

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 21: Meet Anne Symens-Bucher, Canticle Farm

www.judithdreyer.com

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between ourselves and nature. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Anne Symens-Bucher. She is an initiatory member of Canticle Farm, a community in East Oakland, California experimenting at the intersection of faith based, social justice based, and earth based non-violent activism. I came across Canticle Farm through Father Rohr's work at The Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. Intrigued, I contacted Ann and I am delighted to have her as my guest today. Welcome Ann, how are you?

ANN: Doing really well, thank you Judith.

JUDITH: Ann, let's talk about Canticle Farm and how you began. You have such an interesting story to tell and I'd appreciate it if you'd share that with us.

ANN: Thank you. Well it began a long time ago with my own soul work, I guess you could say, as a young person growing up in East Oakland in a Franciscan Social Justice active parish, which took me to the New York Catholic Worker where I lived with Dorothy Day and was inspired by her life choices. And really, as someone growing up in a family with a lot of priests, I felt I had a vocation to the priesthood but when that wasn't a possibility I ended up at The Catholic Worker and that set me on the course of my path. I started a Catholic Worker in Oakland and when I predictively became burnt-out, which is often what happens, I moved over to this little house on 36th Avenue in the property here 36 years ago actually. And anyone who has ever been on this property would be like, wow, you wouldn't imagine you'd find yourself here because it has very deep lots, big huge garden, four houses nestled around a garden. And so, I thought to myself, what a great place for a community. Over the years many people have been here, and I've learned a lot along the way, got married, had five children. So many people have come and helped to shape the direction that we now find ourselves moving in, and it's always been very emergent. I love that you're into looking at things from a holistic perspective, because here one of our philosophies that grounds our work is from Joanna Macy, *The Work That Reconnects*, and her work is based in Buddhism and living systems theory. I've been studying with her for many years and so I really get that things emerge that are beyond anything that we can plan or predict, and that we are parts of a larger whole. That's very much how this community continues to function.

JUDITH: That's beautiful. Holistic principle is looking at a total picture but you're right, we can't predict the outcome. All we can do is follow this step and take the next step and take the next step.

Tell me a little bit about how you evolved. You mentioned four homes with a garden in between, which is a little unusual. How have you evolved to today?

ANN: Yes, this property was very unique right from the start so that was very much part of the vision, which was not anything we had to do anything about. It was just: how do we bring the people in and make this work around this garden? Eventually we've added two houses to it that are on another street, which made the garden even bigger. And it's sort of a bit of a, if you build it they will come, because the houses in many ways have preceded the people. But I do find myself, whether you call it grace or the

holy spirit, or emergent properties or as David White the poet says, “What you can plan is too small for you to live.”, that’s very much been what’s formed and shaped us. As of now, there are twenty-five people here and we’re grounded in many practices and philosophies and experimenting, as we say, at the intersection of all of them, and something unique and particular emerges.

JUDITH: I understand from your website that you’re very concerned about food security. Could you tell us more about that?

ANN: Well, we live in a time where so many of our systems are unraveling and food is certainly one of them. And the way that food has been grown through large agribusiness is not sustainable. What we’re trying to do here is find ways to live more relationally and to create the world that we want to live in. So that world is one where we are growing food and doing it in a way that cares for the people who grow it. We’re not using pesticides and things that make people and the planet sick, and cares for the earth and is healthy and in a neighborhood where there isn’t a lot of access to healthy organic food. There are a lot of liquor stores and places where people can buy packaged and processed things but as we know, that just feeds a cycle of unhealth of body and mind. So being able to work at that intersection because everybody has a right to food. Growing food together can be such a joyful way to bring people together, and to community and creating a neighborhood where there are people growing food in their gardens, is one way for people to get to know to each other and to create more safety as well.

JUDITH: That’s beautiful. I know that we have some community gardens in various towns in many states that bring community together in some measure. But you’re talking about actual living spaces that have gardens where you can go out and pick your lettuce that day or a pepper if you want it for your salad. Am I right?

ANN: Yes, and also one of the things that we’re doing here is growing medicinal herbs and medicinal plants and helping to create tinctures and alternatives to pharmaceuticals to help people be healthier for those living here in the intentional community and also in the extended neighborhood. There is a lot of indigenous wisdom among some of our neighbors as well, who are not that far from their own roots of more of a land-based way of

being, growing food and knowing about herbal medicine. So that's part of what we're also trying to do.

JUDITH: That's very interesting. I'm connected to the herbal world and to see that a community is actually just taking care of themselves in that way to me is very exciting, because community-based living that's sustainable, and, I think the only way we're really going to survive in a healthy productive joy-filled life. The industrial model did not create a lot of joy. It created a lot of product and a lot of revenue but at the expense of our resources and at the expense of our communities. This is really very interesting.

Could you also tell me something about your social justice arm? Your earth-based activism, does that mean social problems such as alcoholism and the community and that type of thing? Tell me more.

ANN: I guess when I say that we're experimenting at the intersection of faith-based, earth-based and social justice based nonviolent activism I want to begin by saying that I'm sad that those things have gotten separated. It's like, what does it look like when we're thinking holistically again? As I grew up in a faith-based community the social justice piece came right out of the faith based, because as far as I was concerned, being a follower of Jesus meant being somebody who was caring for people who were on the margins. It meant something. It wasn't just about going to church on Sundays. And as somebody who didn't have the earth-based connection so much until later in my life, I wonder what my activism would have looked like. I may have mentioned earlier about burning out. You know I think when we're more connected to earth-based rhythms we're less likely to burn out. One of the things we have is a moon lodge here on our land, a place where women can be during their time of bleeding or just for a rest or a rest bit and we have a dedicated space for prayer and meditation. We have spots on the land where people do bird sits, and so trying to be aware of the cycles of nature that keep us more in balance. If we're doing all of our activism at the intersection of these three things it looks differently than if we're just taking one thing and being focused in that direction. For us social justice is about, we want to be aligned, especially those of us with privilege and power because of being white in this culture. We want to be aligned with those on the margins and be, with a lot humility, looking deep inside about the ways that we have benefited from our privilege in a country that has never acknowledged the egregious sin of slavery and genocide of land and people, the indigenous people. What does it look like for us in relationship with

people here in our community and in our neighborhood to begin to make amends? You know, ask for forgiveness. Do the work of reparation, always being aware of our own privilege? When I say social justice, I'm talking about just the great and continued growing gap between those who have and those who have not and that which is a gap that fuels, as you mentioned, you know, the industrial growth society that sees the earth as a warehouse from which we can extract and then a place for us to dump our waste. All of these issues are intimately connected, and we've made the mistake of separating them. That's why we're trying to bring them together and function from that place of intersectionality.

JUDITH: In the holistic model, again, if one part isn't working the whole part suffers. And you know we're very good today because of our media and how we've progressed so we do understand the mind, body, soul connection, right? We can understand that in terms of our health. We can look at various modalities and say, okay we really get that for us. But the dot I'm trying to connect is, is that those same modalities need to be applied to the earth. They're not separate, as you so beautifully said, they're not separate. If someone is not fairing well in the community it affects all of us.

ANN: Absolutely.

JUDITH: And if somebody is not eating healthy it affects all of us, and so forth and so on down the line. We could give many examples of that. It sounds like you're embodying, embracing and living the holistic model.

ANN: Certainly trying. And I want to really say it's all blessed and broken. Those things can't be separated as well. So, you know it's not easy and it takes a whole lot of work and it's the work of a lifetime. You know you just get up and you take the next step and you fall and you get back up. And I think being connected in terms of relationships, whether it's reconnecting to self or to each other or to our place, as Mary Oliver would say, our place in the family of things, that we are not separate from nature is the daily work. Because we've been so deeply, deeply sold a different story of our individualism and our separate selves. It impacts us in so many deep ways. All of what we're doing here is just trying to reconnect really, with that holistic way of seeing.

JUDITH: Again, that's beautifully said. I love Father Rohr's work on that level. He reminds me through the example of St. Francis, for example, that

change happens from the bottom up. When I heard, I don't know if you literally did this, but you took down the fences. To me that's such a beautiful symbol of breaking down the barriers. And, as you said, you've been at this a long time. There are many, many steps to creating a community. I personally don't have any romance about community any more, it's tough! It's hard work when you get people together, you know? And we wonder why certain levels of government can't work together. There are just so many people involved, how do you get everybody on the same page, you know? So how can we continue to foster the growing of us differently so that it's more sustainable.

I also like your motto, you have on your website; "*One heart, one home, one block at a time*". Today you said you had six homes and a community garden and you have the social justice arm. I understand that you have some retreat houses, or houses dedicated on your property to activities. Would that be what you mentioned before? You know a place for retreat, contemplation?

ANN: As I mentioned, there are twenty-six people living here in the six houses. They are primarily places where community members live but some of them have different orientations. For example, one of our houses is dedicated to men who have been paroled from life sentences. We're very privileged to have the four men who are living in there right now part of our community in terms of what they bring and how they help us to do our work here. Another one of our spaces is where we host our workshops. The one I think I was mentioning about working with the herbs and the plant medicine we do that for people who speak Spanish in our neighborhood. That's twice a month. And we have other offerings here. Sometimes people come and use our space to do their work as well, that's aligned with our mission. And we also have a space that's dedicated for restorative justice because we know we're going to have conflicts. As you mentioned, I love what you said about no more romance around community. It's hard to live with each other largely because we're forgotten that we're not separate. Because we know we're going to have conflicts, we're going to have a place and the tools with which to deal with our conflicts. Because we will in fact deal with our conflict. You know we'll just do it the way that we've been raised to do it. So, yeah, did that answer your question?

JUDITH: It did. It gives us another aspect of understanding your community and the depth of your community because, as we both know,

having folks from different backgrounds, culturally, we get different perspectives, how do we break down the barriers? Again, if there's conflict I don't think our society does a great job with teaching us conflict resolution. I think we need certain members of our community to be more experts in that to guide us, so that it's a win/win, not a win/lose because I have to have my way. And again, what I'm hearing in the various places that I interview, is that our command and control mentality is giving way to collaboration. I'm assuming that Joanna Macy and the Buddhism and the Living Systems theory is all about collaboration, whether it's with us and the environment or with our homes and taking care of them. There's a collaboration there; managing our physical property as well as the gardens and the plant life that surrounds us.

There's also another comment that I saw, "Life suffers from our lack of contribution." Anne, tell me what are the gifts you've received doing this kind of work?

ANN: Well I guess just to pick-up on that phrase and to also go back to your mentioned of Father Richard Rohr and the Franciscan Charism. I want to say we're really very rooted in that here. We take our inspiration from two stories from Francis' life. We're named the Cantic Farm because we take our inspiration from the Cantic of Creation that Francis wrote at the end of his life. When things were really falling apart for him, he was losing his eyesight and he had these wounds, you know the stigmata. He was bleeding and in pain. He was pretty much on the margins of the community that had formed to follow him. But it was at that moment in his life, when things were falling apart, that he sang this song of interdependence and gratitude and praise. And so, we say in our time of all sorts of systems that are not collaborating, that are falling apart, you know unraveling, that Cantic Farm is our song and we're here to sing it. What Joanne Macy would call the great turning. You know, a new way. And the second thing comes from the end of Francis' life as he lay dying and the last words that he gave to his followers, and of all of the things that he could have said, because of course he was known as a great lover of the poor, so he could have, you know, exhorted his followers to remember Lady Poverty or he could have exhorted them to be peacemakers because of his work as a peacemaker, and his visit, his trip to the sultan and all that he was in terms of his life as a peacemaker. Or he could have said, you know, remember you're not separate from this natural world. But what he did say was, "*I have done that which was mine to do. May Christ teach you yours.*" And so that's very much at the heart of

what we're doing here. That each of us is here with something that is ours to do. It's very relief giving actually, because there are so many things that we could be doing. And often, we look at somebody else's life and we think I should be like that. Or why can't I do that? But there's something each of us is here to do that is very particular. Bill Plotkin calls it our soul work. We say we're here to figure that out. We didn't come with the operating instructions you know. It's a process of discernment. We want to be a community of initiation where people can come and figure out what is theirs to do. For me this was mine to do. And it's very particular and it comes out of my life and my context. It's been a privilege to be able to do that. And it's just what I do, you know? Everybody is invited to do that which we were given to do. And when we do that, then all of that comes together to support and contribute to our world. And that's what we're here for. We're here to be in service to life.

JUDITH: I agree with you and that's beautifully said again. I love that, a community of initiation. I've read some of Bill Plotkin's work. I've interviewed two of his soul guides and I've been very inspired by them. I'm a dreamer myself. That part of me has helped me understand what mine is to do. I don't feel we have enough of that in the outside world yet. I think it's getting there but change takes time, as you well know. You've been at this a long time. It hasn't happened overnight. And you've grown roots of wisdom with your community from trial and error, I'm assuming.

ANN: Absolutely.

JUDITH: Cool. All right, well Ann what I love to do is, do you happen to have a couple of suggestions for our listeners based on what you've learned, gained, what you think is practical?

ANN:

1. Well one thing that I would really encourage, you know you asked did we actually, literally take down fences and yes, we have. And I like to say that in a neighborhood such as ours where safety is an issue, that people have these fences around their property but really **what keeps us safe is our relationships**. Invest in relationship wherever you are. I mean I think increasingly we don't even know our neighbors. In my own experiments with greeting people, honestly, it's never failed to be the case that even someone looking down as

- they're walking down the street, when I say hello will look up and smile and say hello. One practical tip is just greet your neighbors. Say hello. We're all walking around in this world so impacted by the chronic stress that we're under with our fast-paced life and with our world in just terrible, terrible crisis.
2. Another thing would be just to **assume people are in grief**. You know we must be because we are human, and we're not separate from our suffering world. So, honor the grief and allow it to accompany us because that helps to take us to a place where we know we're not separate and we want to act on behalf of life.
 3. And the last thing would be just to keep remembering **to reconnect to self, to other, to earth. And even the word nature**. You know we are nature. We are not separate. When we're outside look around with gratitude and choose that and awe. Gratitude and awe and know that we are part of all of this beauty.

JUDITH: Thank you. Those are beautiful. I come across in this work the fact that we don't feel safe. We keep our children out of the woods because of tick disease and it's a very big problem here on the East Coast but there are ways we can manage it. There is a way we can approach nature in a way that gets them into the woods again so that they don't get the disease or at least we can minimize the disease in some way, which will help minimize a parent's fear. You live in an urban neighborhood where people put fences up because they're afraid for safety for various reasons. And that's a tough one too to break down I would think in the long run. Thank you for that. Those will be highlighted on the transcript for all of my listeners.

Anne, could you please give us your contact information, any classes you'd like to highlight?

ANN: Our website is www.canticlefarmoakland.org and right now we're actually getting ready to renovate our space, so we don't have a whole lot going on in terms of our offerings, other than the things that we're doing here in the neighborhood. But we really love to build relationships with people, we do host, we call them, friend-raisers, monthly events where people can come. We have music in the garden. We have a lot of people here who sing and play musical instruments and that goes well with our name Canticle which means song. We cook from our garden and then you get to hear from people who are living in the community. If anybody is ever interested in coming to one of our friend-raisers you can email us through

our website and we'd be happy to have you come. We love to have people be in relationship to us and what we're doing because that's what it's all about.

JUDITH: Great. Thank you. I want to thank Anne again for joining us at the Holistic Nature of Us. I know I've been very inspired. Her advice is very practical. And I hope all of you will take it to heart.

This is Judith Dreyer. I am the author of "**At the Garden's Gate**" book and blog. For more information go to my website www.judithdreyer.com. You'll find information about this podcast and the transcript will also be available as well as classes.

I like to end The Holistic Nature of Us with a quote from Paul Hawkin, environmentalist and author, who reminds us
"Sustainability, insuring the future life on earth is an infinite game, the endless expression on behalf of all."

Enjoy your day.