

# Walking the Edge

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*“Be brave and walk through the country of your own wild heart.” — Teresa of Avila*

by the Rev. Canon Martha Kirkpatrick

Since retiring, I spend a significant amount of time in my home state of Maine where I have become a walker. Which is to say, I have gone from “I should walk” to “I need to walk.” Every day that I can, I walk a half-mile into town and to the post office and library and back, and then a somewhat shorter walk in the other direction after dinner, while the evening light is on the harbor. Several times a week I go to my “sauntering” place: a trail through the woods with lookouts along a tidal river in a preserve called “Oven’s Mouth.” I have done this so much now that I feel the trees welcoming me back. That may be fanciful, I suppose, but I am learning that in my desire to grow deeper in relationship with the natural world, I must be willing to suspend old ideas and see what might emerge. Something is shifting.

When in Wilmington, I have two favorite walks. My urban walk runs down Baynard Boulevard to Brandywine Park, circling around to Market Street and back, about four miles. My favorite sauntering place is Rockwood Park, where I walk along the bike and walking trail, sometimes as far as Bellevue and back. I have trees that know me there too, and familiar bird calls and favorite resting places.

The word “saunter” comes from “saint terre,” or holy ground. For the past year I have been involved in the Seminary of the Wild Earth (<https://www.wildspirituality.earth/seminary-of-the-wild-earth>), which is all about restoring our kindred relationship with the rest of the natural world. Walking in nature is imperative — walking slowly enough to listen and smell and notice and open ourselves up to reconnection.

Questions present themselves: Who am I? Who are we? What is our relationship to the rest of the natural world? How are we called to live in the world?

Certain possible theological understandings of our relationship to the rest of the natural world are by now so demonstrably destructive to all of life’s flourishing that they simply cannot be right. One old idea is that humans are to “have dominion over and subdue” the rest of the natural world— a role that is essentially violent and oppositional. This role easily leads to misusing, abusing, and using up whatever we desire. This is suicidal. I am not here to dominate anyone, and I doubt you are either. So I am going to assume that the problems with this are glaringly obvious by now, and I will move on to the next thing.

Another idea is that we are called to be “stewards” of the rest of the natural world. We stand in for God as the world’s overseers, standing apart from nature, and the holders of knowledge and agency. Still separate and apart. “May we use its resources rightly,” as the Book of Common Prayer says. This is a phrase I loathe. It invites us to see the natural world through a utilitarian and transactional lens. By this reckoning, the natural world was all put here for humans to “use;” we just have to do it right. So, we “reduce, reuse, recycle,” etc. This is fine, indeed necessary, but nowhere near enough. Both dominion and stewardship are alienating in their own ways, and we have suffered profoundly from this alienation for centuries.

Another approach to our relationship with the natural world sees humankind as inherently dangerous to the natural world’s health. This approach would say we need to cordon off certain areas for protection (wilderness areas, sand dunes, sensitive wildlife habitat, coral reefs, etc.) implying that we are free to do what we want to the rest of it. Much of government policy is guided by this idea, and it has slowed some of the more egregious impacts of human development. But it basically says, “we don’t belong here.” The essential flaws in the argument were revealed when, in the course of creating the National Park Service, indigenous tribes, who are our best example of how to live in right relationship with the natural world,[i] were removed from their land so that the land could be preserved in its natural state “free from human influence.” This approach is also alienating, arrogant, and unsustainable. All of these approaches foreground human needs and desires over the rest of the natural world (as though it’s a competition!) and assume that this is what God wants for us.

I believe we are being invited to come back into relationship with the rest of the natural world in a way that is based in kinship, dialogue, partnership, reciprocity, teaching and learning, giving and receiving. Belonging. It involves de-centering humankind and our own perceptions so that we may come to see ourselves as radically interconnected to the whole. Rather than remove ourselves from selected areas, we see ourselves as necessary participants, inviting ourselves back into relationship, a relationship that is grounded in health and wholeness for all creation. This is emergent; we are in the process of rediscovering ourselves in relationship, and with new ideas and new relationship comes new language. Some use the word “rewilding,” to describe this movement, others “re-earthing.” Whatever we call it, it is based on the idea that, in the words of author Daniel Cooperrider, “it is through encounters of life with life that the sacred happens.” For me as a Christian, it is grounded in a fundamental understanding of the Christ mystery as revealing the sacredness of all life [in him all things in heaven and earth were created” (Col. 1:1520)], and an understanding of the Trinity that reveals that we are all in a network of relationality that is a continuous flow of giving and receiving, “horizontally,” that is to say, in this earthly plane and moment to moment in *chronos* time, and “vertically,” in the wider realms of the holy and eternal, *Kairos* time, with the cloud of witnesses holding the universe in love and calling us toward the *telos*: the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, which enfolds all creation.

An understanding of ourselves in kinship with the rest of the natural world can give us fresh eyes through which to read scripture. For this I highly recommend Daniel Cooperrider's book *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You: A Field Guide to the Bible*<sup>[iii]</sup>. Here's a taste. One of the most important passages in the Old Testament for the Abrahamic religions is Genesis 18, where Abraham and Sarah receive three visitors, on whom they lavish hospitality, well beyond what a primary obligation to extend hospitality to the stranger would ask of them. This passage begins with the Lord appearing to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. Now it turns out that the oaks of Mamre are a favorite spot for Abraham and Sarah; they had been there before (see Gen. 13:18). Cooperrider asks,

"We might wonder, since this is indeed the first moment of extravagant hospitality that's described in the Bible, where or how did Abraham and Sarah learn to extend such a generous welcome to others? Of course, one traditional answer has been to locate this story within the anthropological context of the practices of the nomadic, desert Bedoin culture..."<sup>[iii]</sup>

But even by the standards of desert culture, the hospitality Abraham and Sarah offer is extravagant. Cooperrider invites us to consider this:

"From an ecological perspective, trees are masters of hospitality, creating the conditions for thousands of other species to flourish....But even within the tree world, no species has mastered hospitality quite like the oak tree. Oak trees are a classic example of a keystone species — one species upon which many species in the ecosystem directly depend."

Taking a deep dive into the Greek, the author invites this reading:

"God appeared to Abraham in the oak trees.... It is only when Abraham opens his eyes to the presence of God breathing in the oak trees that he is able to see that same presence of God breathing in the human beings that visit him... The oak trees teach hospitality then, both as a way of life marked by extravagant generosity and abundance, and also as a way of seeing — seeing the divine presence, the breath of life, coursing, connecting, commingling in all things, people, trees, caterpillars." I am astonished.

This is all emergent. Many of us are seeking to reconnect to the natural world, finding our way. To be on this path is to be willing to be an "edge walker,"<sup>[iv]</sup> on the edge of what we think we know, willing to open it all up and see what's there. Those of us on this path are finding each other, serving as guides to each other, sharing what the rest of the natural world is teaching us, and, in the words of Leonard Cohen, "show[ing each other] where to look amid the garbage and the flowers." The one thing I am sure of is this: everything, everyone, every particle of matter, the space within us, the space among us, the space around us and before us, is shot through with holiness.

And so I walk.

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[i] If you have not yet been acquainted with Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2025), I suggest you go in haste to your nearest library or bookstore.

[ii] Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2022.

[iii] Cooperrider, 117.

[iv] I believe this term was coined by Victoria Loorz, whose book *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021) is on my very short list of must reads for anyone on this path. Also check out The Wild Church Network, Victoria's website and courses found at <https://theecosystem.mn.co/about>. This is the space where many of us congregate and is the home of the Seminary of the Wild Earth mentioned above.

*The Rev. Canon Martha Kirkpatrick*, recently retired as Canon to the Ordinary for the Episcopal Church in Delaware, and previously was the rector of St. Barnabas' Church in Wilmington. Before ordination she had a 20-year career in environmental protection, and was the commissioner of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection under then-Governor Angus King.

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# Wired for God's Love: How Does the Church Respond to Adolescents?

 [delaware.church/wired-for-gods-love-how-does-the-church-respond-to-adolescents/](http://delaware.church/wired-for-gods-love-how-does-the-church-respond-to-adolescents/)

by the Rev. Patrick Burke

Every church that I have attended, or served in, has yearned to attract more youth and young families. We have long recognized a decline in attendance and engagement, and we have sought ways to change. As a parent, a youth ministry leader, and now a priest, I've asked a lot of questions and sought solutions in a variety of contexts seeking to share Christ's redemptive love with youth and young families, helping them to grow in their faith.

Recently, I attended a presentation at Episcopal Community Services ([www.ecsphilly.org](http://www.ecsphilly.org)) in Philadelphia, given by Dr. Frances Jensen, regarding her book *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*. Dr. Jensen is a professor of Neurology and the chair of the Neurology Department at the Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, and the mother of two young adults. She shared insights gleaned from her research on the adolescent brain and strategies for supporting youth and young adults in their development. She also seeks to dispel many of the myths that society has regarding the adolescent brain. As a parent, I found her wisdom to be extraordinarily insightful. As a priest, I found myself asking a lot of questions about how her research might help faith communities try to connect more deeply with youth and young adults and to support their families.

At the heart of Dr. Jensen's work is sharing the physiology and development of the adolescent brain, and the combination of the incredible strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in the developmental process. She shared that our brains are not fully formed until our mid-twenties, with executive function and impulse control being among the last areas to develop. She dispelled the myth that younger brains are fully formed by puberty. In fact, her research shows that the adolescent brain is very much under construction and extremely malleable as neural pathways are created based on the experiences of the individual. In short, the brain imprints experiences very strongly during this period. In fact, it is the most impressionable period of our lives as the brain learns quickly and imprints for life.

Dr. Jensen also shared research regarding the risks during this period, particularly with how chemical substances, such as nicotine, alcohol, and cannabis, can inhibit this growth and disrupt the natural function of the impressionable brain. These dangers are real, as are the dangers with how addictive social media can be to the developing brain.

She also noted that the last area of the brain to develop is the frontal lobe, which governs executive function, risk assessment, and complex decision-making. Because of this, adolescents inherently struggle with understanding consequences — it is not a moral failure, but a natural result of their developing brain.

This is where I started wondering about how we, as communities of faith, can support youth and families during this crucial period in the adolescents' development. Dr. Jensen suggested that one of the easiest ways that adults can support adolescents is by providing “frontal lobe assists” as they navigate life. Having an adult to help process how to make a difficult decision, or any decision that involves high risk and peer pressure, can literally save their life, but it also helps to imprint mature decision-making skills in their brains. And because the brain is so malleable, that imprint will likely stay with them for life.

Our faith communities are full of adults who are grounded in faith and a strong moral compass that could serve as mentors and provide these “frontal lobe assists.” Thanks to the work of Dr. Kara Powell, and her research with Dr. Chap Clark that led to the book *Sticky Faith*, we know that these types of intergenerational relationships provide the best opportunity to build a lasting, lifelong faith in youth and young adults. The opportunity is there to provide adolescents, and their families, with relationships that nurture, creating a supportive environment during a critical time in their lives.

It also represents an important evangelism opportunity for the church, but not in a “please join our church to receive these benefits” way. Instead, it is the opportunity to be the Body of Christ in the world and build a beloved community by modeling how a Christ centered community not only functions to support the individual members, but participates in the transformation of the world through love and nurture. It is an opportunity to lean into the greatest strength of how we are so beautifully created in the image of God, that our brains can be literally wired towards love, empathy, and community care just as strongly as they can be for other things. And, while we can always grow closer to Christ throughout our lives, adolescence is the period when our capacity for this growth is the highest.

So if your church is yearning to connect with youth and young adults, and nurture their discipleship, please consider how you might connect with those who might need care and support as they navigate this treacherous and crucial time in their development. They just might need a “frontal lobe assist”, and they just might want to learn more about how the Body of Christ could be a place where they find love, acceptance, and beloved community that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

The Rev. Patrick Burke, is the rector at the Episcopal Church of Sts. Andrew and Matthew in Wilmington. Prior to this call, he served in a role where he was hired to create experimental ministry and spiritual community for unchurched, vulnerable, isolated and socially-marginalized young adults in an urban, non-church space in predominantly college-age night life scene.

# Yes, Send Me: My Journey to Ordination

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On my 35th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, I am filled with gratitude. I give thanks to God for those who paved the way for me, a woman, to be ordained. I give thanks for those who mentored, encouraged, supported, nurtured, and all who steadily prayed for me. Many who contributed to my learning and development, saw my authenticity and believed in my leadership. And just as I Cor. 3:6 says: “I, (Paul) planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow”, we never know what impact we can have on someone’s life.

I am an Episcopal preacher’s kid (bishop’s kid), with God and the church at the heart of my life and grounding me in faith. We moved to Brazil when I was just 22 months old, and for thirteen years, the Brazilian culture and the Anglican/Episcopal Church profoundly shaped who I am and my call to ministry. I have always felt a deep connection to God, as someone who accompanies me daily, and I couldn’t wait to turn seven so I could become an acolyte. I believe I was the first girl acolyte at All-Saints in Santos. I proudly donned my red cassock and white surplice, serving whenever I could. I served as chaplain during ordinations, as a chalice bearer, and even stepped in to teach Bible lessons for children when no teacher was available.

We moved to the United States in 1977, the year after the 65<sup>th</sup> General Convention (1976) voted in favor of women being ordained to the priesthood and to the episcopate. When I presented myself at St. Stephen’s in Armonk, New York to serve as an acolyte, I heard the typical response: “girls sing in the choir, boys are acolytes.” I was extremely disappointed at this impediment, and a few months later the vestry even discussed whether the offering would be affected on Christmas Eve if I served as an acolyte. I served and the offering plate was plentiful.

As often as I could, I accompanied my father to the Episcopal Church Center in New York City, where he worked. It was there that I met the Rev. Mark Harris and he invited me to serve on the planning team for national college gatherings. Little did I know I would serve as a priest in the same diocese as him many years later. This experience helped shape me for the call I would later discern. In the late 1970’s during my high school years, I was the first girl on a local recreational soccer team. I’m grateful to my brother, who, while we lived in Brazil, let me join him and the other boys for street soccer. He knew I could hold my own — or maybe even outplay a few of them, I say humbly. When I left home, the church remained my anchor; in college, I attended St. Andrew’s in Greencastle, Indiana, every Sunday and often brought friends along with me. Recently, while worshiping there, I encouraged them to remember their mission to the college students. I explained that this church had been my anchor, and along with the Rev. Ken Schomaker, they contributed in my discernment to the priesthood. Again, you never know what impact you will have on someone’s life.

My father, the late Rt. Rev. Elliott Sorge, 1983–1993, was elected bishop in the Diocese of Easton,) so after college I moved to Easton and worked with the migrant health project. There, I met a group of Roman Catholic sisters who have been by my side since 1985, supporting me with their constant prayers. I attended Trinity Cathedral where I met the dean, the Rev. Mark Sullivan (currently lives in Delaware, where he retired). He took me out on visits to the homebound, which included lunch. Mark was always a good listener and encourager in my life, the process for ordination, and my ministry. Look at all these Delaware connections!

I am grateful for St. John's in Austin, Texas and the Rev. Murray Powell, who took me in as their first woman seminarian for my field education. There were some who would not receive the chalice from me because I was a woman seminarian, but I may have won them over by the end of the year. My first experience with a woman priest presiding at Eucharist was with the Rev. Mayfield, at St. David's in Austin when I was in seminary. Keep in mind that was the only laywoman professor in seminary.

I was the first woman ordained in the Diocese of Easton — as deacon on June 3, 1989, and as priest in 1990 at 26 years old. I am thankful to the commission on ministry, the standing committee, the Cathedral chapter, the bishop, and all of my brother clergy who welcomed me. I was ordained 15 years after the Philadelphia Eleven women were ordained priests. These first ordinations took time in many dioceses. Jobs for women clergy were not plentiful, to say the least, and thus, I learned to be creative in living out my priesthood. I was the first woman vicar at St. Paul's in Hillsboro, supplemented by work at the Senior Center in Caroline County.

I served as the first woman rector at St. Peter's in Williston, North Dakota and also at St. Michael's and All Angels in Cartwright, North Dakota from 1995-2013. Nobody knew what to call a woman priest. When I was pregnant with my daughter, the joke became: "Our 'Father' is going to be a 'Mother'(literally)". There were not any pregnant pastors in town. In 2014, when I began to serve at St. Luke's in Seaford, Delaware, I was finally a second woman rector. One of my joys as Conference Leader for CREDO, is leading a conference for ordained clergy women under 45 years of age, where I was not the youngest ordained woman in the room.


Sustained by the Holy Spirit in baptism, God who began the good work within me, continues to grow me. And now, thirty-five years later, I look back and begin to see the legacy of all who paved the way, including all the lay women who were willing to be firsts as acolytes, chalice bearers, vestry members, delegates to convention, and deputies to General Convention (1970). It is important for me to remember those who made way for me. Courageous people continue to lead movements for gender, sexuality, racial equality, and inclusion. I am thankful. Like the prophet Isaiah who answers the call to whom shall I send, we too, must say: "Here I am, send me" (Isa. 6:8).



I guess, I too, said “yes, send me” and my legacy was meant to lead the way for others to follow where they are called. I pray that I have done so faithfully with the support of so many saints along the way graciously watering and nurturing.

# Welcoming Strangers: A Newcomer Greeting

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 [delaware.church/welcoming-strangers-a-newcomer-greeting/](https://delaware.church/welcoming-strangers-a-newcomer-greeting/)

by Kristin Sausville

While traveling, my family has taken to attending Episcopal churches on Sunday mornings, whenever possible and practical. During a college tour in Michigan with my older son this past February, we discovered there was one just ten minutes away from our hotel. Instead of sleeping in, we got up early and braved the cold to attend church.

It can be intimidating to go into a space where you know no one, but everyone else knows each other, even with the low stakes of knowing that this was a one-time-only visit. Would we be welcomed, or would we receive a cold shoulder to match the temperature outside?

We hadn't gotten more than ten steps inside the door when a priest approached us, handed us a folder, and apologized that most of the clergy and congregation were away as they were on a civil rights pilgrimage in Alabama. I glanced at the folder and noted that it was for newcomers who might become members of the congregation. I tried to give it back, explaining that we were traveling and this would probably be our only visit to the church. "Take it anyway," he said kindly, so I did.

Only fifteen or so people were at that service, and their welcome to us was so warm that I'm sure any of them could have told you later our names, where we were from, what brought us to town, and how we managed to find ourselves there that morning. This is because each of them introduced themselves and had an actual conversation with us. This warmth, along with reading through the folder that was full of information about the parish from past and present, made me determined to see what ideas my own parish in Delaware could use to enhance our newcomer welcome.

Working alongside our parish administrator, Cana Hartman, we put together folders for newcomers of our own. This was easy and inexpensive. They are now placed with our ushers, who are the most likely of our parishioners to recognize and interact with newcomers. Some of us can suffer from face blindness, or do not know if someone is a newcomer or a longtime parishioner returning after an absence, so the ushers are an ideal choice for this job.

The folders contain a lot of information about our parish for newcomers to read at their leisure. We were fortunate, timing-wise, that our annual meeting had just taken place and a report of all the ministries had been compiled for the meeting. We put this information into the folders. This allows newcomers to learn about all our ministries, guilds, and programs, along with the name of the contact person for each, should someone be interested in more information.

Our Children's Ministries director had put together a brochure for this year's Sunday School program, so we added this to our packet so parents could see the offerings we have available for children, which also

included contact information. A few of our newcomers who have stayed were parents with young children!

Our rector had previously made a small, folded card with multiple colorful photos of our parish life. It also included contact information and our worship schedule, along with his welcome letter, and a FAQ with answers to questions we thought newcomers might be wondering during their visit: Am I welcome? How are the services different? What do I wear? What do I call the clergy? Can I receive Holy Communion? It is important to remember that some newcomers may never have visited an Episcopal church before, or any church at all. Acknowledging that we understand that they may not know these things, and that that's okay, is part of a warm welcome.

We updated our pew cards and put one in the folder in case newcomers didn't see it in the pew or wanted to fill it out later. Not everyone has something to write with, so we also created an online form, placing the form's QR code on the card, allowing it to be filled out that way as well.

Lastly, we included a small sticky notepad with our parish name and website, thinking that it is the type of merch, for lack of a better word, that most people would find useful and therefore keep seeing our name and information. A pen would also work well for this. In the past, our parish had given mugs to newcomers; however, these are more expensive and bulkier, and besides, many people have a cabinet full of mugs they rarely use.

Since implementing our folders, we have had several newcomers stick around. It has been exciting to see new faces on Sundays, especially when they come back again and again. Our newcomer welcome has improved, and it has made a real difference.

Jesus taught us to welcome strangers, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Making sure that newcomers to our churches are seen and warmly received is one way that we can fulfill this teaching, and possibly even bring more people into our folds.

*Kristin Sausville is a contributor for the Delaware Communion Magazine and a former senior warden at St. Thomas's in Newark. She is a mother of two boys, wife, and world traveler. A bit of trivia: Kristin is a five-time Jeopardy champion.*

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