

Transcript

Episode title: Turning the Tables: Host Kyle Kramer Becomes the Guest

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Dan:

Hi, I'm Dan Galvin, sitting in as the interviewer for this episode of the Earth and Spirit podcast. And I'm here for good reason. Our guest for this episode is Kyle Kramer, who usually is the one conducting the interviews. If you're a regular listener, you probably have a good understanding of the depth and breadth of Kyle's knowledge and commitment when it comes to issues concerning spirituality, mindfulness, meditation, the environment, and our connection to the natural world. Kyle engages our podcast guests in deep conversations about all of these topics and more. But he doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk, too. Kyle's ability to ask the right questions and dig deep into the depths of spirituality and cosmic connection have been earned through a lifelong journey incorporating the exploration of expansive topics into nearly every aspect of his daily life, his work, his relationship with the environment, his family life, and his creative expression. Kyle was a Herman B. Wells Scholar at Indiana University, Bloomington and holds a double BA in religious studies and Germanic studies. He earned a Master of Divinity honors diploma from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.

Kyle was Director of Graduate Theology Programs and Ministry Formation for St. Meinrad, a Benedictine monastery and Roman Catholic school of theology. His roots in environmentalism and sustainability run deep, having spent 15 years as an organic farmer and homesteader with his family in Spencer County, Indiana. And he currently serves as Catholic climate ambassador for the Catholic climate covenant. Kyle is an author, having written and published *A Time to Plant: Life Lessons in Work, Prayer and Dirt* and *Making Room: Soul Deep Satisfaction through Simple Living*. He has been a columnist and essayist for American magazine and for St. Anthony Messenger magazine. Kyle has served as executive director of the Earth and Spirit Center, the largest meditation center in the central US since 2014 and CEO since 2022. At the center, he has taught courses on Thomas Berry and other topics. He's also the founder of the Institute for Applied Mindfulness, I-A-M, or IAM, a new initiative of the Earth and Spirit Center to bring mindfulness to non-profit, for-profit, educational, and governmental organizations. And of course, he is usually the host of this show, the Earth and Spirit podcast on National Public Radio. Kyle speaks across the country on issues of ecology and spirituality. He's a trained singer and guitarist, and he maintains an active outdoor life of gardening, hiking, rock climbing, and mountain biking. Along with all this, and most importantly in his life, he's a devoted and deeply involved husband and father. Well, Kyle, welcome to your podcast.

Kyle:

Thank you, Dan. It is great, and I'll admit a little bit nerve-wracking, to be here with you. Not your fault, but, being on the other side of the mics, I see now why my guests are sometimes nervous. But we'll run with it. Good to be here. And thanks for doing this.

Dan:

Oh, great. I'm happy, too, and I'm really glad that, you know, our podcast listeners get to know

you a little bit better and get to know a little bit more about your background. And, you know, I know they listen to your interactions with guests in each one of your podcasts. And your responses are always very insightful, but they probably don't really know where all that insight comes from.

Kyle:

Neither do I!

Dan:

But can you share a little bit with us about, you know, your life growing up and the things that influenced you, to bring you closer to, you know, a deeper spiritual experience of life and really your connection with the earth care and sustainability as well.

Kyle:

Well, you have just asked a really dangerous question, Dan. I've realized that, over the course of my interviews, you ask someone a kind of broad question about their background and prepare for 30 minutes of monologue. So, I will not do that to you. I think if I were to try at least to be succinct about what got me here in terms of these threads around spirituality and ecology, I'd point to a couple different key moments. I should admit pretty freely that I did not grow up with environmentalist parents. I didn't grow up with kind of an environmental mindset. I actually grew up loving to catch things on fire and drive around off-road vehicles. I was a Boy Scout, so maybe I, you know, get a few ecology points for that. But my, I guess, conversion, if you will, actually began in college. I was part of a really wonderful scholarship program, the Herman B. Wells Scholars, which meant I got to rub shoulders with some really interesting professors, take some interesting classes. And one of those professors was Scott Russell Sanders at Indiana University. And Scott, he's a professor emeritus now, but he is a Quaker contemplative writer and environmentalist, and an English professor by trade. And he, I think, really more than anyone else, woke me up to the idea of contemplative spirituality. I had kind of a nominally Protestant, Christian upbringing, but silent or centering sorts of prayer methods were not really on my radar until I met Scott. And so he woke me up to both of those things, a kind of a contemplative practice wedded to a deep, deep concern because he is a conservationist and a lot of his writing goes along those lines - to a deep concern about the natural world and our connection with it. So I think that was one key moment. Another was, through Scott, meeting Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, poet, author, profit, however you may label Wendell. But I tried to get Wendell to come for a talk. He steadfastly refused, but that ended up kind of creating a connection and relationship that spanned many years over letters and some visits. So Scott and Wendell were really key mentors to me in a love of land and sort of approaching life and conservation work or ecological concerns through a contemplative lens. And, skipping plenty, I went to pursue a Master of Divinity at Emory, as you mentioned, and thought that I'd end up kind of in the academic realm, writing and thinking and teaching about these issues. But I actually fell in love with urban gardening at the time, which eventually became farming, both with my feet and hands in the soil, but also a deep love cultivated through reading of folks like Wendell. And so I derailed my own academic track early in life by deciding that I at least wanted to make a go at organic farming.

Dan:

But now with your farming, I mean, that wasn't something that you really had a lot of background with as a child, was it?

Kyle:

None, whatsoever. My mom's side was a family of blue-collar tradespeople and machinists, and dad's side... I think dad was the first to go to college. So, no background in farming, the trades, and other ventures. So, I was kind of learning by doing, by trial and error, or as I say, by trial and error and error and error.

Dan:

It happens that way sometimes.

Kyle:

Yeah, but I ended up on 20 acres of land in southern Indiana and tried to make a go of farming and then realized pretty quickly as I was running through my bank account that farming is a pretty expensive endeavor as is homesteading. So I found a job very nearby, serendipitously or providentially, however you may think of those things, at St. Meinrad. And I had another piece of this journey I had along the way, is actually becoming Roman Catholic. And we can maybe get into that, but I found myself deeply in love with its contemplative tradition, its sacramental imagination, all the great social activists like Dorothy Day and, of course, Thomas Merton and others. So I found myself on a farm in Southern Indiana, running theology programs for a Roman Catholic seminary and trying to figure out how all those pieces fit together, built my own house with my wife, who was wonderful and silly enough to marry me and step into that life out on the farm. And then we had three children that we raised, completely barefoot and analog on that farm. And they knew me as someone kind of always with a tool belt on and either continuing to build our house or fixing what they broke or on a tractor or with a hoe in my hand. I have twins, so I would spend many an hour with one twin in the front on a carrier or one twin in the back running a tiller or hoeing or doing whatever. So they, I think, that was probably the best product off that farm - raising kids who really had a deep love and connection with the land.

Dan:

What an ideal situation for them. And with twins as a farmer, I mean, double your labor force, so that's a good deal too.

Kyle:

Didn't quite work out that way.

Dan:

So, you've talked a lot about mentorship and relationships in your family. How did those relationships with family and friends and neighbors, and, I know that church was important to you as well in that community and, you know, really development of those relationships. How did that affect your farming and your homesteading? And not only those relationships, but, you

know, as a farmer, your relationship with the land.

Kyle:

Yeah. Relationships are everything, Dan. Relationships with other human beings and with the land. And both of those were absolutely essential and formative for me in that period of my life. In terms of relationship with the land, I knew, Dan, and it may sound a little woo-woo, I still don't actually pretend to understand it, but when I stepped on that 20-acre piece of land, it said home to me. It spoke to me. And so I, from the very get-go, was in relationship with that land in a significant way. So much so, actually, true confessions, that my wife Cyndi would often talk about our land, the farm, as my first love or my mistress or something like that, you know, competed with my attention, but it was a beautiful relationship in those years, you know, albeit one that, you know, took lots of time and sometimes away from other relationships. But, in terms of human relationships, this was a farm in a very rural part of Indiana, and frankly, you can't really and shouldn't really survive anywhere, but particularly in a rural area running a farm, without having meaningful relationships with your neighbors. So I had neighbors who would help me fix my tractor when it broke, help me pull it out of the ditch when I got it stuck, help me put a roof on my house when I was busy building it, and then our twins arrived and we had no roof and it was raining. So all through those years, my neighbors and I... they helped me and I helped them as best I could, throw hay, fix things.

Dan:

Did you see that coming? I mean, you know, when you jumped in with both feet on this, did you think, "Oh, I'm going to be out here by myself getting all of this done"? Did you really see that coming down the road?

Kyle:

You know, I didn't see it coming in its exact contours, Dan, but I hoped for it. Because, again, I'd drunk enough of the Wendell Berry Kool-Aid to hope for that kind of rural community, which frankly doesn't always exist or certainly doesn't exist in the idealized way we might think. But I was very hopeful of that and therefore proactive about it in trying to reach out and build those relationships through my farming activities, certainly through my church involvement, as later I became the part-time director of music ministry at my parish. So we felt really, really woven deeply into the fabric of that life. And it was very sustaining. And certainly the relationships that I created or was part of at St. Meinrad where I worked, and then, and I'm sure we'll get to this in the questions, we left it all. Dot, dot, dot.

Dan:

Well, don't leave us hanging there. I mean, what happened that made that occur?

Kyle:

Long story, and I won't share it all or even probably much of it here, but we, my wife and I, because you never do this solo, obviously, you're always trying to tend to all the needs of all your family members. And we realized that we were a little too isolated. It was fine enough for me, who had outside work, but my wife was feeling quite isolated because she stayed at home

with our children on our rural, isolated farm. And also, I, and this was probably the primary driver in terms of professional trajectory, I felt like there was something of a disconnect between the spiritual work I was doing by day, my day job, and all the ecological work I was doing by evening, early morning, weekend. And I had hoped that those would be better woven together. And so I had tracked the work of the Earth and Spirit Center for many years. I had come to know its founder, Father Joe Mitchell, had even brought Father Joe out to teach some workshops at St. Meinrad occasionally, and I was beginning to get restless on some level. And then a job opening for the executive director position of the Earth and Spirit Center in Louisville, about 90 minutes away, came open. And my first thought was, "That's a dream job. That lets me weave everything I care about together and then get paid for it. Hallelujah". But then my next thought right on the heels of it was, "I can't leave this farm. I can't leave this home that my wife and children and I have built together and been so deeply connected to". And so I let it go. And I thought about it, but just kind of went on with my life. And about six months later, I was in Louisville giving a talk and I happened upon Joe Mitchell and asked him how the new executive director was working out. And he gives this kind of hangdog look and he said, "We still haven't been able to fill this position". And he looks up and he said, cause he didn't know that I knew about this or that I had considered applying, and he said, "You wouldn't consider this, would you?" And for whatever reason, Dan, at that time, then six months later, maybe that idea had enough time to percolate, and it seemed possible. And so we discerned actively, I guess, for a month or two with the Earth and Spirit Center and finally decided this was a move we were willing to make with fear and trembling. And we did it in 2014. And it was, I'll say two things: it was the absolute right thing to do, and it opened up a whole wonderful new world in so many ways for my family and me. And... It is one of the hardest, most painful things I've ever experienced, kind of like, at least in my imagining, is a death and a divorce rolled into one. And almost nine years later, frankly, I'm still not over it. I get on about my life, but we have griefs, I think all of us, that cut so deeply that we're never the same afterward. And it's not that we can't function or that we're totally preoccupied that, but that's a, I was going to say, a wound that won't fully heal. I'm not sure that's true, but certainly a wound whose scars are still present to me and have changed me.

Dan:

But, you know, a lot of times we learn from those kinds of wounds. And it's, as I look back at what you did in life leading up to that, it just seems like you were building all these building blocks to actually be at the Earth and Spirit Center. I mean, as you step back, do you see that now? That you were really kind of built for this job.

Kyle:

Well, I'd like to think that. I hope others think that. Thank you. I love this work. I love the weaving of these strands of contemplative spirituality with social justice, concern for healthy human communities, and concern for healthy non-human communities in terms of the larger sphere of ecological belonging. So yes, this is just, as I've said before, it feels like I fell in a tub of butter, but there's a price to be paid for that. And no job is perfect, obviously, because human beings are involved, me first among them. But yeah, I am hoping, probably too much of a confession here on the air, but I'm hoping that there is a third phase in which we, my family and I, find

another place that we can call home - that we can feel as deep a belonging as we felt on our farm. So we continue to look for land, and I have itchy hammer fingers in the sense that I'm a woodworker and a carpenter, and among other things, and would probably love to build yet another home, crazy as that sounds. So stay tuned for part three.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, I know, you know, at its core and in its founding, the Earth and Spirit Center was really very much about meditation and continues to be in mindfulness and everything that goes along with that. And I know you've been meditating for 30 plus years. I mean, can you tell me a little bit about your meditation journey far long before, you know, the Earth and Spirit Center part of your life? How did that all start?

Kyle:

Well, I mean, yes, I have been at it a long time, and I'm actually not sitting on this chair that I'm on here. I'm floating slightly above it because I'm so spiritually enlightened. Just wanted to make that clear to everyone who's listening or watching. No, actually, it's just the opposite, Dan. So I, as I mentioned earlier, got introduced to the idea of contemplative spirituality through a Quaker mentor of mine, Scott Russell Sanders. And so I sort of bumbled my way into a self-taught practice. And I want to be really honest with you and with all the listeners and viewers, if we do video on this, which is that I am still, after 30 plus years of this, I'm absolutely a novice. I have, just to explain in broad strokes, probably my one merit in these 30 plus years, is consistency. I have shown up for some form of contemplative practice for about 20 minutes. Sometimes it's more, rarely is it less, but for all those years with very few exceptions. And I've practiced a mixture of Buddhist practices, Zen, Vipassana. I kind of call myself a Zen Catholic, or I'm not exactly comfortable with strict labels, but I've certainly tried centering prayer and metta meditation in the Buddhist tradition as well and others, but the main contours of that practice have been sitting in silence for, let's just say 20 minutes, every day and being observant to what arises and being patient with what arises and with myself and my wandering mind. I rarely have done any kind of longer term, silent retreats. Farming never really allowed that very easily. And so I'm just like a plain vanilla... I don't even know if I'd call myself a contemplative. My wife is a contemplative. She can see visions of angels at the foot of our bed. She's like the modern day incarnation of William Blake or Wordsworth or, you know, these folks who really had this highly-tuned spiritual sensitivity, and for better and worse, Dan, I don't have a really highly affective spiritual life. I've had those few peak moments in my life, particularly in connection with nature, but I say that both to, you know, be clear about my own limitations spiritually but also to kind of console listeners who might have certain expectations about what spiritual practice is supposed to be like and all the fireworks and the states of bliss and enlightenment. And, to me, the main fruits of a good solid spiritual practice have been: A) that you keep doing it, and B) that you hopefully and, mostly probably in the judgment of others, become more compassionate, less easily triggered, more patient. I hope I'm all those things. I think, you know, it's hard to live out the counterfactual after 30 years, but what would I have been like without this? But I do feel like it's provided me an ability to roll with things and be present to whatever the moment is requiring and offering that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, I think so many of us see mindfulness and meditation as this thing that's internal to us. We're going to be better people. We're going to understand ourselves better. We're going to develop in our internal self. But that's really not what it comes down to, I know. And with the Earth and Spirit Center, in particular, and with you in kind of a broader sense, I mean...

Mindfulness is also about social justice programs and our summer camps that we do and, you know, all of these interactions that we have. Can you talk a little bit about mindfulness beyond just internalizing it?

Kyle:

Yeah, thank you. That's a great question, Dan. And I think what I would say, probably should have said from the get-go, but if I want to get a little more philosophical about it, the, as I said, the practical fruits of mindfulness are showing up better in your life and being the best version of yourself. But to get a little more esoteric, the real significant fruit of a contemplative practice like mindfulness is that it helps you cultivate what I'll call a non-dual vision. And again, fancy words, but essentially that's just a recognition that your good, Dan Galvan, and mine are not fundamentally separate. That the good of we human beings is not fundamentally separate from the good of the non-human beings. So all of the lines of us versus them, they start to blur, properly so, I think, in contemplative practice. And so it becomes less and less tenable for you to say, "Well, I'm okay, I got mine, and to heck with you all". You can't, honestly, you can't help but care about the health of other people, about the health of human communities generally, about the health of the natural world, which is home to us all and which we're, you know, an undeniable part of. So those elements all fit together, I think, as fruits of this non-dual vision, and again it, I think, points to the brilliance of Fr. Joe Mitchell in founding the Earth and Spirit Center with those three focal points as the mission. With meditation as a personal practice for spiritual growth, that's that interior dimension that you mentioned but also that you bring mindfulness out into your life of relationship, and so you try to show up and serve the good in the relationships in the human sphere, and likewise, you become more mindful of the oneness between you and the rest of the created world. And, as that love grows, a sense of care and responsibility comes right along with it.

Dan:

Yeah, well, I think so many of us miss that idea of the created world as well, that this extends beyond just our relationships with people that are around us. And even those distant from us, but also with the earth itself and the whole cosmos that we're all a part of. And I just love that about the Earth and Spirit Center and kind of how they see mindfulness and what the fruits of mindfulness are. But, you know, I know that we've talked a lot about how this is applied in an individual sense, either with people attending classes and things at the Earth and Spirit Center. But you have also founded the Institute for Applied Mindfulness here recently. And I know that's a new initiative of the Earth and Spirit Center. Who's that targeting and what is the Institute offering?

Kyle:

Why, thank you for the chance for the infomercial, Dan! Don't mind if I do. So yeah, the Institute

for Applied Mindfulness is the coming into being of an idea that we've been talking about for a while at the Earth and Spirit Center. And namely this, that for many years since 2005, we have offered all kinds of opportunities for mindfulness instruction for the individuals coming from the general public, one at a time. And we've become the largest provider of bricks and mortar mindfulness instruction in the central U.S., as I think you mentioned at the top. But we began to realize, or at least think about, what it would be like to leverage our impact by working not just with discrete individuals but people who were part of organizations. And so we thought, "Well, you know mindfulness is such a helpful practice for an individual, what could it do and be in the context of an organization?". And there's more and more research out there. Google's doing a lot of work here and others, Aetna, about bringing mindfulness into the workplace as a tool, certainly for productivity, efficiency, but also for employee well-being and a greater awareness of social and environmental goods. So that's what the Institute's work is, to take mindfulness and use it, introduce it to non-profit, for-profit, governmental, educational organizations for leadership development, organizational development, employee well-being, all of the fruits that mindfulness can bring about in the context of an organization. The institute, IAM, is the acronym for that as you said, is beginning to do that work.

Dan:

And it's interesting how it really hits bottom lines as well. I mean, it's not, it is in so many ways in the best interest of these companies to pursue mindfulness in their organizations just because it really does have bottom line effects. Can you talk a little bit about that? I know some research has been done there.

Kyle:

It does, and I am awful at carrying statistics in my head, so I will fumble around a little bit here. But even before I start fumbling, Dan, I'm gonna answer your question, but I want to take one detour first, which is the quick answer is yes. As far as kind of early research indicates, there are very specific, measurable, trackable returns on investment for mindfulness. But, before I dive into that in any way, I want to be clear that that's not why we founded the Institute. We didn't found the Institute so companies can find one more knob to turn for increased revenue or profitability. Obviously, we have no objection to that whatsoever that that happens, but we're very careful in that we want to hold up some broader goods, certainly employee well-being, generally, and as I mentioned, social and environmental goods that any mindful or conscious company should be about. So we're very reticent or cautious about mindfulness being used as say one more productivity hack or one more profitability hack. We hope that if those things happen, and they likely will, that those are byproducts rather than simply end goals. Because the end goal, just as I think is the case in individual mindfulness practice, Dan, the end goal is that an organization become a better organization. That it become a more conscious organization that it become a better place to work, a better corporate citizen, more effective at how, say, if they're a non-profit, how they fulfill their mission. If you do all of those things, in my judgment, and not just mine, research is bearing this out as well, if you do all those things, then greater profitability and other more specific metrics of business success will follow. I think, I believe it was Aetna, and I could have my facts wrong here because again, mind like a sieve, and I don't have any notes in front of me, but I believe Aetna showed a 40% return on their investment in

mindfulness practices. And I think maybe either in the show notes or maybe in a subsequent conversation, we can drill down into some of those details. But I think for the level that we're at right now, I would say, suffice it to say, that the companies that are really giving this a serious investment of their energy and resources are not at all regretting that investment and certainly seeing returns on it in various ways, most of which are also affecting the bottom line positively.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, and I'll tell you, I am glad that I asked that question in that way about the bottom line, because it does clarify, I think, what the mission of IAM really is, and, you know, shines a light on the things that are really important there more than others. And while profitability may come in a lot of different forms, you know, having profitability in one's life and in an organization, you know, on the whole, I think is important as well. And you certainly address that.

Kyle:

Right, and we're a non-profit, and so we have our kind of dreamy, idealistic vision about literally healing the world. That's why we're about this work. That's why we want to do the Institute for Applied Mindfulness, is to help heal the world, because we recognize that it's not just individuals who do that, but organizations, particularly large multinational corporate organizations, many of which are headquartered here in Louisville, they have tremendous power. They have political power, they have economic power, they have ecological power to do harm or good to the natural world. And so we're not the kind of nonprofit that just is naive about that kind of power. And so we would rather engage it fruitfully and usefully through the work of the Institute rather than ignore it or just be about our idealistic business.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, you just kind of describe this full spectrum of issues that the Earth and Spirit Center deals with. You know, as CEO of that organization, what are some of the goals that you hope to achieve in the coming years?

Kyle:

Well, we certainly, even as we continue to grow the Institute for Applied Mindfulness, we are not giving up our efforts to reach individuals and provide them all the benefits that can accrue to them with mindfulness practice. So we're going to continue that provision of beginning and advanced mindfulness courses for individuals, including, I should mention, a lot of instruction that's pro bono, not just providing scholarships for folks who come here, but through our mindfulness mentors program actually going out into the broader Louisville community, particularly in underserved neighborhoods, and partnering with social service organizations, partnering with schools, partnering with other organizations that have clients or students or others in their orbit who have real serious barriers to access when it comes to instruction, whether that's time, money, transportation, all the above. So we certainly want to continue teaching mindfulness. We have fantastic summer camp programs for young kids and those are growing leaps and bounds. So we want to continue that trajectory and introducing young people to these three elements of our mission, mindfulness of self, of others, and of the natural world. We, in the last two years, we've started a program for retreats, mainly for youth, and those have

grown like gangbusters. So we are serving now almost 2,000 young people a year through those programs, and we're trying to grow that. And of course, the Institute, and of course, the Earth and Spirit podcast. We're always experimenting with new things like today, and we have other media channels as well. So we hope to both let the world know about the good work that we're doing at the Earth and Spirit Center, and also that these channels for other forms of media themselves are a way to broaden our mission, or broaden the audience for our mission.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, you mentioned the Earth and Spirit podcast and, you know, it's fun to play the host today. I get to do that today, and it's been great to do a deep dive with you. But, you know, I know that you get to be the host of this show on an ongoing basis and you speak with some amazing people with just great experiences and backgrounds. And you have to learn so much from them and I'm sure they're learning from you in the process too, but what are some of the most profound things that you've learned from your guests?

Kyle:

Oh, good one. First of all, it is an absolute gift to be able to connect with some of the most wonderful and interesting human beings I can imagine meeting. So even though I am busy as CEO of this organization, we have a million different things going, and I, by any reasonable measure, I don't have time to be doing a podcast twice a month. It has become something I can't imagine giving up if for no other reason than the kind of folks it enables me to connect with. And so in terms of learnings, Dan, I guess just maybe repackaging what I just said, I am learning or being reminded that people are amazing. I have just met so many genuinely good, talented, remarkable people out there who are doing fantastic work. So that's just balm for my soul. And I think I'm also learning that there's no one particular mold for what it looks like to have strong commitments to contemplative spirituality, social justice, and ecology. Just like there are really diverse ecosystems, there are so many diverse ways to approach those priorities. Like, I'm thinking of Dr. Ursula Goodenough, whom I interviewed several months ago, she is a non-theistic religious naturalist. So she really has crafted her life and work around cultivating a spiritual connection with the natural world even though she would not ascribe any kind of particular divinity or spirit, so-called, to it. So you have someone like Ursula on the one hand and then you have Sister Toni Temporiti who's a Catholic nun, and she's doing this amazing other women religious, Sister Carol Jean Willie, who, we had such a great podcast conversation, that I asked her to come and be a board member and she has agreed to do that. She's doing phenomenal work across the globe. Sister Susan Gatz down the road from Nazareth, Kentucky, the Sisters of Charity. So I guess I'd say it takes all sorts. That's what I'm learning - that there are so many different ways to have contemplative practice and commitments and to live those out, and it just has made for me this beautiful tapestry. Like at home I have this little cabin where I do a lot of my writing and some of my recording and the backdrop of it is a quilt that was made a couple generations ago in my family and it's like quilts are, it's patchwork but it's beautiful in the fact that there's no one patch that's the same as any other patch, and that's what I've learned in the podcast, too. That the human community is this amazing ecosystem of diverse members. And the podcast is one way that I get to get in touch with that diversity and to see how each of these different people are contributing something

wonderfully positive to the world in their own spectacularly unique way. It's just, it's beautiful. And to have good, real meeting-of-the-minds-and-hearts conversations with folks who might have been strangers before the mics turned on, that is a gift that I just can't get enough of. So I will keep learning. And I suppose that's one thing I'd also add, Dan, is I'm a learner in this podcast. I hopefully bring my own expertise and experience and ability to track a good conversation, but it is so wonderful to go into these conversations with this, not a blank slate by any means, but this willingness and hope to learn as much as I can. So even if we never aired these podcasts, I would still be inclined to do them simply because I get to learn so much behind the mic.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, and what a challenge that is to, you know, have your day job as it is, and then, and then execute this podcast and distribute it every week. And we're all the beneficiaries of that.

Kyle:

Every other week. Don't push me too hard, Dan!

Dan:

I'm trying to get there.

Kyle:

I caught that subliminal note.

Dan:

Yeah. Well, I'll tell you, I mean, you know, you seem to thrive on these challenges, even on the recreational side of your life. I know you're a rock climber, and can you draw some parallels between being the CEO of a not-for-profit organization and being a rock climber?

Kyle:

Oh Lord, I guess in both you're hanging on for dear life.

Dan:

Yeah, well, I'm sure that's true some days.

Kyle:

Yeah, yeah. So yeah, aside from the obvious and hanging on by your fingernails, I think when you, and I should be honest, I'm not a great rock climber. I'm an on and off rock climber at best. But, when you're climbing, you have to plan your route. You have to kind of look from the bottom and figure out the best way up this cliff. You have to be prepared with the right gear. But then as soon as you get off the ground and you're a couple holds up the wall, you have to start improvising and working with what's right there in front of you. And that's exactly what you have to do in organizational leadership as well. You have to make your plans. Planning, what is it, I think Eisenhower said, plans are nothing, planning is everything. You have to plan, but you also have to adapt constantly. And rock climbing has taught me that. Rock climbing has taught me

how to be present in the moment. So if contemplative practice didn't do it, rock climbing certainly did, because if you don't wanna fall off a cliff, all there is is you figuring out where you need to put your next hand and your next foot. And I'd say climbing is certainly about risk, but it looks more dangerous than it generally is. Because unless you're some crazy guy like Alex Honnold climbing up mountains in Yosemite with no gear, you're going to have safety gear. You're going to have ropes. So I think the parallel there is I am very inclined to take risks when it comes to running an organization. But they have to be calculated risks with plenty of buffer and backup. So when you're climbing on ropes, you may fall, but you know that rope is going to catch you. It'll be kind of a scary fall for 20, maybe 30 feet, but then the rope will catch you. And that's how I've tried to run the Earth and Spirit Center as well as an organization, to make sure that we have cash reserves, to make sure that we can take calculated, smart risks where if we fail, we haven't bet the entire farm, i.e. your life, when you're climbing. And we wouldn't want to do that for organizational life either. And I guess finally, rock climbing is a communal sport, Dan. You can't do it without at least one partner, your belayer, who's holding the other end of the rope, keeping you safe. And not only is it absolutely necessary to not go it alone, it's so much more fun too. You make memories together and in organizational leadership. It's all about the community that forms around, within the organization itself and with the constituents of the organization. So I'm just thrilled that over all these years of running the Earth and Spirit Center, all the fantastic people I've come to meet. Just like with the podcast, like you, Dan, like others who have gotten involved in the mission of this place and formed community, or rather a community of communities around our educational work, our advocacy work, our environmental stewardship work. So it's so much more fun together.

Dan:

Absolutely. Yeah, well said. I love that dichotomy between the two. But so, you know, you and you mentioned Earth Care there at the end again, and it seems that Earth Care is woven into pretty much everything that the Earth and Spirit Center does programmatically. And, you know, when we think about climate change, a lot of people are kind of overwhelmed with the challenges we're facing and, you know, the radical action that needs to be taken to make a difference. We're so far down that road at this point. I mean, is it important to meet people where they are and bring them along. You don't want to come at that scaring people, but how are organizations like the Earth and Spirit Center really working with individuals to act for that environmental change that's necessary?

Kyle:

That's a great question. Thank you. I think the first thing I'd say is that we get a lot of different kind of people here at the Earth and Spirit Center in this ecosystem, to stay with that analogy, and, as such, you have to meet those folks where they are. So some folks may come to us literally with a doctor's prescription for mindfulness. And they are experiencing health challenges, mental health challenges, and they look to us to be a place where they can learn some tools and practices to help them reduce their stress and anxiety, to help them manage their lives better, to show up in their families, their workplaces with less emotional reactivity, greater ability to self-regulate, and again, all of the benefits that accrue to mindfulness. And we want to serve those folks. And what we also want to do is introduce them to this truth that their

health and wellbeing is inseparable from the health of their communities and the health of the natural world. And so we will take someone who is really interested in meditation and say, hey, have you thought about these? Or someone, maybe a young person, who wants to come be part of our environmental internships, and we'll meditate with them at the beginning of sessions. We'll let them take our classes. So, essentially, we have such a broad mission with so many entry points to it. We'll take some folks with whatever door they enter in, and then we'll introduce them almost by osmosis to the other parts of our mission. And what that does is we don't browbeat anyone. We don't beat them over the head with this need to tow some line of ours. We recognize folks are in very different places in their lives and in their thinking and commitments around this stuff, but everybody can learn, everybody can engage, everybody has their own unique gifts to offer. And we just try to create a space where that safe space where that's possible, whatever someone's priorities. And we think and hope that as we do that, they are going to become connected in deeper ways to the other parts of our mission that may not have drawn them here but could be quite meaningful and significant for them.

Dan:

Yeah, definitely. Well, since you know, we're talking about this kind of heavy topic of environmental challenges, I know that a lot of times you'll ask your podcast guests, especially ones that have more of an environmental background to them, you'll ask them what their outlook is on the future and you know if they're hopeful. And so I'm going to put you in the hot seat the same way that you do them because that's such a tough question. And I'm going to ask you the same question. I mean, what is your outlook on our collective future? And you know, what do you do to stay hopeful? And how can we be encouraged about our future?

Kyle:

Well, dangerous question, Dan. And I remember being called out on this sort of question when I asked it of Stephen Jenkins, one of the podcast guests a while back. So I don't necessarily presume hopefulness on anyone's part, even perhaps my own. But to just get straight to your question. No, I think I'm going to get crooked to your question. So the crooked part of the question is I'm not especially optimistic in the sense that, if optimism means, well, I think we'll finally figure out all our problems and how to solve them in time to avoid any serious suffering or catastrophe, I actually don't believe that will be the case. And I think that we're already, there are many on this planet that are already suffering horrible things. And I think there's probably more suffering in store for more of us and certainly for the more-than-human world as well. So I'm not rose-colored glasses optimistic in that sense. And in fact, we may not even make it as a species. My lack of optimism goes that deep. I think it's quite feasible that humanity as we know it doesn't last and that maybe a humanity 2.0 arises, or a 3.0 or 4.0. When you think about the long sweep of deep time and evolutionary history in an almost 14 billion year old universe, there are very few, if any, species that have made it the whole way. And we all have our moment in evolutionary history. So I don't necessarily think that human beings, whatever our spiritual beliefs and commitments are, that we're exempt from that pattern. So in that respect, Dan, I'm not especially optimistic. But I am still hopeful. And I think what I mean by that is probably going to sound a little too esoteric. I'm not sure I even understand it fully myself, but I have a sense that, what is that saying? Even if I knew the world would end tomorrow, I'd plant a tree today.

That regardless of what the outcome is in terms of the future of the human species or even the future of this planet, I'm hopeful in that I see so much goodness, so many trees being planted on the eve of catastrophe, if you will, that just humbles me at the strength and depth of human courage and human kindness and the goodness in this world. And I think it's always possible even in the worst of circumstances to plug into, be aware of, contribute to that goodness. And I also think in the big, broadest sweep, like we're talking the 14 plus billion year sweep, that it's going to be alright. And that's an article of faith for me. I am a person of faith, a Roman Catholic Christian. And so I have some theological underpinnings to that, but I also have a broad cosmological sense that what is ultimately driving the evolution of the universe is a benevolent force. I would call it, for shorthand, I'd call it love. However, one might understand that in the biggest, grandest of terms. And I don't think love's purposes will be thwarted over the deep time perspective. And I just hope that in the short tiny little nanosecond of time that I have in my own life, I can plant whatever trees are mine to plant and build the relationships, the loving relationships, that are mine to build, to contribute to this evolution. Whatever catastrophe happens or doesn't happen, whatever goodness happens or doesn't happen, to know that we're part of this much larger sweep of time, and that we're held in hands larger than our own. And so that's where my hope lies, not at all optimistic, but trying to take the long view.

Dan:

I think that's a realistic and beautiful way to think about it. But, you know, for me, I always think about, you know, it's not so much where you're headed, but how you get there. And if you think about Martin Luther King or Gandhi or Jesus Christ, who all had sort of this premonition of their own death as part of their mission, they knew what the end was going to be for them, but it didn't impede the work that they did, you know. They did these enormously wonderful things for all of humanity, knowing that the reward for them was, at least in this life, was going to be what it was.

Kyle:

Right, they wouldn't get to the promised land. They can see it, but they can't get there, like Moses, like Martin Luther King, yeah.

Dan:

Exactly. And so I think of this in that way too, in some ways that just it's about the journey, right? It's not about the destination, rather that destination is what we believe it's going to be or not. But having that hope is so important. Well, Kyle, I have enjoyed this so much. I don't know if there's anything that you would like to add here that we haven't covered.

Kyle:

Oh my goodness, well you know me, I could just keep talking forever. But no, you've asked so many great questions, Dan. I was a little nervous about being on the other side of the mics, but you've made it so easy. So I just want to thank you for your willingness to try this experiment and for your great questions. I know from my experience that it's not easy to do good interviews, so compliments to you. And I suppose by way of infomercial, I just want to emphasize for our audience that the Earth and Spirit podcast is aimed at really two audiences. One is the whole

world and anyone who can benefit from this content and material, but also and very specifically the Louisville Metro region, because we are a bricks and mortar institution, and we have so many wonderful programs, whether it's a meditation class or workshop, environmental stewardship opportunities, retreats, working with organizations. We do so much and most of our work is locally and regionally focused. So we hope that anyone who's listening and is in this region will come by and check us out. We'll put our website, www.earthandspiritcenter.org. We'll put that in the show notes, as well as the new website we developed for our institute, which is instituteforappliedmindfulness.org. Those are two good ways to find out more about our work. And we would love to engage with our listeners, whether those are individuals wanting to take part in our programs or other organizations that would like to work with us to learn how to bring mindfulness into organizational life. So, Dan, thanks for giving me a chance to ramble on about the work of the center. And again, to the listeners, thank you for being willing to let these mics be turned and give me a chance to talk a little bit more about the work of the Earth and Spirit Center and the Institute for Applied Mindfulness.

Dan:

Excellent and thank you for the opportunity to do this. I've enjoyed it thoroughly. This has been a lot of fun, and you know I will see you soon.

Kyle:

Deep bow of gratitude. Thanks, Dan.