

Episode 6: Practicing Grounding in a Climate Changed World

Jessica David: Hello, friends. How do you stay grounded when it comes to our climate catastrophe? What keeps you connected? Seriously, I need to know. This is the Climate Changed podcast Behind the Scenes Edition. I'm Jessica David, a Harvard Divinity School student and intern at The BTS Center. We're breaking things up over the next few episodes with special practices designed just for you. We'll be guided through a contemplative or embodied practice developed and delivered to you with love by a member of our team. Each practice strives to remind us that there are lots of ways of making sense of things. Our hope is that we each feel connected to something bigger and wiser than ourselves, so we can keep showing up for today's climate changed world. I'm joined today by three colleagues who each bring unique gifts and perspectives to this conversation.

Ash Temin: Hi there. I'm Ash Temin, and I serve as the communications manager at The BTS Center. I'm also a spiritual director and lover of wild spaces.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: And I'm Madeline Bugeau-Heartt. I'm the program associate at The BTS Center. And when I'm not doing that, I'm making weird theater with my beloved theater company and doing organizing work in my community up in Belfast, Maine.

Peterson Toscano: I'm Peterson Toscano, and I'm even more behind the scenes than Jessica. I work with the host to produce each episode of Climate Changed Podcast. I also work as an artistic consultant creating original videos for The BTS Center. Beyond this work, I host my own podcasts, including Bubble and Audio Playground.

Jessica David: I am so excited to be here with the three of you today. I hope the listeners can hear it in my voice, how much fun we're having. So The BTS Center often includes a grounding or some kind of activity in your programs. Why? What is it about practice that matters?

Peterson Toscano: Well, I, uh, think regardless of the practice, and there's lots of different ones, the goal is to get out of our heads and stop all that clatter and chatter that is

happening. So during the regular season of this podcast, each episode begins with a grounding. And listeners typically don't expect this at first because it's not what happens in most podcasts. But once people start listening, they begin to look forward to this practice. It allows them this moment, to slow down, to show up with their ears open so that they can hear more deeply what will be shared. Personally, I do a daily Quaker practice of silence for five to 15 minutes. And truly, some days are easier than others. But this practice resembles how I stretch every morning to keep my back and body limber. This repetition makes it easier over time. So with my muscles, I develop a muscle memory in my very tight hamstrings. So they are more responsive over time and they're less tight every day. Similarly, the daily silent spiritual practice helps me settle and stay silent faster. Like I get into it quicker and I'm then better prepared for the marathon, hour long Quaker meetings for worship.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I love this question of, what about practice matters? This, this kind of container. And I just feel so strongly that there's a huge difference between intellectual, heady, reason based knowing, which I think a lot of us are very comfortable with, and embodied knowing. And the example I have of that, and I think this is like a wish that I'm having, which is I wish I could cook a poached egg. If I read a recipe or I read in a cookbook how to make a poached egg, I can intellectually grasp it. But it's not until my hand and the boiling water and the egg is in the water that I actually know how to cook a poached egg. I really believe that practices are containers for us to live differently and containers for alchemy, dare I say, and transformation. And I love what Peterson was saying about repetition. And I think about, when I was a kid I used to play the alto saxophone. Big into jazz. Wow. I thought I was great. Sometimes I'd wear a beret, which is horrifying, while I would play. But it was in the practicing of the scales that I, by the time I had done it over the course of a couple of years, I didn't have to think about it anymore. It was just a part of who I was. So I just think that repetition piece is so important to this conversation about practice and living differently.

Ash Temin: And as you mentioned, Jessica, at The BTS Center, we start really all of our programs with some sort of practice. We really see all of our programs, whether it's a book study or a podcast or a public conversation, as being spiritual and spiritually grounded. And

part of really recognizing that is taking a contemplative stance and inviting people to step into a space and a spaciousness that might not be as present in their busy day to day lives. So we have this intentional time for arriving and grounding ourselves in community with one another, dropping into a different dimension of ourselves for a period of time at least. And I'll say that for me personally, that idea of muscle memory really resonates also. And it's about using different muscles than I'm used to using. I spend a lot of time in my head and being able to spend a little bit of time each day, bringing practice into my body, into my breath, into my movement, really helps me to keep a broad and open perspective on all the things that I'm doing in my life on a day to day basis.

Jessica David: So what I'm really taking away from this is two things. One is this, you know, Ash said, dropping into a different dimension. And it's sort of ironic that we have to set aside this time and space to do that intentionally to sort of check in with ourselves. But also the component of it's not just an intellectual or a mental exercise, that it's checking in with the whole of ourselves, which may include more than just our mind. I think that's the piece that's the hardest for me as someone who lives almost entirely in my mind. Checking in mentally is not a challenge. But spreading beyond that and remembering that I actually have a body existing in a world, sometimes I forget to do that. So I'm super curious. Peterson already talked about this a little bit. What practices do you all find meaningful in your own lives? Please tell me all of them.

Peterson Toscano: Can I tell you one I don't like? Yeah, please, please don't hate on me for people who like this practice. And I'm saying this because just because a certain practice doesn't work for you doesn't mean you are spiritually inadequate. Because I really thought I was. Because I don't like guided meditation at all. You listening? You may love it and that's beautiful and I'm really happy for you. But for me, being told when to breathe, what to visualize and how to feel pulls me out of my experience. It feels like someone else is trying to drive my inner life and I resist rather than relax. And truly, at first I thought there was just something spiritually wrong with me, like this rebellious spirit. I was like, why is this not working? And, why is everyone loving this? It's horrible. But it turns out it just doesn't work for me. So these days when I'm online and this guided meditation starts, I just lower the volume and slide into my own quiet place and everybody's happy. But that's the key.

Different practices meet different needs. But the question is, what practices do I find meaningful? Well, I do well with the ones that help me connect with my body and that involve movement, partly because I sit so much. And I know this is definitely one of Madeline's specialties.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Thank you for letting us off the hook of guided meditation. I was worried, I'm like, oh, maybe.

Peterson Toscano: We don't have guided meditations. And I just practice.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: We probably will. But also, whatever, something for everyone. Oh, uh, thank you so much for that. Okay, here are two practices that I'm personally leaning into these days. One I'm calling falling through the cracks. Or I don't know, embodying in the cracks. And for me, this is the practice of breaking patterns of normalcy by practicing minor disruptions. So often we're on autopilot. And for me that leads to this sense of like a lack of agency. And especially in the times we're living in, if you can just find like strange little cracks in what you think is normal, something else emerges. I did a theater production recently and we had every single audience member smell a big bouquet of flowers as if it was the last thing they would ever smell. And we had them smell in pairs, which was awfully cute. It's small, right? Like, and it's not like a high risk practice, but it was a disruption because how often do any of us really do that? The second practice that I try to do sometimes, I mean, usually I'm forgetting, but when I do remember to do this, it's, it's a small victory is something I call holy noticing. And that you can do anytime, any place. And you just stop yourself in any moment and just notice how the world is noticing you and what is happening around you, what smells or visuals or sounds or tastes are erupting in that particular moment. And I like to think about it as like a symphony of the mundane. And I like to think about it as something that might be occurring just for me to partake in. And suddenly this like, right, kind of mundane or boring or hard moment kind of starts to light up with some magic. So those are two. Look for the cracks and, and holy noticing are two practices I'm relying on heavily these days.

Ash Temin: I really love what, what Madeline said about the symphony of the mundane. I'm gonna, I'm gonna be pondering that one as I move through the world. I am a person who

spends a lot of time in my head thinking. Thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. Unlike Peterson, I do enjoy a good guided meditation. For a long time I tried to do sitting meditations. I had a sitting meditation practice. I would try and do it sometimes like 45 minutes a day. I went on meditation retreats which involved a lot of sitting meditation. And it wasn't that, that time didn't have value, but I just felt like I was always still stuck in my head. And then I had a conversation with a somatics coach who also had had a long lineage in sitting meditation practices. They told me that for a lot of people, particularly those who have a trauma response that is to freeze, sitting for long periods of time can be counterproductive to connecting more deeply with the body. That it can actually take us further out of the body instead of dropping us into the body. That was like a huge aha moment for me. Amazing, right?

Jessica David: Amazing. Yes.

Ash Temin: So I'm more into movement these days. I have been experimenting with humming and chanting. That really gets me into my body in a new and interesting way. Feeling those kind of vibrations and, like, allowing myself to sway and move. Dancing around my house is also super helpful, particularly if there's an 80s playlist involved.

Jessica David: Child of the 80s.

Ash Temin: And as Madeline was saying, just paying attention, really taking time to notice things, which I'd normally just like, breeze by or ignore, has helped me to ignite the sense of wonder and awe. Uh, and particularly if I'm feeling overwhelmed by the state of the world, which is often these days, bringing it down to such a small level. Looking at the slug that's crawling across my walkway in the rain or the droplet of water on a flower petal really helps me to get grounded, be present, and move out of that sense of overwhelm, even if just for a few moments.

Jessica David: Already, listeners, I feel normalized. What I'm really taking away from this conversation is in many ways, these are things that we sort of would do instinctually. Right? Our attention would be captured by the slug. It would take a minute to breathe and to

pause. I love this notion of giving names for it and making it into something. Elevating it almost. Madeline's so good at giving things names. The holy noticing it just elevates it into a more deliberate practice and also, you know, starts to trigger that muscle memory idea. So what does practice offer us in a climate changed world, specifically?

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I've been thinking about this question, Jessica, again, if I'm good at elevating things with names, you're really good at questions.

Peterson Toscano: Seriously.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: I think that we can collectively agree, even if we don't have any answers, that what we're doing as a species is not working by way of this climate changed context, this idea of practicing within a climate changed world. The image that kept coming to me this morning when I was thinking about this was, remember that book, The Chronicles of Narnia?

Ash Temin: Oh yeah, I love those books.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: The best CS Lewis on brand. Kids would go through the wardrobe into another world. And I think of practices that way as a way of like a window we can climb through to live differently into the world we're longing for.

Jessica David: Oh my goodness. Oh, wait, pause, pause, pause, pause, pause, pause, pause. You, uh, gotta say that again. That's amazing. It's a window we can climb into the world we're longing for.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: Yes, yes, I think that's true. Uh, I mean, that's what I'm holding right now. And this place, again, like a container for that particular alchemy and that place to experiment within threshold. And especially I think if we're doing this in an embodied way, and we've been talking, I think so far, a lot about individual practices, but if we do this together, there's a different kind of muscle that gets activated by way of, of this art of

manifestation that we're so desperately need. Not only need, but are longing for. And I, I think is waiting for us.

Ash Temin: Yeah, I love all of that, Madeline. So good. Honestly, I think one of the great gifts of practice and of embodied living for me is getting in touch with grief. You know, so much of the violence and trauma and disconnection and terrible things in the world feel rooted to me in a refusal to acknowledge or engage with our own grief and our own mortality. And I know that I can be in that space too, of like pushing, pushing, pushing, pushing those difficult emotions and experiences away. And so practice for me is a way of edging up to that, you know, touching it, feeling it, allowing myself space to be with the discomfort and the big emotions. And sometimes that is just like a little tiny touch. And sometimes I'm in a space where I can go deeper with it. It just sort of depends on the day and what's going on. But the practice of it gives me the space to play with that, if I can say, like play in the context of difficult emotions. It takes time, it takes softening, it takes stepping in, stepping back. It's like a whole dance. But practice makes space for all of that in an intentional way. And it's not only about grief or the difficult emotions, but it brings those into the conversation with joy. And you know, the more that we can feel and experience our grief, the more we can feel and experience our joy as well.

Peterson Toscano: I'm so glad, Ash, that you mentioned this, because it's such an emotional issue. But often the emotions that I feel aren't useful, like grief is a very useful emotion, because, you know, it's connected to love often and it's honest. But so often the feelings that come up for me, this sort of exhausting emotional loop I get caught in is fear, shame, and despair. And by doing a practice, it makes space for something else. It doesn't erase these hard feelings, but it clears some of the fog. And these are foggy feelings. Fear, shame and despair. But suddenly there's room for other emotions like grief, like anger, which I think is really underused and under explored. We get nervous around anger, but that seems to be an appropriate response to our climate change world, to be angry. And when I'm not stuck in anxiety or guilt, I can definitely think more clearly, I can make better choices. And maybe more importantly, when we're in that space, without all that fear and anxiety and guilt, we can listen to ourselves, listen to others, and to what's needed in that moment. So I find that practices, these grounding practices, they create that opening.

Jessica David: That'S so lovely. I want to ask so many more questions and I feel like we could, we could have our own podcast about practices and groundings and contemplation practices.

Peterson Toscano: Podcast with Jessica and friends.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: And friends and friends.

Jessica David: It's like Sesame Street. I love it. But we don't have time. Peterson always tells me we don't have time. So sorry, Peterson, I'm blaming you for that one Timekeeper. So we are very fortunate that Ash is going to lead us in our first practice this episode. So listeners, each of us, each of the four voices you're hearing today will, will lead a practice. Short, short, fairly simple practice, this episode and then in the next three. But today is going to be Ash's turn. So, Ash, before we get into the specifics, tell us what your intentions were for this practice or exercise.

Ash Temin: I guess my intentions for this practice are really to allow a little space to engage with the body as part of this world and as part of creation. I talked about how I'm a kind of person who's often in my head spinning and thinking and analyzing. I don't think I'm alone in that. And so what I wanted to do is, is offer some space where we can really engage with our bodies in a new and hopefully kind of fun way in conversation with the more than human world. I think about what theologian Sally McFague said, that the earth is the body of God, which means that all of us are parts of the body of the divine. We're parts of the divine becoming. And I wanted to explore that a little. I love that.

Jessica David: So how did you assemble or put this together, create this?

Ash Temin: It's really about noticing how we are alike in a real bodily way to so much of the creation that's around us. Thinking about what we were talking about in our conversation of attention and noticing and how that kind of deep noticing and awareness for me starts to break down the barriers between what's human and what's other than human and how

these sort of false divisions that we create between ourselves and, and the other. And so I wanted to see what it felt like to see and feel physical resemblances to other beings and to touch into our kinship with the natural world in a different way. Maybe a little less cerebral and a little bit more embodied.

Jessica David: Oh, I feel so fortunate. I have goosebumps. All right, take it away.

Ash Temin: All right, so thank you all for being willing to step into this space and experience some practices with each of us. When things in the world feel overwhelming, I find myself living in my head with spinning thoughts and plans and anxieties drawing my energy upward, moving away from the grounding of my body. Recently I had the opportunity to accompany a retreat focused on the poetry of Mary Oliver. Some of you might be familiar with her work. And she has this exhortation in her poem *Wild Geese*, to quote, “let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” And that just struck me anew. So this practice is a way in which I have been playing with that invitation of love and creatureliness. So I'm going to invite you if you have the capacity and the wherewithal to step outside of wherever you are. You might find a space near a tree, or in your garden, or on your front porch, or wherever it may be. If you're not able to be outside, you can still do this practice. You'll just be a little bit more in your imagination. So wherever you are, take some time to just breathe deeply and feel your body to arrive in the space wherever you are. You don't need to force the breath in any particular way. Just breathe once you feel grounded and comfortable. Look around you if you're outside, or even if you're inside and focus on an other than human being. You can also call into your mind an other than human being in your imagination, if you prefer. This could be a particular kind of tree, another mammal, a bird, a body of water, any being that feels right to you. Take a few moments to greet and really attend to that being. Whether this is in your imagination or in front of you with your senses. Notice the textures of its skin or its fur or its bark, its leaves, its feathers. Notice the way it moves, the sounds it makes, its way of being in its own particular place. Now notice a way in which your own body resonates with the qualities of this being. Maybe the hair on your head is rustling in the wind the same way a fox's fur might. Maybe your skin feels alternately rough and smooth like the bark of a birch tree. Maybe you imagine the movement of water through your cells like that of a river, or the salt taste of your tears as tiny droplets of ocean. Maybe your spirit is feeling raucous,

like the cry of a blue jay. Whatever it is, let the soft animal of your body find communion with the body of this other being. Take some time to really explore the resonances, the connections, the intertwining rhythms of yourself and this other being. You can stay in this practice for as long as you would like. You can even do it with more than one being at a time if you'd like. Noticing similarities, differences, relationships. When it feels complete to you, take some time to offer gratitude to this being and also, just as importantly, to your own animal body. You can say a blessing or a prayer, Something like, I honor the kinship between you and I, and I offer you peace and safety. But you can also offer gratitude in other ways. You don't have to use words. You can sing or hum. You can write a letter or a poem and read it to this being. You can dance around and let the movement of your spirit connect you even further to this wild world. Use this time to celebrate your place in the beautiful communion of beings in this world. And I hope that this practice leads you just a little bit further into that sense of kinship and connection.

Jessica David: Thank you, Ash, for that, that beautiful exercise. I'm particularly struck by this idea that you don't need words to express gratitude or really any emotion. I am a word person. I will give everything words, and if it could have one word, I will give it five words. But that there are other ways to express that and to make those connections is really powerful. Yeah.

Ash Temin: Thank you.

Jessica David: Thank you so much. Peterson and Madeline, any reflections?

Peterson Toscano: Well, what I love about this, to me, it didn't feel like guided meditation because you were giving us a practice that we can go off and do by ourselves. You were, in fact, teaching us a skill, and a way of looking at the world. So I like that because, yes, we needed you to share the practice, but then you gave us the practice. We can walk away and do it on our own. And I like that because that is something one could do every day from the same spot right outside their door if they like.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: And I was so struck, it hit me, right in the heart. When you first said the word communion, I was like, oh, my. Oh, I'm in communion with this lovely dirty old pigeon that lives outside of my house. It's on my window. It's always like, but so beautiful. And oh, may we all remember our creatureliness. Thank you for that reminder.

Jessica David: Yeah, I love that. And the word that struck me, Ash, was exhortation. And I love bringing exhortation into practice, and I love challenging us to think about exhort. Exhorting without words.

Ash Temin: Yeah, like you. You know, anything that could be said in three words, I will say in 25. So I. It's really a great practice for me to think about an offering of myself in a way that doesn't involve words. Words are beautiful, and I love writing and I love weaving words in a particular way. And also, it's just like a lovely practice to do things differently and to offer relationality in a way that is not perhaps my first inclination.

Jessica David: Yeah. It almost means more too, that way, to receive it.

Ash Temin: Yeah. I don't know if the birds and the trees are that into my dancing, but, you know, I give it freely anyway.

Jessica David: Oh, no, that pigeon sounds like it's pretty into Madeline.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: It's waiting for you, Ash.

Ash Temin: I'm coming to Belfast to dance for the pigeon.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt: For the dirty old pigeon. That is a moment of rupture that I'm waiting and willing to see.

Jessica David: I think that's the name of our next podcast, Dancing with the Pigeons.

Ash Temin: So into it.

Jessica David: I'm sorry, Peterson. We're creating more work for you. Thank you, Ash. I'm so grateful for you and your words and your. All the ways that you bring us connection. Thank you.

Ash Temin: Thanks, Jessica.

Jessica David: Okay, listeners, now it is your turn. What did you think? Tell us about your experience with this practice or any practice that brings you strength and peace. You can email us at podcast@thebtscenter.org that address again is podcast@thebtscenter.org. Or leave a voicemail at 207-200-6986. That's 207-200-6986. You can also text that number, 207-200-6986, if you're like me and do not like making phone calls. We would love to hear from you. For more on this or any of the other episodes visit climatechangedpodcast.org that website again is climatechangedpodcast.org thank you so much for listening to the Climate Change Podcast Behind the Scenes Edition with me, Jessica David. Coming up in our next episode, our producer Peterson Toscano is going to join us with another practice. Many thanks to Ash for guiding us through today's practice and special thanks also to you producer Peterson for producing this episode and joining us for the conversation. To Nicole Diroff for your assistance and support and to Madeline for joining us here today. We're excited for your practice. Also, I gotta say I'm maybe a little nervous for Madeline's practice. Climate Changed Podcast is a project of The BTS Center in beautiful Portland, Maine. Learn about the many resources we offer along with our in person and online programs. Visit our website thebtscenter.org that's thebtscenter.org Take Good Care my friends.