing what creation has been naturally empowered to do by God. For example, when individuals take loving care of the soil on which they dwell, the soil does not dry up nor get depleted of nutrients. Instead, the soil remains good and full of nutrients, so that it produces fruits and herbs that people live on. However, this present generation of humans have struggled to care for creation, such as the soil that surrounds all of our natural habitats. As a result, people have resorted to synthetic components to help the soil grow food. Creation care is essential for humans to live and sustain themselves. Sometimes these synthetic soil additives find their way into people’s bodies. Because these additives are foreign to human bodies, they are liable to cause sickness. God is love, and 1 John 4: 8 says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because

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10. Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2010), 26.

God is love.”<sup>11</sup> Loving creation should not be done out of compulsion or religious volition, but as an act of knowing God more. When people love God, whom they do not see, then they are also able to love the works of his hands that they can see. Thus, the kind of individuals who are able to care for creation must love God and seek to know him more.

Furthermore, it is important to note that developing a loving relationship with God and other components of creation occurs in spaces that are provided by creation itself. Jürgen Moltmann posits that space is the environment that a subject “fills and dominates, and in which it dwells, and which therefore has to be respected as the sphere of that particular life.”<sup>12</sup> After God made humans, he placed them in the garden, and this was the space that he provided for himself to commune with them. It was also the space for humans to interact with the plants and animals. In order to try to understand God and what he revealed concerning his creation, we must make use of the space that he has given to us. People must respect God as the maker and owner of the space. They must equally respect and love other components of creation. Individuals must be aware of their responsibility, as well as recognize the space provided by creation and respect it. Humans need to understand that this space is for loving interactions and relationships with creation, not for selfish motives and exploitations. These kinds of people who have this understanding are able to love and care for creation. Charles Cummings states, “Creation is to be a continuing, dynamic process guided by incomprehensible love. God’s purpose

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11. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations in this thesis are from the New International Version (NIV) (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1984).

12. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures: 1984–1985 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 142.

is lovingly to draw all beings [especially humans] into blissful union with the divine being in the new creation.”<sup>13</sup> When an individual is full of God’s love, then obedience to follow new initiatives becomes easy. Love also tends to purify the heart. It can help people see new initiatives in the formation process. Jame Schaefer explains, “Aquinas taught that God created the many diverse entities that exist in the universe to communicate the divine goodness and, thereby, better represent it than anyone (or presumably several) creatures could.”<sup>14</sup> God expressed his grace and love through nature made manifest in the ecosystem in which we live today. By participating in this love, spiritual formation occurs. I now examine the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting which are also necessary in the process of spiritual formation.

### ***Prayer***

Contemplative practices like prayer are important for those who want to care for creation. Prayer is a process of communication with God, with a view to knowing God more. Human hearts should be inclined toward constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer. Prayer helps individuals take their hearts and minds off the pressures of their lives and place their hearts and minds on God. Through this, and by the help of the Holy Spirit, divine wisdom is enabled, and people can apply this to live sustainably. Prayer helps individuals see how vulnerable they are without God. This encourages people to desist from trying to solve their problems on their own and from carrying out activities that endanger other parts of creation. Instead, prayer promotes tranquility of mind. A

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13. Charles Cummings, *Eco-Spirituality: Toward a Reverent Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 111.

14. Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 124.

mind that is tranquil is able to see the provision that God has put in place in creation. A mind that is tranquil is at peace with itself and can reflect more about God and experience peace from God. God's peace is a lens that gives individuals the perception that God wants to dwell with them and the rest of creation. Prayer sets the pace for this kind of peace. Experiencing this peace may help people understand that other components of creation also want to "live" in peace and, thus, have the right not to be destroyed in order to satisfy human needs.

Prayer is empowered by a heart that seeks purity. When humans relate to creation with hearts of purity, then they are able to live sustainably. For example, instead of cutting down trees for energy, the fallen leaves and branches could be used instead. A pure heart seeks continuity of another creature, not just its own selfish needs. A pure heart will help those who desire to care for creation to live sustainably, because a pure heart will seek conservation of all components of creation and devise ways for its protection. When creation sits on the path of continuity, then many of the materialistic tendencies that cause humans to hurt creation could be resolved. For example, if animals and the remains of trees are allowed to replenish poor soil, which is a natural continuous process, then there would be no need for synthetic fertilizers. There would be no need to over-mine and extract minerals, like phosphorus ore, for synthetic fertilizers.

### ***Fasting***

Fasting is a spiritual practice that involves abstinence from food and other pleasurable activities. The idea of going without food and/or other pleasurable activities for some time does not appeal to many. Fasting has both spiritual and physical aspects. The spiritual aspect helps humans take their focus off the flesh and place it on God.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun posits, “Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God’s will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer.”<sup>15</sup> Fasting can initiate deep reflection about God and become a channel of revelation for individuals. Fasting enables the soul to become quiet and humble, which makes it receptive to spiritual knowledge. The spiritual knowledge that is received forms people spiritually to be like God and to behave like him. A humbled human mind that is filled with spiritual knowledge will see creation as an extension of God’s love for people—a means of God’s faithfulness to provide for the human need for relationship and interaction with other components of creation, and not as specimens on which to conduct experiments, or as resources to be plundered. Fasting enables spiritual formation whereby individuals who are formed with the character and the mindset of God’s love for all creation, see every component of creation as part of God’s sacred arrangement to take care of people’s needs, both present and future.

The physical aspect of fasting involves going without food and/or water, which enables the human body to engage in the processes of detoxification that improves wellness. Don Colbert explains, “Fasting allows your other digestive organs, including the stomach, pancreas, intestines, and gallbladder, a much-deserved rest, which allows your cells time to heal, repair, and be strengthened.”<sup>16</sup> A detoxified, rested, and strengthened body can fully participate in spiritual practices that enhance spiritual formation. The body is physically able to endure long periods of waiting, of reading

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15. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 246.

16. Don Colbert, *Get Healthy Through Detox and Fasting* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam Media, 2006), 26.

sacred text, of pilgrimage, and of prayer, which form individuals spiritually to be like God and to exude his character. Also, during this time of abstinence, one can reflect on the pain and discomfort of going without food and water, as well as rediscovering the importance of rest. The spiritual knowledge that is obtained and the formation that takes place can help people relate to other components of creation. It reinforces the fact that when other components are allowed to rest, they are able to regenerate naturally and to become revitalized on their own. A case in point is land that has been overused by people in many parts of the world and is no longer able to produce food to meet human needs. Creation care allows the land to rest from time to time. It also help replenish the soil through organic materials and other practices of soil tending. This may help the land replenish and produce food for creation and all components to remain sustainable.

### Mental Formation

When humans experience challenges, their minds, which are where processing and the ability to cope occur, become distressed or troubled. Mental formation, which includes the emotional aspect, enables one's capacity to cope with normal stress, process this stress, and express one's feelings or emotions. In this section, I will look at some practices facilitated by creation care that build mental capacity for sustainable living.

#### ***Mindfulness/Attentiveness***

Mindfulness/attentiveness builds one's mental strength and capacity to focus. Calhoun provides the following definition: "Mindfulness/attentiveness is a state of active, open, nonjudgmental attention to what is unfolding now in the moment in the presence of God."<sup>17</sup> It is a conscious and intentional effort by the mind to pay attention to what the

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17. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 114.

individual chooses to focus on. Usually, mindfulness/attentiveness is letting the mind become attentive to what is going on with thoughts, feelings, emotions, and the body. This means becoming mentally attentive to emotions like anger, frustration, and anxiety, as well as and movements or actions that are occurring in certain parts of the body. For example, one may become aware of anxiety by noticing racing thoughts, increased heartbeat, difficulty in swallowing, and hunched shoulders. Calhoun believes that “mindfulness/attentiveness keeps close watch on our inner compass so we can notice if we are mostly present to anxiety about our wardrobe, our longing for food or our expectations about tomorrow.”<sup>18</sup> Through mindfulness, we are able to listen to what is going on within us, whether the anxiety is about trivial things, like what clothes or shoes to get from the wardrobe, or about serious situations we are dealing with that result in internal chaos, like fear. After acknowledging what is inside of us, we can determine whether there is a need to re-orient our thoughts to the present, to stay in that moment, and to find ways to cope.

Jon Kabat-Zinn explains, “In the practice of mindfulness, you begin by utilizing one-pointed attention to cultivate calmness and stability, but then move beyond that by introducing a wider scope to the observing, as well as an element of inquiry.”<sup>19</sup> Mindfulness helps us gain control of our thoughts, make observations, and inquire about the things that we are noticing or on which we are focused. This can help calm the mind and focus it on such desired content as sacred texts or images, or even on the self.

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18. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 116.

19. Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness Meditation: Health Benefits of an Ancient Buddhist Practice,” in *Mind/Body Medicine: How to Use Your Mind for Better Health*, ed. Daniel Goleman and Joel Gurin (Yonkers, NY: Consumer Reports Books, 1993), 262.

Attentiveness on sacred or spiritual content produces spiritual insights and knowledge, which form humans into the likeness of God, and enable the capacity to give or receive from creation. Therefore, creation provides space for individuals to become calm, stable, attentive, and observant, toward mental formation that is capable of helping the individual cope with the difficulties of life. Serene places, such as mountains and/or hill tops, provide spaces for mindfulness. People who are well-formed mentally are able to subdue challenges inside or outside themselves and, thereby, enhance genuine care for creation.

### ***Memorization***

Calhoun indicates, “Memorization is the process of continually remembering the words, truths and images God uses to shape us,” and it “provides us with a store of learning, which can be accessed anywhere and anytime.”<sup>20</sup> This practice includes reading, writing, and listening to words or information, with the aim of committing them to memory. Justina reports, “In ancient times, people of all ages memorized abundant amounts of information, and so they were able to build on that knowledge to gain understanding and apply the wisdom.”<sup>21</sup> When we hear or read words and other information that we come across without intentionally keeping them in our memory, then they are forgotten. The reason is that our minds are processing a lot of information that is coming in from every area of our lives. However, when we intentionally memorize,

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20. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 194.

21. Justina, “Memorization: Why It Is Important and How It Is Mentally Liberating,” Jus’ Classical, n.d., <http://jusclassical.com/memorization-why-important-mentally-liberating/>, n.p.

through frequent repetition of the words, truths, and images, then these stay in our memory and constitute a storehouse of learning or knowledge.

Justina continues, “Through memorization, it is possible to build an organized system of knowledge in our brains or long-term memory.”<sup>22</sup> The knowledge that is present in our memories makes it possible for our minds to ponder on that information. Thus, we are able to think, analyze, and understand what has been stored, and we are able to apply this as wisdom. These processes enhance mental formation, including the mental capacity to receive, analyze, and disseminate information to oneself or to others. Justina asserts, “Memorization and accumulation in the long-term memory of relevant information leads to the ability to compare ideas, solve problems, critically think, ask questions, find insights, and inspire creativity.”<sup>23</sup> We are formed mentally when our minds have knowledge that is understood and is used to compare ideas, solve problems, ask questions, gain insights, and apply wisdom that is needed to be in control during challenging situations. Study International believes, “Memorizing through repetition and recollection is not only a mental work-out, but it also trains the mind to focus on tasks that seem dreary and unpleasant.”<sup>24</sup>

Care for creation enables us to stay outdoors for many activities, including walking around forests and parks. “University of Michigan psychology research . . . explored the cognitive benefits of interacting with nature and found that walking in a park

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22. Justina, “Memorization,” n.p.

23. Justina, “Memorization,” n.p.

24. Study International Staff, “Is Memorisation Antiquated, or the Foundation of Learning?” Study International, 7 February 2020, <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/memorisation-learning-foundation/>, n.p.

in any season, or even viewing pictures of nature, can help improve memory and attention.”<sup>25</sup> This implies that creation images and environments possess the ability to aid memory, which stores knowledge and the ability to recall as needed. Therefore, sacred texts and/or objects that are memorized can be retrieved at-will mentally and used. For example, a memorized psalm can be recited and reflected upon. This is an activity that forms us mentally and that strengthens our capacity to respond to difficult situations.

### ***Meditation***

“Meditation is a long, ardent gaze at God, his work, and his Word, slowing down and giving one’s undivided attention to God.”<sup>26</sup> This is a mental exercise that helps persons involved in the practice to continuously look at or listen to the words or activities within and/or around them. The content of meditation may be information that is already stored in one’s mind, or it may be something that is present in the environment. In the process of gazing at such content, one’s mental capacity is focused on that single content. This focus/attention may be in the form of thinking about that content over and over again until more understanding unfolds concerning that body of knowledge.

While all of this is happening, a slowing down, which aids in paying attention, occurs during meditation. There is a slowing down of other thoughts that have been racing through the mind, thus giving way to a more energized attentiveness on a single piece of information or on what the person is gazing on. This builds one’s mental capacity to pay attention to whatever content it so desires, and to stay there for as long as required. This helps develop a mental discipline that is vital to mental formation,

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25. “Going Outside—Even in the Cold—Improves Memory, Attention,” University of Michigan News, 16 December 2008, <https://news.umich.edu/going-outsideeven>, n.p.

26. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 191.

whereby a person, over time, has trained his/her mind to be able to pay attention to previously stored content or knowledge that can help in times of crisis. Also, the focus of attention may also be on images or activities that reside in creation. For example, focusing on the sounds of waterfalls, ocean waves, or birds chirping may help slow down the mind by shutting out other thoughts. In other instances, external activities in creation may help quiet the mind and redirect mental energy to a desired internal content. The entire creation is a space for meditation that helps form people mentally so they can contribute meaningfully to their existence and sustainable living.

Thus, spiritual and mental formation, with practices that include prayer, fasting, attentiveness, memorization, and meditation, among others aid human capacity to pay attention to self, creation, and its components. This ability to attend to self and creation is very essential in caring for key components such as land and food for the earth to be sustainable. I will now look into the care of land and food in more details.

### **Care of Land and Food**

Being able to attend to self and creation develops one's ability to care for the land and the food that it produces. Land and food can be overly exploited and destroyed by human carelessness. The exploitation reduces the capacity of these components to contribute to human wellness and sustainable living. Creations care offers an enabling environment for interaction and interdependency among these components that

contributes to human wellness and sustainable living. For example, land cared for will produce good food.

## Land

Land was part of God's creation to foster relationship, reciprocity, and cohabitation among living and/or non-living components made by God. This can be seen from the garden that God created at the beginning. Andrew Sloane reveals, "The account of God creating the garden and humanity establishes both an integral relationship between humanity, particularly the man, and creation and shows the character of care entailed in human dominion."<sup>27</sup> The garden space enabled plants, animals, and people to cohabit as they depended on each other. Humans are endowed with knowledge to care for creation while maintaining responsible dominion. The rest of creation reciprocates by giving back its own care in providing basic needs, such as food, to people.

John Hart proposes, "Reciprocity can also manifest through the exercise of traditional resource management or 'land care' practices embedded in traditional ecological knowledge."<sup>28</sup> Land provides the space for people to demonstrate the inherent care in them by making use of what they know in order to better the good of all creation. For example, allowing the land to rest after being used for some years enables the land to be regenerated. The regenerated land gains back its soil nutrients, and it also serves as a habitat for small animals that live and reproduce on it. Additionally, the regenerated land brings forth good harvests of crops for the sustenance of humans and other animals.

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27. Andrew Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 154.

28. John Hart, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 378.

Therefore, land, like every other part of creation, must be cared for with respect and with the knowledge that without it, other components cannot be sustained.

Land, humans, plants, and animals are made for interdependency. However, David Kline observes, “Creation has become something distant, something you go to, but has ceased to be a living part of us.”<sup>29</sup> Land is a part of our lives that we must attend to each day, wherever we live on the earth’s surface. Schaefer reports, “As one of the first theologians to address environmental concerns, [Joseph] Sittler criticized the subsuming of the natural environment under humanity to serve merely as a resource for human needs, thereby leaving the environment divested of ‘her own and proper life’ and ‘devoid of interests in herself.’”<sup>30</sup> Almost every aspect of human living is sustained by land. Plants and trees grow from the land, mineral resources are mined from land, and the list goes on. Elmer A. Martens declares, “In general, land and acreage as the source for vegetation and food are crucial for human existence.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, we see an interdependency that connects every living and non-living component of creation together. People are as dependent on land as land is dependent on people for care.

As the human population keeps rising, more land is used to build houses, to produce food, and to create a sense of security for various people across the earth. In this process, land is being destroyed, along with its components. It is quite unfair that people can depend on land for survival, but land cannot depend on people for its own

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29. David Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 62.

30. Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 173.

31. Elmer A. Martens, “‘O Land, Land, Land’: Reading the Earth Story in Both Testaments,” in *The Old Testament in the Life of God’s People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens*, ed. Jon Isaak (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 233.

sustenance. Consequently, if this trend continues, there will be more famine, and vegetation will continue to be depleted, which reduces food and water supply to humans. When people reciprocate the care that land gives to creation, humans enjoy more benefits from the land that they inhabit.

Land provides opportunity to build shelters and to offer hospitality, where the love of God can be displayed. Shelters are built on land with the use of different materials. Most of these materials are obtained from land. Wood is an important material in making shelters, and it is obtained from trees that grow on land. Many animals also make homes on or inside trees, like the birds and some insects. The key thing is that shelters provide security for their inhabitants: humans live in strong houses, and birds live in nests that are built on trees and, thereby, provide safety from other predators

Victor Matthews explains, “As a social institution, hospitality in the Near East, in both ancient and more modern times, adheres to a model of behavior based on the fulfillment of obligation and social expectations.”<sup>32</sup> To revive the relationship and interdependence that originally were laid out by God for all creation, people must show more care and concern for the land upon which they dwell. Schaefer states, “Patristic and medieval theologians urge the faithful to recognize God’s creation as blessings from God that should be used gratefully with restraint.”<sup>33</sup> For the land to sustain future generations, knowledge must be sought through God’s word, as well as through building ethics that will help the interactions with nature and its components. Our world is now plagued by so many environmental and agricultural disasters that the ability of land to produce food and

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32. Victor H. Matthews, *Old Testament Turning Points: The Narratives That Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005), 53.

33. Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 211.

sustain life has been reduced drastically. It is imperative that all people endeavor to seek knowledge that will help us keep the ecosystem functioning as originally designed and intended by God, so that humans can be well and live sustainably.

Land produces food that is vital to human existence and to the survival of the ecosystem. God created the earth and planted trees to bear fruits and seeds to serve as food. He made food to sustain all living things that live on the earth. God gave humans dominion over all that He created, including the food system. By this, I mean all that includes the process of preparing the soil, tilling the grounds, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and moving the food from the farms to the places where individuals can have access to the food. As long as people care for the land, they can grow food and have enough for themselves. The earth would be fertile to produce food, which serves as a form of connection among all components of the ecosystem. Food also serves to cure and prevent health problems. Humans are responsible for how food is produced and how it can be used for the common good of all creation. It is the duty of all people to ensure that fruits and herbs are allowed to grow and to be eaten at the right time. Humans also are responsible for how to use food that was created in abundance, and to maintain the interdependence of all creation. This process means that people were placed in charge, and whether they starved or had enough to eat was their responsibility. That is, their actions and everyday activities are functions that affect what they will have to eat. I believe that this process of being responsible and being actively involved helps individuals appreciate God and creation. It avails them the opportunity to study, to know other components of the ecosystem, and to develop proper food care that can sustain all components and the earth itself.

## Food

The world is full of people who for one reason or another do not have food to eat. Food can be an avenue to reach these people, who can be found in every society and culture around the world but are often neglected. Food brings them to the table of those who have. Those who have food have the opportunity to share their lives with others as food is made available to them. Hungry people can learn how to become independent and to be sources for their own living. Thus, proper food care entails food being utilized in such a way that others who are hungry are fed, and thereby relationship is developed. If those who have food use it in such a way that it is wasted, then others who are hungry either will steal from them or take it with violence, which results in conflicts. Therefore, when those who do not care properly for food have their food supplies disrupted, they become challenged. They can no longer feed themselves or preserve for the future. They are barely able to survive, and they eat whatever they see, whether good or bad.

Proper food care informs those that have food to eat what is needful and healthy so that they can be in a good state of wellness. This enables people to develop and maintain needed relationship with others. Sustainable living involves eating foods that are nutritious in their components. This information can come via relationships. Therefore, it is not just about bringing those who do not have to the table, but it is also about sharing information from more informed persons. A good state of wellness will equally make relationship with God more enjoyable. Angel F. Méndez Montoya posits that “eating is not simply a utilitarian function, but rather is ultimately a sacramental act that sustains, gives meaning to, and transforms the life of humanity into a greater communion with

God.”<sup>34</sup> Humans are able to participate in and experience God’s blessing and community through food. This gives opportunity to relate with each other as neighbors. According to Jennifer R. Ayres, “People and communities seek to establish food security in their neighborhoods and towns, build relationships between farmers and consumers, re-envision how humans relate to the land, support the dignity and livelihoods of farmers and laborers, and rediscover the meaning of being a neighbor.”<sup>35</sup> Food is common to every person, but most of the time the stakeholders are far apart and operate in isolation. Our world is so given to production, profit, and population increase, that those who grow food are in a constant state of trying to produce bigger yields. The marketers are worried about who they will sell to. The consumer is anxious to have constant supplies, and they may not care how the food is produced. These situations make it difficult for all stakeholders to relate as neighbors.

### ***Developing Capacity for Proper Food Care***

The principle of proper food care is to ensure that food is used responsibly. Overbuying food items and cooking overly large quantities of food contribute to waste. Overbuying food items from stores or markets stems from many factors. One factor may be the fear that the items may become exhausted and may take time to be replenished. Another factor may be poor judgement about what is actually needed compared with what is simply wanted. There are many times when people want something when it is not actually needed. When these food items are overbought, then there is higher tendency to

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34. Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist*, Illuminations: Theory and Religion (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 87.

35. Jennifer R. Ayres, *Good Food: Grounded Practical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 77.

prepare overly large quantities because the items are so prevalent. Some of these items are preferred to be eaten fresh, while some are prepared in mixtures with other items. In the end, when there is so much quantity prepared, and everyone has had his or her fill, then the rest is thrown into the trash. It is expedient to buy only what is needed and to think of ways to take care of food remnants so that they do not end up in the trash. No matter how little the leftovers are, the trashcan must not be the only alternative for these leftovers.

Proper food care entails having an interest in discovering other options for excess food that differ from throwing it into the trash. It takes effort and time to explore options that can be utilized to check buying and preparing excessive amounts of food. Sometimes it takes engaging in some experimentation to discover some findings about some food items. It is only interest that can sustain these activities. For example, when there is excessive food produced that can be composted in many different ways, one way is to try to introduce red worms into the waste. There are some food items that red worms will not feed on or try to decompose. Careful and diligent observation may enable one to discover exactly what is best for the red worms to feed on in order to make good compost from the food waste. There are also possibilities that some kinds of excess food can be mixed or processed together for animal feeds. All of this involves an intentional attempt not to contribute to the waste of excess food in our various communities.

I believe that this interest can be reinforced by changing the mindset that excess food must be thrown away. For proper food care and sustainable living, it is important to reorient the mind to the idea that not all people have enough to eat, nor do all people have same access to the same varieties of food. Some people feed on an extremely poor quality

of food that makes them prone to diseases. A right mindset may include identifying persons or communities where there is not enough to eat, and then getting involved in making food available. Kathryn Blanchard and Kevin O'Brien submit, "By practicing this membership in a global food community, people learn to invest time and energy in communities of the poor and marginalized who are too often denied secure and self-directed access to healthy foods."<sup>36</sup> It will take every necessary step to prevent food from losing its nutritional value. An appropriate mindset will not leave this task to others but will seek to be actively involved.

Prudence is an important aspect of developing food care that is essential for sustainable living. Schaefer declares, "A prudent person chooses means of acting on other living and inanimate entities through a process of taking counsel, forming a good judgement, and commanding correctly."<sup>37</sup> Handling food requires careful actions that are preceded by taking counsel from others and by having good judgement. For example, there are some food items that can easily become contaminated with impurities from the environment. If unnoticed, this can get into the human system and cause harm. Other food items may start going bad when they experience temperature variations. Even in storage, food may spoil when inappropriate actions are taken. Prudence helps in making good judgements that affect both food consumers and the inanimate entities that are involved in food production. Wrong judgements about water usage in arid places can reduce the amount of water that is available to food consumers in a community. It can also dry up entire water sources. Thus, correctly commanding the natural resources that

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36. Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kevin J. O'Brien, *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 78.

37. Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 232.

produce food is vital. Prudence makes room in the hearts of people to love the rest of the ecosystem that is involved in making food available. It acknowledges the fact that creation is a space for loving relationships, not a place for dominion that impairs the survival of others. Contrary to the views of many that food-producing plants and animals are to be subdued and simply used to meet human need, prudence sees them as parts of God's creation that must be approached with care and respect. Love, respect, and appropriate action are needed in dealing with resources that produce food, -primarily the land, where plants, trees, and fruits are obtained, and where animals are reared. Loving the land will ensure that it receives what it needs to produce good food.

### ***The Effects of Proper Food Care***

Proper food care can stimulate people to grow their own food and to live sustainably. Locally grown food can be raised free of artificial constituents or growth enhancers and so takes more time, energy and resources to produce. Thus, there is less tendency to waste it since it is not always readily available at the food store. Growing food enables people to be responsible for what they eat. They have control over all the factors involved, from land, to seed, to storage. People have the freedom to grow food according to their specific desires for what the crop would look like and contain. When food is grown locally, then the growers have the opportunity to care for the plants, the animals, and the other components involved in food production. These people follow the natural course of growing, and they avoid any form of growth-stimulating chemicals to aid food growing. They watch for factors that might affect the quality of the crop and address it in the most natural way.

Ayres proposes, “The practice of growing food is a means to nurture human agency—the capacity to make decisions, act accordingly, and reflect upon one’s experience—and an entrée to active and meaningful participation in the movement towards food justice.”<sup>38</sup> Proper food care creates an atmosphere for individuals to relate with each other. It gives room for reflection as one engages every stakeholder in the food system. For example, before planting, growers are able to think deeply about land as a great gift from the Creator. This reflection may also lead to the desire to have the land rejuvenated and revived to keep the land alive. This will inform good decisions that will be of benefit both to the land and to the crops planted on it. Care informs communities about being able to exercise their rights to grow, sell, and eat healthy food.

Proper food care can lead to economic and social stability, which promote sustainable living. According to Michael Pollan, “There’s no escaping the fact that better food—whether measured by taste or nutritionally quality (which often correspond)—costs more, usually because it has been grown with more care and less intensively.”<sup>39</sup> This equates to more money for the growers when they sell their leftovers to consumers. However, growers have to contend with challenges in order to meet demands. I believe that there is a large market for natural and organic food across the world; however, due to the time and the kinds of specialized techniques and equipment involved, organic farmers may not be able to make more money from their sales. A possible solution to this is community cooperation and participation, whereby growers can pool their labor together, care for the land and the crops, and then patiently wait for harvest. This may also help

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38. Ayres, *Good Food*, 115.

39. Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 184.

stem the tide of food waste that arises from an inability to harvest everything in good time. Economic viability can help growers acquire more training and equipment which, in turn, will create more locally grown food products.

When there is economic and financial empowerment, then there is social stability in the community. Each person in the community will be more independent and not have to become part of a group of people who cannot fend for themselves. This creates an upset in the community that leads those who think that they are victims to commit crimes. Social stability gives force to social justice, where everyone in the community has equal access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges. Proper food care can influence local communities to become centers of industrial growth. When people in certain communities grow some food crops in quality and quantity, this may attract big companies who use those items as their raw materials. The communities also are standby farmers' markets where people can come to buy fresh food items.

Proper food care creates an atmosphere of food security that is essential for sustainable living. David Castle, Keith Culver, and William Hannah report, "Over one billion of our fellow humans are at serious risk of starvation—a risk explained technically and diplomatically as 'food insecurity.'"<sup>40</sup> Food insecurity is responsible for a lot of problems in communities around the world. It interferes with sustainability, because when there are too many people who are at the risk of not having food to eat, then their present and future conditions are in jeopardy. People who are at risk of starvation will not be in a situation to contribute meaningfully to creation care. They will end up being impoverished, which affects the economic and social stability of their communities.

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40. David Castle, Keith Culver, and William Hannah, "Scenarios for Food Security," in *The Philosophy of Food*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 253.

These persons may have little or no knowledge about proper food care in utilizing every available food product. People whose minds are not reoriented towards prudent use of resources that produce food, may contribute to food insecurity. They are liable toward waste and careless use of available resources. Thus, for food security, which entails the availability of food for the present and the future, proper food care is vital.

Food security enhances self-reliance and self-worth, both for individuals and communities. When people are confident of being able to feed themselves at every point in time, then their self-worth increases. This can bolster confident participation in trade and other economic activities. Frances Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins, and Cary Fowler posit, “With food self-reliance, trade becomes an organic outgrowth of development, not the fragile hinge on which survival hangs.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, proper food care is a tool for a natural outgrowth of development. This development includes an ability for self-sufficiency in the basic necessities of living. That is, the availability of food may directly or indirectly lead to the availability of other components of sustainable living. For example, proper food care ensures that humans have access to food with adequate nutritional content.

Appropriate nutrition obtained through proper food care is important to maintain healthy individuals and community. According to Gyorgy Scrinis, “In understanding the relationship between food and bodily health, at least three levels of engagement with food can be distinguished: the dietary level, the level of food or the food product, and the

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41. Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, with Cary Fowler, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1977), 376.

nutrient level.”<sup>42</sup> The dietary level has to do with the intake of certain nutrients that are available in what is eaten. It also implies abstinence from some certain nutrients, like complex sugars or lipids, or partial abstinence at various levels of intake. In some food products, these nutrients may be high or low. My point is that all the dietary and nutrient parameters needed for good health can be achieved through proper food care. Thus, the human body is filled with food that can supply the nutrients that will initiate proper maintenance of body systems, growth of the body, reproduction, and disease control. Good nutrition has low tolerance for genetically modified food products and other artificially created animal products. These have been shown, over time, to contain components that do not break down naturally in the body. They distort the body system and weaken its defense mechanisms against disease. Proper food care emphasizes local organic production of food items with appropriate nutrients. These break down naturally and are absorbed directly into the body mechanisms. Thus, there is a direct relationship between eating good food that leads to good health and living sustainably.

Proper food care has the capacity to engage people in sustainable practices that promote human wellness, which is when people are physically, spiritually, and mentally/emotionally sound. A person can be physically well but may have trouble with his or her mind. There may be thoughts of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and frustration that may impair the ability to make good decisions that will promote sustainable living. Proper food care engages nature—land, plants, and animals—and it can serve as a form of therapy to combat emotional and mental stress with which humans struggle. For example, tilling the ground and planting focus the mind on the land, and

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42. Gyorgy Scrinis, “Nutritionism and Functional Foods,” in *The Philosophy of Food*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 270.

help the mind reflect on every single organism that forms part of the ecosystem that is involved in this practice. Others may feed animals on their ranches and have their minds focused on the animals at that point in time. Again, reflection on nature and its components can take people's away from the pressures and stresses in their minds, focusing their thoughts on their immediate activities.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored creation care and sustainable living. I have looked at awareness of self and creation. That is, our ability to pay attention to ourselves, creation, and its components. Then I examined the spiritual formation and mental formation that occur through such practices as prayer, fasting, mindfulness, meditation, and memorization. In addition, I analyzed the significance of care for land and food, how they help humans maintain wellness, and their effects on sustainable living. All of these show how creation care facilitates the spiritual and mental wellness of individuals and their communities. How is spiritual or mental wellness defined? What constitutes spiritual and mental wellness? What is spiritual distress and mental distress? Why are these kinds of distresses detrimental to sustainable living? How can creation care enhance spiritual and mental wellness that can contribute to the earth's sustainability? These questions will be considered in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### THE ROLE OF CREATION CARE IN SPIRITUAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS

#### **Introduction**

Creation care contributes to spiritual wellness, and it provides different avenues that afford the opportunity to use creation's abundant resources. These are resources that are familiar to humankind, but not fully utilized. They include forests, caves, deserts/wildernesses, among others. Accordingly, there is a need for renewed awareness and knowledge of how these resources can be used. This will help creation be seen as being at the center of spiritual wellness, which supports physical wellness in wholistic ways. Wendell Berry writes of how people, suffering from despair, are "encapsulated in loneliness" and have isolated themselves from the healing virtues of creation.<sup>1</sup> Berry believes, "They cut off access to the wilderness of Creation where we must go to be reborn—to receive the awareness, at once humbling and exhilarating, grievous and joyful, that we are a part of Creation, one with all that we live from and all that, in turn, lives from us."<sup>2</sup>

The wilderness of creation implies the vast varieties of resources that creation possesses. Creation provides an opportunity to be reborn spiritually and/or mentally; that is, when individuals engage creation, they gain better awareness of self and of the

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1. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1977), 104.

2. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 104.

components with which they engage. In this chapter, I will explore how creation care may enhance spiritual, mental, and emotional wellness for sustainable living. Spiritual wellness includes mental and emotional wellness vital to living sustainably on earth. Mental and emotional wellness are used interchangeably in this thesis. Spiritual and mental wellness is distorted by spiritual and mental distress which impairs the ability of humans realize their abilities, cope with stress and to live sustainably. Creation care through its spaces and environments helps to fight spiritual and mental distress to enhance spiritual and mental wellness.

### **Spiritual Wellness**

According to Ellis Jones, Ross Haenfler, and Brett Johnson, “No matter how much our world changes, one factor that stays the same is the human desire to connect to the eternal, the everlasting, and to something greater than ourselves, that which many of us call God.”<sup>3</sup> In a broader sense, this may be referred to as spirituality: the ability to connect or have relationship with a divine being or higher power. A primary reason for this is that people have always depended on creation set up by the divine, especially in theistic faiths like Christianity. For example, in Genesis, Adam did not have to create the water, vegetation, fish, etc. Rather, he met all these things already created alongside other components of creation. There were mountains, creeks, forests, and the sun, and moon, which he enjoyed and depended on for his sustenance. Thus, humanity has been in relationship with the divine and has, over the years, developed various ways to maintain and grow that relationship. That relationship became a “go-to” place in times of adversity when people needed help with what they could not understand or figure out. The place of

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3. Ellis Jones, Ross Haenfler, and Brett Johnson, *The Better World Handbook: Small Changes that Make a Big Difference*, rev. and upd. ed. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2007), 143.

the divine became a place of succor and a medium to rejuvenate the human soul and body.

Within the Christian context, spiritual wellness is a measure of how an individual is able to use his or her belief in God—including using spiritual practices like prayer, reading scripture, meditation, etc.—in order to cope positively with life’s challenges. Individuals vary in the degree to which they can use their beliefs and/or relationship with God for positive coping during hard times. This may depend on the length of the individual’s relationship with God, or the depth of the person’s belief. It may also be a function of the kind of spiritual practices to which the individual has been exposed, as well as practiced for years. The consistency of spiritual practices shapes the individual for positive coping at challenging times. Also, some individuals are unable to use their belief, relationship with God, or spiritual practices to cope positively due to a lack of awareness, poor spiritual/mental formation, life’s challenges, and various inconsistencies in observing spiritual practices, among other reasons.

Strout and Howard report, “People possessing spiritual wellness accept the unknown in life and find harmony with social and physical forces from outside. . . . They can formulate a personal value system that gives unity, purpose, and goals to their hopes, thoughts, and actions.”<sup>4</sup> A dependence on God and a trust in his ability to oversee the affairs of people, both in the present and in the future, cause individuals to accept even the unknown in life. Clinebell declares, “The deep conviction that your life has some meaning and worth and that you are really loved can help you live a more whole life right

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4. Kelley Ann Strout and Elizabeth P. Howard, “The Six Dimensions of Wellness and Cognition in Aging Adults,” *JHN* 30 (2012): 201.

in the midst of life's difficulties."<sup>5</sup> The Christian faith attests that God has a purpose for each life, and that God is able to bring this purpose to pass no matter the trials, troubles, and temptations that the individual may face. Thus, there is a deep belief that God is all knowing and able to offer help at all times. This belief moves one toward a place of peace, both internally and externally, in the midst of terrible life challenges. Internal peace involves calm and clarity coming into the mind, which can be exhibited externally through corresponding actions, like non-anxious presence and supportive dialogue.

Furthermore, when persons turn to spiritual practices, they cultivate hope, as well as a value system that may give purpose or meaning to the challenges that they are facing. A big problem during life's challenges is finding meaning and purpose. Spiritual practices, over time, help enhance good values that become engrained in individuals. These values may produce goals. For example, an individual may include praying for the elderly in his/her neighborhood for ten minutes each morning. If this has become part of one's value system, even during life's challenges, then one still continues to do this. As one invests times in praying for or helping others, this may lead to positive thoughts and actions that may provide positive coping with the challenge at hand.

### **Spiritual Distress**

When a person is not spiritually well, spiritual distress may be present. Elizabeth Weathers states, "Spiritual distress has been defined as a disturbance in the belief or value system that provides strength, hope and meaning to life."<sup>6</sup> A belief or value system

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5. Howard Clinebell, *Well Being: A Personal Plan for Exploring and Enriching the Seven Dimensions of Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 28.

6. Elizabeth Weathers, "What is Spirituality?" in *Spirituality in Healthcare: Perspectives for Innovative Practice*, ed. Fiona Timmins and Silvia Caldeira (Cham, Switz.: Springer Nature, 2019), 15.

is comprised of principles, ideals, and practices that enable one to have strength and meaning for one's life. This system is like a driving force that guides and motivates an individual to pursue his/her desires. When a belief or value is questioned or becomes subject to doubt due to an unfavorable event, then it is said to be disturbed or in a state of distress. Agents of disturbance may come from pain, loss, sickness, and many other unpleasant experiences that come with daily living. Spiritually distressed persons are not able to use their beliefs and practices to counter these disturbances and to subdue any doubts that attack their belief system. Therefore, they become weakened, hopeless, and lack the peace to make sense of what they are going through. This may be a result of a lack of depth of understanding of how their belief responds to unfavorable circumstances. It could also be that the situation is so overwhelming that it clouds the ability of the mind to make use of its beliefs or practices to respond positively to cope. There might be a total forgetfulness of one's beliefs in the face of adversities.

Weathers notes, "Spiritual distress is said to arise from unmet needs, and the greater the degree that a spiritual need remains unmet, the greater the level of spiritual distress experienced by the person."<sup>7</sup> A spiritual need could be considered as expectations that persons have in order to gain strength, peace, and meaning for life in difficult situations. When persons encounter negative events, like natural disasters, sickness, or loss, they may have conscious or unconscious expectations to get support internally from their own beliefs or value system to find strength to address that challenge. In some cases, the expectation may be for external support from spiritual care professionals. For those with poor spiritual wellness, these expectations are not met by their own beliefs or

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7. Weathers, "What is Spirituality?" 15.

value system. Thus, they become spiritually distressed, and they cope negatively with their challenges. Spiritual distress may increase so that meaning making and finding strength in life situations become difficult. This may result in a total shutdown of one's spiritual coping mechanisms, which may complicate response to medical treatment.

When the spiritual issues are not easily seen, then spiritual distress may be hidden. Some persons may not even be aware that they are spiritually distressed, so they do not know how or where to get help. For some with greater self-awareness, they may be able to sense that some things are not going well concerning the way that they are coping with their current challenge.

Spiritual distress may lead to neglect of creation and, accordingly, an unsustainable earth. Spiritual distress in persons can result in loss of interest in creation, nature, communities, and the environment in which they live. Things that ordinarily one should do are not done, because there is no motivation towards this. When the belief system is disturbed, then awareness of self and of creation becomes almost non-existent. Land and food care are left unattended because individuals have lost strength and hope in themselves and in the divine, and they are not able to find meaning in their lives. The resultant neglect in caring for creation renders it less able to provide what humans need to live sustainably. Spiritual distress can cause individuals to become disengaged from creation, and in so doing, they indulge in activities that are detrimental to creation.

Spiritual distress may be hidden internally; in this case, people may not understand the purpose or meaning of their situations. Other forms of distress may appear externally, such as anger, frowning, or crying due to loss/grief, among other situations. The process of providing spiritual care gives the spiritual care provider the opportunity to

explore different areas of the life of the person who is spiritually distressed. These areas cut across the whole person's feelings, relationships, purpose, identity, values, and beliefs. The main components of spiritual care include assessment, intervention, outcomes, and follow-up.

### **Engaging Creation Care for Spiritual Wellness**

In this section, I will look at how creation care becomes space for humans to move towards spiritual wellness from a place of distress. Humans can engage the components of creation to gather attention, pray, be alone, and heal. This occurs through interactive activities where humans offer care to creation and creation in turn cares for humans through healing of spirit, mind, and body.

#### **Attention and Contemplative Prayer**

Creation care helps combat spiritual distress to enhance spiritual wellness by providing space for gathering attention and contemplative prayer. Chase discusses how creation can foster attention-gathering which can become contemplative prayer.<sup>8</sup> That is, creation has spaces that encourage one to be attentive to oneself, to gain awareness of oneself and of other components, which may lead to reflections that may turn into prayer. This may occur when people go into creation, find a convenient place and position, gain some level of stillness, and then begin to reflect. It could be on a riverbank or under a tree, and one could be sitting, lying down, or taking any position that is comfortable. One may begin to note “physical and material characteristics of the place—space and time—around you and how you feel connected to them.”<sup>9</sup> This evokes a feeling of appreciation

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8. Steven Chase, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 14–15.

9. Chase, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 14.

for every aspect and component present in that space. It can lead to prayer that “could be an internal conversation, or recollection, or lament,” that connects one to the divine and leads to offering words of thanksgiving, despair, submission, or renewal of faith, as the case may be.<sup>10</sup>

Chase believes, “Creation prays in several modes, none of which is independent of the other.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to list “five modes of creation prayer: 1. Creation’s Prayer to God; 2. Humanity’s prayer to God through Creation; 3. God’s own loving contemplation of creation; 4. Creation as a manifestation of God’s contemplation; 5. Reciprocal prayer between creation and humanity as prayer to God.”<sup>12</sup> The last is, perhaps, the most interesting. In caring for creation, individuals often speak to it in prayer. For example, after a time of scorching heat on the land, a farmer often responds to the first rain showers with words of thanksgiving to the Creator. The plants also respond as their leaves change position for receiving the rain. In this, one can see how creation and humanity pray to God in different ways. Being able to gather attention, observe creation, converse with it, and commune with the divine uplifts our spiritual wellness and our ability to gain strength during spiritual distress.

### Solitude

Creation offers spaces for solitude. These are places where one can be alone. There are Biblical passages indicating that Christ went to the wilderness and/or deserted places for prayer and personal rejuvenation (Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42). Susan Bratton

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10. Chase, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 15.

11. Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011), 94.

12. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 94–95.

affirms, “Wild nature can provide refuges, free from human distraction, for contemplative prayer and for rest from our day-to-day responsibilities, and places where we, like Christ, can seek deep contact with the divine and relocate ourselves on our spiritual road.”<sup>13</sup>

Creation has these locations that many cultures and religious people have deemed as “holy” sites. A good example is mountain tops. I have personally visited such sites in my part of the world where many mountain tops are revered. I climbed a very high mountain. Climbing this mountain has remained one of the most spiritual experiences that I have ever had. In the process of climbing this mountain, there were writings that I could stop to read and reflect on. As the elevation rose, the village where it was located became smaller and the clouds got closer. Upon getting to the top of this mountain, the clouds passed by, and they were so close that it was like I had entered into another world. The presence of the divine became strong in the quietness and sacredness that filled this mountain top. During this aloneness, the whole scenario of what I was experiencing enabled me in rendering a prayer of thanksgiving and in subsequently outpouring of my heart’s petition to God. I may not have had this kind of connection if I had not been in a space that was offered by creation. Thus, creation aids spiritual wellness, and a person who is spiritually well can engage creation in positive ways that sustain every component.

Bernard Brady and Mark Neuzil present James Nash’s findings that people throughout history “have been filled with awe and wonder, moved to humility and contemplation, perplexed by the paradox of holistic order through brutal predation, overpowered by a sense of mystery, and yet strangely grasped by the consciousness of

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13. Susan Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 134.

God's loving presence."<sup>14</sup> Solitude moves people into a personal place of humility and contemplation that may act like a magnifying glass that helps them evaluate their connection to God. People tend to see things about our attitudes, behaviors, and relationship to others that were not seen before. The presence of God gets closer, and one is able to rejuvenate one's spirit and to renew the mind with God's Spirit. This boosts the individual's spiritual wellness and the ability to overcome challenges to a sustainable earth.

### Ecotherapy

Creation provides an environment for ecotherapy. Ecotherapy simply means treatment using the earth or creation as a kind of medicine or engaging in natural processes that fight spiritual distress to bring spiritual wellness to humans. The earth has many ways in which it can be a source of healing to persons who are in distress, especially regarding temporary and permanent wellness. Clinebell explains, "Ecotherapy is essentially a healing process, taking place somewhere within the half of the continuum representing degrees of illness, dysfunction, and alienation, including alienation from the earth."<sup>15</sup> Creation provides people with nature that is filled with plants, animals, bodies of water, wildernesses, forests, etc. that can be engaged daily. For example, in my own west African context, sicknesses like malaria or typhoid fever are known to be treated with a careful selection of some herbs obtained from the bush or forests that surround communities.

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14. Bernard Brady and Mark Neuzil, *A Spiritual Field Guide: Meditations for the Outdoors* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2005), 120–121.

15. Howard Clinebell, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* (New York: Haworth Press, 1996), 62.

A salient part of ecotherapy is intentional interaction or engagement with nature. It can take place in any setting—rural or urban, villages or cities, formal or informal. It can take place on ranches or farms, in parks or personal homes, etc. As long as the activities will involve nature and human interaction, healing and wellness may take place. According to Jenny Smith, “Formal programmes are usually a group activity and are run by trained professionals,” with some sessions utilizing “a set structure” with the inclusion of other types of therapy, while other sessions “can be more informal, or vary depending on the time of the year and what work needs doing.”<sup>16</sup> The efficacy of these programs, whether formal or informal, may depend on the severity of the distress and the availability of trained therapists. However, one can access many resources that have self-help processes that could be used personally or as a group. An advantage of ecotherapy is that it can be carried out in any place where nature exists without having to depend on second or third parties, as found in medical circles. Ecotherapy creates room for sufferers to connect with creation and, eventually, to connect with God. Persons initially hit by a stressor might be so down that they may not want any form of interaction with other individuals. They might lock themselves in to the point of self-harm, all because they do not want to be involved with others. This might be followed by a severance from a relationship with God. Persons like this may be open to spending time in and connecting with creation, and this may open up avenues to connect with the divine.

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16. Jenny Smith, *Making Sense of Ecotherapy* (London: Mind, 2015), 5. <https://wildwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Mind-MakingSenseOfEcotherapy2015.pdf>.

### *Ecotherapy in Practice for Spiritual Wellness: Horticulture*

Creation is primarily made up of the life-sustaining component of land, a platform for the ecotherapy-based horticultural therapy. This may also be referred to as gardening or gardening-based therapy, whereby interaction between humans and plants brings about spiritual wellness. Elizabeth Messer Diehl expounds, “Beyond exercise, the benefits of horticultural therapy extend healing into the psyche, culture, and spirit, working in ways that are both concrete and symbolic.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, by engaging the land and the plants, people are able to access healing for their spirits. The process of going through various plants that are present in a garden—looking at the colors, leaves, flowers—evoke appreciation of the Creator. This sense of appreciation may bring about remembrance of the divine/God and cause deeper reflection that may be strong enough to lead to a spiritual practice of worship. In the process of worship, one shifts wholly to the divine, drawing comfort and peace to replace fear or anxiety.

Horticultural therapy includes a wide range of activities that include observing plants, experimenting with seedlings, and planting and caring for the plants throughout their time of growth. Diehl explains, “Exposure to plants, most likely in tandem with other factors, stimulates cognitive and physical functioning, improves disposition, alleviates depression and loneliness, increases self-esteem, and helps disease recovery.”<sup>18</sup> Horticultural therapy stimulate physical functioning, that is, the process of participating in shoveling the earth, rejuvenating the earth with compost, or even making compost

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17. Elizabeth R. Messer Diehl, “Gardens that Heal,” in *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, ed. Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2009), 166.

18. Diehl, “Gardens that Heal,” 169.

from waste vegetation may relax, as well as build body muscles. These activities are capable of connecting one to the divine as new hope is built or re-built when the body's muscles get stronger. The feeling of gaining physical strength and the renewal of spiritual connection changes one's disposition from that of spiritual distress to hopefulness that tends towards spiritual wellness.

Trees are used in therapy, and they create a sense of companionship that stems loneliness. People climb trees and/or even build houses in trees for protection. As these interactions solidify, there is increased awareness and love towards these trees.

Vietnamese poet Thich Nhat Hanh describes his tree connection, "I planted three beautiful Himalayan cedars outside my hermitage, and now, whenever I walk by one of them, I bow, touch its bark with my cheek, and hug it. . . . I receive a lot of peace and sustenance from hugging trees."<sup>19</sup> This exemplifies a great relationship of an individual to the trees that he planted. Hanh knows how to use this spiritual resource to rejuvenate his spirit and mind. This results in gaining peace, even in the face of challenges that might be spiritually distressing. The simple acts of touching the bark of the trees with his cheeks and hugging them evoke a sense of companionship with the trees. Another important point here is that the trees were planted by him, and they must have taken years to grow. The trees now became a source of sustenance both spiritually and mentally. Thus, Hanh would be able to plant more trees for upcoming generations that might equally grow to sustain future generations.

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19. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2009), 3.

In stressing the importance of therapeutic horticultural programs, Diehl writes, “Institutionalized adults with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias participating in a horticultural therapy program . . . are demonstrating increases in self-esteem, social interaction with peers, confidence, interest in the future, awareness of the environment, and participation in other activities.”<sup>20</sup> Increase in self-esteem, social interaction, and awareness of the environment are very important for sustainable living. This awareness promotes conversations and activities that take specific steps toward sustaining the land with reasonable demands that do not destroy its productivity.

### ***Ecotherapy in Practice for Spiritual Wellness: Exploring the Wilderness***

Wilderness therapy through creation and its components contribute to spiritual wellness and sustainable living. Clinebell presents Robert Greenway’s findings, who surveyed students who took “his course on ecopsychology and wilderness . . . which includes three days or more of ‘alone time’ in nature. Ninety percent of respondents described ‘an increased sense of aliveness, well-being, and energy.’”<sup>21</sup> The wilderness produced a conducive environment for “alone time” with oneself, but still in the presence of other creatures, that only offered their supportive presence and no judgmental feedback. Clinebell also reports from Richard W. Voss, who leads trips into wilderness areas, “that the trips stretch people’s boundaries as they travel into their own inner wilderness.”<sup>22</sup> This may be the inner wilderness of spiritual guilt, pain, anxiety, or anger. These wildernesses may be incidents that happened during childhood or teenage years

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20. Diehl, “Gardens that Heal,” 172.

21. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 224.

22. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 224.

that were not resolved but raised questions about an individual's spiritual beliefs. Being exposed to the wilderness provides one with an environment that enables processing these emotions, making meanings, choosing to enrich one's spiritual resource base, and being able to use it in times of future crises.

Bratton, in "analyzing the ascetic and contemplative models of the wilderness experience," posits that "the strenuous environment of the wilderness provides freedom from social temptations and offers" a site where one can wrestle with one's internal spiritual state.<sup>23</sup> People have found themselves in a world where social interactions can sometimes become draining and a major source of spiritual distress. The wilderness provides space that is devoid of temptations that keep one distracted from facing deeply rooted sources of spiritual distress. It provides space where one can gain the aloneness that may be needed to confront internal spiritual turmoil that makes one unwell. In places like this, one may identify deep emotions, like unforgiveness or guilt, and express them in a group or in a place of rest and prayer to the divine. This improves spiritual wellness and the ability to engage creation better.

In the preceding sections, I examined spiritual wellness and distress to help us understand what constitutes these conditions, and how one can use creation care for sustainable living. Creation offers spaces for attention, prayer, and solitude. Also, creation and its care provide an environment for ecotherapy that may help fight spiritual distress and bring spiritual wellness to our spirits, minds, and bodies through horticultural and wilderness therapies. These therapies may produce spiritual aliveness, wellness, and energy for people, which promotes activities that sustain the earth. I will now move on to

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23. Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife*, 267, 143.

mental wellness which is a part of spiritual wellness and how creation care equally contributes to mental wellness for sustainable living.

## **Mental Wellness**

### **Introduction**

The mental wellness of people is critically important for the holistic functioning of all components of creation. This is because individuals are responsible not only for their own wellness, but also for the wellness of others, and a sustainable earth. Proverbs 23:7 says that what a person “thinks within himself, so is he” (NASB95). What goes on in the human mind is what comes out in actions and in relationships with others. When the mind is well, it is able to engage challenges, process information, and come up with positive thoughts and actions that impact sustainable living.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “21% of U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2020 (52.9 million people). This represents 1 in 5 adults. 5.6% of U.S. adults experienced serious mental illness in 2020 (14.2 million people). This represents 1 in 20 adults. 6.7% of U.S. adults experienced a co-occurring substance use disorder and mental illness in 2020 (17 million people).”<sup>24</sup> This is an indication that millions of people are not mentally or emotionally well to care for themselves and other components of creation. Thus, sustainability is negatively affected, because the mental framework of thoughts, emotions, actions, attitudes, and activities that is needed to care for the earth is lacking. In the words of Berry, “The split between what we think and what

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24. National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health by the Numbers,” NAMI, March 2021, <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>. n.p.

we do is profound.”<sup>25</sup> Creation and its care offers spaces and environments for mental wellness.

### Mental Wellness

Mental and emotional wellness are often used interchangeably. However, there is a slight difference, which I think may be helpful to know. Pyramid Healthcare provides some insight. “Mental health” includes “how well your mind processes and understands information and experiences” as well as “your ability to carefully reason through decisions and maintain a steady focused attention span.”<sup>26</sup> “Emotional health” involves “having both an awareness of your emotions and the ability to manage and express those feelings in an age-appropriate manner” as these emotions “arise from what you have learned and experienced.”<sup>27</sup> Both have wider scopes of meaning and use, but for the purpose of this thesis, I make a simplified definition from both pieces of information above. Thus, mental, or emotional wellness refers to one’s ability to understand information, process information and/or experiences, carefully reason through decisions, maintain steady focused attention, and manage and/or express emotions that arise from the everyday challenges of life.

To have mental wellness that can contribute positively to the earth’s sustainability, individuals must be able to understand themselves and to cope with mental/emotional distress. Tribute Senior Living explains, “The ability to acknowledge

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25. Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 18.

26. Pyramid Healthcare, “What is the Difference Between Mental Health and Emotional Health?” Pyramid Healthcare PA, 30 April 2019, <https://www.pyramidhealthcarepa.com/what-is-the-difference-between-mental-health-emotional-health/>. n.p.

27. Pyramid Healthcare, “What is the Difference,” n.p.

and share feelings of anger, fear, sadness, or stress; hope, love, joy and happiness in a productive manner contributes to our Emotional Wellness.”<sup>28</sup> One needs to be able to understand and process information, situations, and circumstances that tend to distort one’s normal life processes. Abnormal and distressing situations arise at different stages of life, and if one is not in a state of mental or emotional wellness, one may resort to doing harm to oneself and/or to others, including other components of creation.

Clinebell summarizes findings on mental wellness from social psychologist Marie Jahoda. From this, Clinebell says, “a person is mentally healthy to the degree that: (a) His attitudes towards himself are characterized by self-acceptance, self-esteem, and accuracy of self-perception; . . . (d) He has a dependable sense of inner identity and values so that he is not overly dependent on the influence of others; . . . (f) He is able to take what life gives him; master his environment; and enjoy love, work, and play.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, we see that mental wellness encompasses self-acceptance, self-esteem, perception, and a sense of inner identity, alongside holding one’s values. I believe that these parameters are useful in understanding and processing situations, information, and experiences that people go through. When an individual does not accept himself or herself, then there is already a conflict in the mind. Clinebell declares, “Only when you feel at least a minimal degree of self-esteem, competence, and inner strength will we be able to respect others, cope constructively with life’s demands, and know that our lives can make a small but significant difference in the world.”<sup>30</sup>

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28. “Seven Dimensions of Wellness,” Tribute Senior Living, n.d., <https://www.tributeseniorliving.com/seven-dimensions-of-wellness/>. n.p.

29. Howard Clinebell, *The Mental Health Ministry of the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 16–17.

30. Clinebell, *Well Being*, 52.

Another part of mental/emotional wellness is the inability to take what life gives and to express the feelings or emotions that are produced. Life can present distressing situations, events, and crises. When one is not able to understand or process these, then it becomes very difficult to express the emotions that are being felt with these distressing circumstances. Some persons keep these feelings bottled up for days, weeks, or even years, until this begins to affect their actions, attitudes, and relationships. These unexpressed feelings may affect the body in certain ways, by creating new illnesses or compounding already-existing ones. When persons are unable to understand, process, and express their feelings, then mental/emotional distress results.

### Mental Distress

Mental distress has many origins that include a person's inability to cope with the challenges of life and their environment, past or ongoing traumatic experiences, and/or family or genetic traits. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Exposure to environmental stressors, inflammatory conditions, toxins, alcohol or drug use while in the womb can sometimes be linked to mental illness."<sup>31</sup> The Clinic also explains that "brain chemistry" may be another cause of mental illness, in which neurotransmitters, which are "naturally occurring brain chemicals that carry signals to other parts of your brain and body," may be "impaired" so that the "nerve receptors and nerve systems change, leading to depression and other emotional disorders."<sup>32</sup> I will take a brief look at three major mental

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31. Mayo Clinic Staff, "Mental Illness," Mayo Clinic, 1998-2022, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/symptoms-causes/syc-20374968>. n.p.

32. Mayo Clinic Staff, "Mental Illness," n.p.

distress states that affect human wellness. These mental distress states impair people's ability to attend to themselves and creation, which perverts sustainable living.

### ***Depression***

Deborah Cornah notes that depression is characterized by one or more of a number of symptoms, including “feelings of sadness or misery; unexplained tiredness and fatigue; the feeling that even the smallest tasks are almost impossible; a loss of appetite for food, sex or company; excessive worry; feeling like a failure; unjustified feelings of guilt; feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness; sleep problems; and physical symptoms such as back pain or stomach cramps.”<sup>33</sup> One can see that this common mental distress has to do with feelings, especially negative feelings and emotions. These vary from feelings of sadness, misery, and guilt, to worthlessness and hopelessness, and in some cases, suicidal ideation may set in. Although these feelings may come from different real-life causes, they become more solidified when the negative thoughts and aspects of these circumstances are allowed to settle and take root in the mind. David Sobel and Robert Ornstein explain, “When you are depressed, pessimistic negative thought patterns become even more pronounced, coloring your perceptions and reactions to life.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, when the negative thoughts that arise from life's challenges dominate, this causes mental distress that adversely affects physical output. Sobel and Ornstein go on to say, “The way you think helps to produce and sustain a depressed mood. . . . Negative thoughts can undermine your feelings of self-worth.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, a person who is suffering

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33. Deborah Cornah, *The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health: A Review of the Literature* (London: Mental Health Foundation, 2006), 10.

34. David Sobel and Robert Ornstein, *Mind and Body Health Handbook* (Los Altos, CA: DRx, 1998), 157.

35. Sobel and Ornstein. *Mind and Body Health Handbook*, 157.

from depression may lack the energy and mental wellness to engage the land, grow food, and take care of animals, and other components of creation.

### *Anxiety*

According to Sobel and Ornstein, “Anxiety is generalized fear.”<sup>36</sup> Cornah describes the symptoms as including “feelings of shame, grief or aloneness, difficulty concentrating or an inability to learn new details; increased breathing and pulse rate, difficulty sleeping and problems with eating; social apprehension, isolation or withdrawal and irritability or unusual levels of aggression.”<sup>37</sup> This form of mental distress comes with its own array of feelings of shame, grief, and extreme fear, even when there is no immediate threat. It also comes in the form of panic attacks and phobias. The bottom line here is that anxiety happens mostly in the mind, and the body expresses it as tension, irritability, aggression, and other behaviors that make people function less effectively in their daily lives, as well as in their capacity to meet the responsibility of caring for creation, upon which the earth’s sustainability depends. Anxiety is mental distress that may be subtle or very pronounced. Whichever way its expressed, anxiety multiplies one’s worries and distorts mental/emotional wellness. Technology has added to the many conditions that promote anxiety, which reduces the time to care for oneself. People who are anxious have difficulty paying attention, and they may be unable to respond to the demands of caring for creation, which sometimes requires undivided attention.

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36. Sobel and Ornstein. *Mind and Body Health Handbook*, 144.

37. Cornah, *The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health*, 10.

### ***Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***

According to Richard S. Sharf, “Extreme reactions to a highly stressful event constitute post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”<sup>38</sup> Cornah adds, “It is a delayed reaction to an abnormal, traumatic life experience, such as war, terrorism, a car or aircraft accident, natural disaster, or physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse.”<sup>39</sup> This is a full-blown mental disorder that may be treated or managed. Due to the extreme and delayed reactions over an extended period that characterize the disorder, PTSD re-surfaces every now and then in the lives of individuals who struggle with it, and it contributes to mental distress when they face other traumas or normal challenges of life. Sharf further clarifies, “A traumatic moment may actually be a series of frustrated or dangerous moments in which feelings of tension and dangerous explosiveness are very high.”<sup>40</sup> These reactions may include feelings of fear, tension, anger, helplessness, terror, guilt, and shame. PTSD may encompass symptoms of depression and anxiety that impair mental wellness.

### **Engaging Creation Care for Mental Wellness**

In this section, I will look at how mental distress can be combated by engaging creation care, which is becoming increasingly helpful in providing care to persons suffering from depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other forms of mental distress. Clinebell talks about being “nurtured by nature,” where our interactions with the natural world

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38. Richard S. Sharf, *Theories of Psychotherapy and Counseling: Concepts and Cases*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2000), 13.

39. Cornah, *The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health*, 10.

40. Sharf, *Theories of Psychotherapy and Counseling*, 272.

bring us healing and enlivening.<sup>41</sup> Creation has spaces with the capacity to nurture humans via intentional and disciplined interactions that bring wellness and that enable sustainable living. Human interactions with creation or nature, along with its care, support mental wellness and human ability to impact the earth positively.

Gregory Bratman and colleagues explain, “Nature experience has been associated with improved sleep and reductions in stress. . . . These impacts on sleep and stress may entail decreased risk for mental illness, as sleep problems and stress are major risk factors for mental illness, especially depression.”<sup>42</sup> They further explain nature experience as our exposure to and experience with natural features of creation which may include landscape, tree density, and green and blue spaces like rivers, streams, and oceans. Improved mental wellness can be an outcome of one’s contact and experience with creation or nature.<sup>43</sup>

According to psychologists Kathryn Schertz and Marc Berman, experiments have shown that being exposed to “natural environments” improves “performance on working memory, cognitive-flexibility, and attentional-control tasks,” while exposure to “urban environments” has been linked to cognitive deficits.<sup>44</sup> Creation provides these natural environments that humans can access to fight mental distress and enhance mental wellness. Individuals with improved working memory, cognitive-flexibility, and

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41. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 8.

42. Gregory N. Bratman et al., “Nature and Mental Health: An Ecosystem Service Perspective,” *Science Advances* 5, no. 7 (24 July 2019): 3, <https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/sciadv.aax0903>.

43. Bratman et al., “Nature and Mental Health,” 3–5.

44. Kathryn E. Schertz and Marc G. Berman, “Understanding Nature and Its Cognitive Benefits,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28 (2019): 499, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0963721419854100>.

attentional-control are agents who can contribute to the earth's sustainability. The ability of an individual to maintain attention over time is vital to caring for oneself, and other components of creation and being sensitive to creation's needs. Also, the cognitive flexibility to adapt to changes in creation will provide the direction needed for sustainable development and to tackle sustainability challenges. This flexibility makes room for critical analysis of ideas and concepts that need to be put in place.

### Slowing Down and Unplugging

Creation and the process of caring for it provide opportunities to slow down and unplug which helps to fight mental/emotional distress. Calhoun notes, "Slowing is one way to overcome inner hurriedness and addiction to busyness. Through slowing, the sacrament of the present moment is tasted to the full."<sup>45</sup> Our world is constantly on the move, and the mind is being bombarded every second with daily activity needs. This is compounded by unexpected situations and crises that occur. Calhoun goes on, "Slowing is a way we counter our culture's mandate to tend to the bottom line, to move it or to lose it, to constantly be on the move."<sup>46</sup> Always being on the move robs us of being present and of enjoying the present. The constant agitation in our minds between the errors of the past and the uncertainty of the future creates unending tension that may cause mental distress.

Carl Honoré, in discussing the ever-increasing speed of contemporary life, writes: "In this media-drenched, data-rich, channel-surfing, computer-gaming age, we have lost

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45. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 88.

46. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 89.

the art of doing nothing, of shutting out the background noise and distractions, of slowing down and simply being alone with our thoughts.”<sup>47</sup> Creation presents spaces that can allow an individual to do nothing and to be alone. Being alone with one’s thoughts enables strong reflection which may lead to meditation that effectively fights mental distress. An important area has been the human response to the challenges of protecting and conserving resources so that everyone can have enough to live on, as well as enough to reserve for future generations. In being alone with our thoughts, we are forced to face our own fears and worries, and we may be able to name the feelings that we are experiencing and allow creation to lead us to a place slowing down.

Chase describes the process of discernment, beginning with “attentive slowing,” which generates “intensity of perception.”<sup>48</sup> He states, “Intensity of perception leads to curiosity, which may lead to compassion.”<sup>49</sup> The intentional act of slowing down prepares the mind and body to engage an object, whether it is a piece of art, oneself, or a component of creation. As the person gains this state of attention in a slowed-down mode, the perception of the object become intensified. There is more peering, reflection, and curiosity which eventually move one into compassion. The earth needs this form of compassion to remain sustainable. This is a compassion that moves people to discern the needs of the components of creation, which usually are not able to speak; to discern land or forests that need to be left alone or nurtured; and to discern when one is mentally distressed and needs to slow down in order to maintain mental/emotional wellness.

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47. Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 11.

48. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 169.

49. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 170.

Calhoun declares, “Unplugging calls us to . . . be fully present to and uninterrupted in my interactions with God and others.”<sup>50</sup> This reiterates the slowing-down concept. Creation makes this process of slowing down and unplugging practicable, as it presents vast spaces for this purpose. Whether it is on a mountain top, or in the wilderness, it is the intentionality that matters. When humans attend to themselves and discern when they are mentally or emotionally distressed, they are able to seek recuperation by going into creation. Mental/emotional wellness is enhanced, and they are able to tackle sustainability challenges that also need their attention and work.

### Dealing with Loss and Grief

Loss and grief can impact our mental wellness as they evoke feelings and behaviors that cause mental distress. J. William Worden clarifies, “Normal grief, also referred to as uncomplicated grief, encompasses a broad range of feelings and behaviors that are common after a loss.”<sup>51</sup> He says that these include: sadness, anger, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, numbness, shock, confusion, sleep/appetite disturbances, crying, and restless hyperactivity.<sup>52</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of feelings and behaviors that result after loss and grief. The point here is that these feelings and behaviors may impair mental wellness and the normal functioning of people, which may affect their interactions with self and others.

Creation offers space and resources for persons with loss and grief to find consolation. Chase explains, “Nature seems to understand, seems to fully accept our hurt,

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50. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 95.

51. J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Springer, 2009), 17.

52. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 18–30.

and has its own way of easing pain and offering solace.”<sup>53</sup> Chase discusses a veteran who “had stepped on a land mine,” and was in the hospital. He “was in despair and had stopped trying to improve.”<sup>54</sup> A horticultural therapist planted five bean seeds in a small glass jar and placed it in the veteran’s room. As the seeds began to sprout, the jar was placed on the other side of the bed so the veteran could not see it. By the next morning, this veteran had turned over by himself, and he continued watching the bean seedlings as they grew—and from then on, he began to improve.<sup>55</sup> Such is the power that is inherent in creation through plants. This person had seen the bean seeds planted, and then watched them sprout and grow. He was so engrossed in the process that he made a conscious effort mentally to turn himself to the other side in order to continue seeing the bean seedlings grow. His mind and spirit were revived, and this gave strength to his body.

#### Ecotherapy

According to George W. Burns, the central goal of “nature-guided therapy” (i.e., ecotherapy) is to facilitate healing and well-being, which includes “a state of physical health as well as a mental and emotional state of consonance,” which “exists in a healthy environment” and is based on “a harmonious connection with that ecology.”<sup>56</sup> An inner state of mental/emotional wellness may be achieved by fighting mental distress caused by life’s stressors through connection with various components of creation such as animals.

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53. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 177.

54. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 174.

55. Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, 175.

56. George W. Burns, *Nature-Guided Therapy: Brief Integrative Strategies for Health and Well-being* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 20.

### ***Ecotherapy in Practice for Mental Wellness: Animals***

Animals are integral parts of creation that can help fight mental distress to enable mental/emotional wellness when people interact with them. Dogs, cats, parrots, chickens, dolphins, cows, horses, and many others present opportunities for companionship and healing. Some of these animals may be trained for the specific purposes of service and therapy for persons with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other mental/emotional challenges. Other animals may be found in their natural habitats or may be brought together on farms or ranches where people can have access to the warmth, tranquility, and connections that they provide.

Craig Chalquist presents, “In a systematic and controlled study (Berget, Braastad & Ekeberg, 2008), patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, anxiety, affective disorders, and personality disorders showed significant improvement in coping ability, self-efficacy, symptom reduction, and quality of life after spending three hours twice a week working with farm animals for twelve weeks.”<sup>57</sup> It appears that God has placed some inherent silent interaction-oriented healing properties in animals that help alleviate mental/emotional distress and disorders. With improved coping abilities, persons may become more resilient to deal with normal life challenges. Coping abilities allow the individual’s mind to accommodate challenges and to offer solutions, especially on sustainability issues. ***Ecotherapy in Practice for Mental Wellness: Community***

Creation sets the environment for communities to exist with various landscapes, bodies of water, and other areas that can help fight mental distress and bring wellness to

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57. Craig A. Chalquist, “A Look at the Ecotherapy Research Evidence,” *Ecopsychology* 1 (2009): 67, <https://www.centreforecotherapy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Chalquist-evidence-into-effectiveness-of-ecotherapy.pdf>.

humans. These areas afford people the opportunity to co-exist, do things together and depend upon each other. Bill McKibben reports, “As eminent British economist Richard Layard points out, all primates live in groups and get sad when they’re separated: ‘an isolated individual will repeatedly pull a lever with no reward other than the glimpse of another monkey.’”<sup>58</sup> People living in groups in communities that carry out the same sets of eco-activities periodically can draw therapeutic benefits from such activities. It is much more difficult for a person in isolation to fight mental distress.

Elan Shapiro notes, “People experience deep pleasure and release from sweating together—feeling the elements of soil and water, rock, and plant, while doing a common task with a visible outcome.”<sup>59</sup> This pleasure and release from working fights mental distress and brings mental wellness and vitality to the body. Also, there is an element of fellowship and teamwork that evokes feelings of happiness, accomplishment, and hope. One also begins to see the outcomes of the activities in terms of improvement to part of creation in that particular environment. For example, worn-out farmland may become more fertile when time and effort have been spent on it for rejuvenation. This could be something as simple as letting the leaves rot on the land and then turning them over, for some time. This is part of creation care that is important for the earth’s sustainability while enhancing wellness. Many mental health facilities are engaging this communal or group structure to carry out mental wellness programs in which people are placed in

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58. Bill McKibben, “Human Nature, Community, and ‘Deep Economy,’” in *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, ed. Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2009), 189.

59. Elan Shapiro, “Restoring Habitats, Communities, and Souls,” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 226.

communal spaces on ranches or farms so they can gain support from each other and from the environment, as well as improve the environment in the process.

### ***Ecotherapy in Practice for Mental Wellness: Storytelling***

Ecotherapy through sharing of stories of creation-loving people may help fight mental distress and enhance mental/emotional wellness. Clinebell explains, “True stories of individuals or families who learned something from a frightening, destructive, inspiring, or enlivening experience with the natural world may be effective.”<sup>60</sup> Such stories involving creation components like the sun, trees, and birds can help people connect to the already-available therapeutic effects inherent in them. Clinebell posits, “In addition to human stories, tales of plants, animals, or other natural beings can communicate metaphorically a truth regarding humans and the earth.”<sup>61</sup> Clinebell shared a story from pastoral psychotherapist Douglas A. Anderson about a stream that wanted to cross the desert without being absorbed or consumed. In this story, the wind came to the rescue of the stream by carrying it in form of vapor and letting it fall when it got to the top of the mountain many miles away.<sup>62</sup>

The importance of this story is that individuals or families may come across distressing situations that demand that they change from previously held attitudes, mindsets, or habits, and be willing to be helped by others to get through their challenges. In the story, the stream had feared losing its identity and its normal way of life, so it initially resisted the idea of being helped when the desert advised that the wind could

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60. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 190.

61. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 190.

62. Clinebell, *Ecotherapy*, 190–191.

help. Another vital point from this story is that the stream remembered that there were things about it that were important, and that the wind (the helper) would help the stream sort out this in the process of carrying it across the desert. The same applies to humans, because we tend to forget that there are resources within and outside of us provided by creation, that can become assets to fight mental distress and enhance mental wellness if we accept help to identify and then utilize these resources.

### ***Ecotherapy in Practice for Mental Wellness: Eco-Education***

Ecotherapy via eco-education fights mental distress, enhances mental wellness and sustainable living. Ambra Pedretti-Burls submit, “Ecotherapy and eco-education utilize a variety of interventions designed to facilitate healing and growth in the three interdependent dimensions of *body-mind-spirit*.”<sup>63</sup> This is a “three-way holistic model” which “enables the educator/therapist to integrate the multiple needs of people, using resources from *participants* themselves, the *educator/therapist* and *nature* as co-educator.”<sup>64</sup> Pedretti-Burls explains,

The specific elements of the model are designed to enable people to enhance the *self* through three experiential dimensions . . . : develop openness towards being more fully, intentionally, and regularly supported by nature, in a caring and respectful interaction; enable people to become more cognitively aware of their place in nature and of the wider meanings, self-transcending or spiritual dimensions in their experiences of nature; motivate people to learn how to adopt more ecologically caring lifestyles and behavior and to participate in actions that will help save their ecosystem and biosphere.<sup>65</sup>

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63. Ambra Pedretti-Burls, “Ecotherapy: A Therapeutic and Educative Model,” *Journal of Mediterranean Ecology* 8 (2007): 21. <http://www.jmecoology.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/19-25-Pedretti-Burls.pdf>.

64. Pedretti-Burls, “Ecotherapy,” 21.

65. Pedretti-Burls, “Ecotherapy,” 22.

As in the story of the stream, desert, and wind, persons desiring mental wellness need to strive to be intentional to make changes and to be supported by nature through caring interactions. For example, a consistent practice of walking through bush trails may provide opportunities for deep-breathing exercises that utilize purer air. Caring interactions may include clearing trash around the trees as one walks through. Also, persons need to be more aware of spiritual dimensions as they experience nature. I have often wondered about the life-transformation that goes into a seed that grows into a tree, which can live for decades, and the awesomeness of the Creator in making this possible. It helps me remember that I can depend on that life-giving power of God.

Pedretti-Burls describes “eco-educative (and therapeutic) activities,” which may include “restoration of green urban areas—and educational activities which equip people to recognize and know the habitats required by plants and wild animals/insects in the local community or countryside and develop botanical and conservation know-how.”<sup>66</sup> These activities may result in physical and mental wellness that could include enhanced self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-care. Additionally, the ability to face challenges and changes that occur in life is developed. Self-care in being able to identify when to stop and take a break, both physically and mentally, becomes more pronounced. In addition, self-skills like having the ability to evaluate one’s progress and giving and receiving feedback in consultation with the educator and peers, promote mental wellness.

In the preceding sections, I explored mental wellness and distress, and how creation care help fight mental distress to enhance mental wellness thereby contributing to human wellness and a sustainable earth. I looked at how creation and its care can help

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66. Pedretti-Burls, “Ecotherapy,” 22.

humans fight mental distress by providing spaces and environments to slow down, unplug, and deal with loss and grief. I examined ecotherapy as a tool against mental distress that aids mental wellness by offering humans space to interact with animals, engage in community interactions, share eco-stories, and participate in eco-education. These avenues provided by creation help people function in a state of mental wellness that contributes to sustainable living.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

#### **Summary**

In our contemporary world, humans suffer from spiritual, mental, and emotional distress which impairs human wellness. In the preceding chapters, I have claimed that creation care contributes to human wellness and to the earth's sustainability. Creation care, which involves conscious and intentional activities carried out for the healthiness of all components of the created world, can help fight distress. These activities include, but are not limited to, care for self, land, food, water, and animals. My line of argumentation was as follows, first; creation care helps humans live sustainably by providing spaces by which people become better aware of themselves, other humans, and various components of creation. These spaces and as well as the interconnectivity that they offer, aid in self-awareness, spiritual formation through demonstration of love, and the practices of prayer and fasting. Also, creation care helps mental formation through practices of attentiveness, memorization, and meditation. In addition, creation care fosters land and food care, which are essential for human survival. This promotes a viable and sustainable earth.

Second, creation care contributes to spiritual and mental wellness. Creation care helps fight spiritual and mental distress through its spaces, environments, and activities, where people can be attentive and pray to the divine. Creation offers space for solitude in which humans can reflect, study, and pray to gain spiritual strength. Furthermore, creation and its care affords humans the opportunity for ecotherapy, whereby interactions

with nature bring wellness both spiritually and mentally. These interactions include the practice of horticulture on land, exploring the wilderness, interacting with animals, being in communities, and sharing eco-stories. Ecotherapy offers opportunity for eco-education that facilitates healing and growth, which help restore much damage that has been done to the land, climate, and other parts of creation. Having put forth these claims, I will conclude by considering some potential avenues for future research.

### **Using Creation Care in Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy for Spiritual and Mental Wellness**

Creation care can be used in spiritually integrated psychotherapy for spiritual and mental/emotional wellness. According to the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, “A meta-analysis of 97 outcome studies . . . of spiritually and religiously adapted therapies found that spiritually integrated psychotherapies were equal to secular treatments on mental health outcomes and often superior on spiritual outcomes.”<sup>1</sup> This is because humans are spiritual and religious by creation, and they tend to respond better to care when the divine/holy is introduced. It is interesting to note that this is equal in treatment to secular treatment, with an additional advantage of having no side effects on the mind and body, as medication has. Spiritually integrated psychotherapy includes the use of spiritual practices, such as prayer, mindfulness, sacred texts, sacred imagery, and nature as interventions. Thus, exploring care of creation has the capacity to bring a

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1. Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, *ACPE Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy Participant Manual* (Atlanta: ACPE, 2020), 15.

troubled mind to a place of attention-gathering and entering into a quiet but deeper form of prayer where a person can release bottled-up emotions to the divine.

This future research will explore creation care and some of its practices, as well as how these can be used to care for mental and behavioral health patients. Mental and behavioral health patients often are placed in secluded spaces without access to creation. I have been privileged to provide care to some patients with extreme anxiety and other disorders, who did not want medications because they claimed that the medications were not helpful. While the use of medications may be helpful to many, it is imperative to develop more resources that can be of help to these other patients. These resources may be a blend of other interventions but will be based on creation care and exploring nature. A great challenge for this research will be, how mental and behavioral health patients in secluded spaces, like hospitals, rehabilitation centers, prisons, and homes, can get connected to these unique resources when they cannot get out into open spaces. Also, it will be interesting to measure the outcomes of these specially developed creation-care-based practices when used in spiritually integrated psychotherapy with patients who are dealing with mental and behavioral challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, and then compare this to when medications are taken. What may be the short- and long-term effects on mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of the patients who engage in these creation-care-based interventions?

### **Land as Ecotherapy for Spiritual and Economic Wellness**

A core component of creation is land. It is the primary habitat for humans, who are equally one of the core components of creation. Land is so important to people because they are spiritually and physically connected to it. Land is seen as God's gift to

people, which is to be possessed and dwelled on. Also, humans see the presence of the divine through the existence of other creatures on land, which are perceived to be helpers for people to survive. For example, in most west African countries, cattle may be seen as God's blessings to provide for human needs. Cattle is a reference in these societies of how rich or influential an individual or a family is; and sometimes this determines the respect and position that an individual is given. Unfortunately, due to the damage done to the climate and the resultant global warming, land experiences drought, flooding, etc. The result is constant moving by cattle-owners, and encroachment of land owned by farmers, which has led to conflict, poverty, and destruction of lives and property. It will be valuable to research how conflicting tribes (which are theistic in faith) of Christians, and Muslims can find common ground to see land as sacred, and as a place of healing and sustenance to all life on earth.

### **Land as Eco-Education for Spiritual and Economic Wellness**

Land offers opportunities for eco-education that can contribute toward the spiritual and economic wellness of humans. Drawing from the holistic eco-educative model presented by Pedretti-Burl, it will be interesting to look into how an “educator/therapist” can “integrate the multiple needs of people, using resources from *participants* themselves, the *educator/therapist* and *nature* as co-educator.”<sup>2</sup> This may work alongside the above-mentioned interest in exploring land for healing—spiritually and economically. The multiple needs of the differing tribes and faiths present an opportunity to study how they see God, their neighbors, and the possibility of co-habiting

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2. Ambra Pedretti-Burl, “Ecotherapy: A Therapeutic and Educative Model,” *Journal of Mediterranean Ecology* 8 (2007): 21. <http://www.jmecology.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/19-25-Pedretti-Burl.pdf>, 21.

in peace, without having to fight over land for their vocations of cattle-rearing and farming. Furthermore, eco-education can be built into school curriculums, so that land is presented as a tool to strengthen one's spirituality and to survive economically.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Creation care is very important for human wellness and for the earth's sustainability. When creation is cared for by humans, it in turn cares for humans by helping to fight spiritual and mental distress, which contributes to human wellness and sustainable living. The significance of this thesis is to advance scholarly discussion on creation, its care and its connection to human wellness beyond theological theories, so as to engage creation care as a potent and practical tool or "medicine" to fight spiritual and mental distress in order for humans to be well. Thus, we must engage creation with respect and love in order to attend to ourselves, other people, and various components of creation, and we must apply this engagement for sustainable living. The more conscious and intentional the engagement with creation, the more humans are able to utilize the spaces, environments, and living and non-living components of creation to fight against distress and to maintain wellness. Humans who are well spiritually and mentally can contribute to the earth's sustainability by carrying out intentional activities that support the earth.

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