

## Spiritual Nature Walk : Interfaith Watershed Literacy

### Suggested Guidelines for Preparing your Spiritual Nature Walk

*Before scheduling the group Spiritual Nature Walk, rehearse it:*

As you observe what's on your walk, pick those reflections most appropriate for these sights - e.g. stream bed, trees, trash

**Opening** - concluding with **Opening Prayer** below)

Gather folks with [\*Mah nora hamakhom hazeh\*](#) chant (by Rabbi Shefa Gold)

The Bible tells the story of Jacob, who fell asleep with his head on a rock and had an extraordinary dream of a ladder with angels going up and down upon it. And when he woke up, he realized the sky and the ground were connected in a way he hadn't understood before. And he said, "Wow -- God was in this place and I didn't even know it!" How awesome is this place! Repeat after me: Mah norah -- how awesome -- hamakom hazeh -- is this place.

Today, we're here because our congregations are in the process of waking up, our faith communities are increasingly becoming aware of God's presence in the natural world. Like Jacob, we're realizing God was always in this place though maybe we didn't always know it. Let's plan, like Jacob, to wake up on this walk to the sacredness of the natural world, and to having hearts open to following where that awareness leads:

Sing chant: Ma norah hamakom ha zeh

#### **\*Opening Prayer:**

Creator of the universe, today we come to witness your Word in Creation. There is a tradition that says that God's word is written in two books. One is the Bible and the other in the book of Nature. As Martin Luther said:

*God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.*

We ask the Spirit to guide us today, open our eyes that we may see and our ears to hear the Word of God in Nature.

#### **Teachings from various faiths on Care of Creation:**

Ba'hai - The attributes of God are revealed within every created thing. "*Nature,*" Bahá'u'lláh writes, "*is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.*" It is the embodiment of God's name, "*the Creator.*"

Christian – stewardship of Creation as an expression of “love thy neighbor”

Jewish - Tikkun O’lam, repair and restoration of the whole world.

Muslim – Tawhid, observing the Oneness of God serves as the root of trusteeship and responsibility for God’s Creation.

Buddhist – interconnectedness of all life, compassion for the suffering of the natural and human world

Sikh - Air is the Teacher, Water is the Father and Earth is the Great Divine Mother of All and we must respect and protect her - Guru Nanak

**(Optional) Song:**

Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me.

Open my eyes that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine!

**Reflection on the Two Books of God's Word**

In church services, people perk up and tune in, following along in their bulletins, when the readings from scripture are read. In synagogues, we have many ways of showing that the Torah scroll where God’s word is written is sacred: standing when the Torah is taken out, touching it and kissing the object that touched it, even reading it using a pointer so our fingers don't touch the parchment.

There’s a Jewish teaching (in a Hasidic mystical text called the Tanya) that the words with which God created the world are still physically inside each thing in the world, holding it up. Like the words with which God created mountains still animate each mountain, and the words with which God created forests still animate each tree. Christians refer to the Earth as "God's second book," and these teachings both suggest that the natural world *is* scripture, is revelation.

These teachings challenge us to regard the natural world we encounter today as literally the revelation of God, at least as much as scripture is. You are invited to approach what you experience on this walk with the same heightened attention that you would bring to a reading of scripture in church and the same reverence we would bring to the Torah scroll itself.

## When you come to Trees or Trees Planted:

### APPRECIATION OF TREES

**"Ruach" Breath of God guided meditation** -- Our breath, the breath of trees, and the breath of the Creator of the Universe are all interconnected in a cycle of life.

Read this meditation SLOWLY:

Let us start with our breath. Read Genesis 1:1-2 - *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.* BREATHE (pause). God's first relationship with Creation was with water. BREATHE (pause). And the wind or Spirit of God that hovered over the waters is known in Hebrew as "Ruach" or breath of God. When we breathe we breathe in oxygen produced by plants and trees. BREATHE (pause). When we breathe out carbon dioxide, the trees and plants breathe it in. We are in a cycle of the breath with trees ... and plants. God's breath of life, Ruach, flows through every living thing. Every moment of every day we are "breathed" as we breathe in life-giving oxygen. BREATHE (pause). Trees are the lungs of the world. Thanks be to the Creator for the breath of life provided by trees. Let us take a moment in silent thanksgiving as we breathe in and out with gratitude what God has provided from trees.

**Muslim:** The Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him) had a deep spiritual connection to trees. He used to stand by a tree or a date-palm on Friday. Then an Ansari woman or man said. "O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! Shall we make a pulpit for you?" He replied, "If you wish." So they made a pulpit for him and when it was Friday, he proceeded towards the pulpit (for delivering the sermon). The datepalm cried like a child! The Prophet (ﷺ) descended (the pulpit) and embraced it while it continued moaning like a child being quietened. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "It was crying for (missing) what it used to hear of religious knowledge given near to it."

**Buddhist story** the Maharatnakuta Sutra, "Dwelling In the Forest": Kashyapa, after a forest-dwelling monk arrives at a secluded place, he should follow the Dharma of a forest-dweller and perform eight deeds to show kindness for all sentient beings.

**The Bible: Beginning, Middle and End (Christian end) with Tree of Life Stories** --

- *Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.* -- Genesis 2:9
- *A tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all who cling to it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.* -- Proverbs 3:17-18

- *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. -- Revelation 22:1-2*

### **How are Trees now "healing the nations"? Trees are "Creation's Cure-All"--**

Read this quote from the architectural designer William McDonough who designs plans for zero-waste cities: *If you look at a tree and think of it as a design assignment, it would be like asking you to make something that makes oxygen, sequesters carbon, fixes nitrogen, distills water, provides habitat for hundreds of species, accrues solar energy's fuel, makes complex sugars and food, changes colors with the seasons, creates microclimates, and self-replicates.* "William McDonough: Godfather of Green", WNYC Studio 360 (18 March 2008)

Trees Provide this Healing Help for Creation:

- By planting trees humans are engaging in watershed restoration & stewardship
- Restore habitat for wildlife (only native trees host native insects, whose caterpillars feed birds - one nest of Chickadee chicks needs to eat over 6,000 caterpillars before they fly! - and plant Oaks: How many types of insects do you think they host? - over 500! refer to Bringing Nature Home by Doug Tallamy)
- Filter out pollution (lifts up to 100 gallons water, retains pollution in the tree)
- Reduce runoff (5% increase in tree canopy reduces runoff 2% in community)
- Prevent soil erosion (roots hold soil in place, leaves slow the rainfall)
- Transform sun energy into food (make fruits and nuts)
- Reduce carbon footprint (absorbs up to 48 lbs. CO<sub>2</sub> / yr; 40 yr old tree = absorbed 1 ton CO<sub>2</sub>)
- Make food for birds (only native trees do this)
- Cool off and save energy (can reduce cooling of building by 30%)
- Create fertilizer for soil (from their fallen leaves)
- Prevent flooding (trees act as reservoirs, holding back some of the flood waters)

Let us offer our thanksgiving for all that God provides through trees!

**OPTIONAL Song of Praise: Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life** by Guy Carawan, adapted by Luci Murphy, Rise Up Singing, 1965, pg 58. Em A / D - / Em AG / D

First verse:

Call: Ain't you got a right (Response: ain't you got a right(x3)

Call: To the *tree of life* (Response: to the *tree of life*)

Additional verses (optional):

You can tell all my sisters (Response: repeat)

You can tell all my brothers (Response: repeat)

You can tell the world (Response: repeat)

... 'Bout the tree of life ('bout the tree of life)

We come from the distance (come from...) (x2)

And we got a right (and we...)

To the tree of life (to the...)

**ALLOW SOME REFLECTION TIME TO OBSERVE THE TREES AND LISTEN FOR GOD'S VOICE TO SPEAK TO US AS WE HONOR THE TREES..**

### **AWAKENING SENSORY EXPERIENCE**

**Silence: for 5 mins following these Quotes about the Spiritual Significance of Trees:**

*Trees are Earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.* - Rabindranath Tagore

*The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit.* - Nelson Henderson

[The Torah compares humans to trees] *because, like humans, trees have the power to grow.*

*And as humans have children, so trees bear fruit. And when a human is hurt, cries of pain are heard throughout the world, so when a tree is chopped down, its cries are heard throughout the world.* (Rashi)

As you hear the following scriptures, reflect on the meanings of trees (or other meanings that occur to you!) that serve as symbols for our spiritual life: of faith, healing, and joy/ happiness

- Happy are those ... who delight in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wither. -- Psalm 1:1-3
- Trees sing and clap for joy in praise of God-- Isaiah 55:12 Psalm 96: 11-12
- A tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all who cling to it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. -- Proverbs 3:17-18

### **Soil - We are made of Earth & Water**

Humans came from the Humus / Earth (Adam = "Adama" = Earth creature)

- *Then God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being --Genesis 2:7*
- *All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again --Ecclesiastes 3:20*  
For Christians, beginning the season of Lent, these words are said on Ash Wednesday:  
*From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.*
- *You are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. -- Isaiah 64:8*

Everything we eat and drink comes from the earth. So we are made from earth and water! All our food is grown in or on the earth. We are dependent upon the water and soil for life. What is the condition of the water we drink? **What is the condition of the soil with which we grow food? How do the soil and water appear here in this place? (soil erosion? sediment?)**

### **Spiritual Practice: Examen - Questions for Observing a Local Stream:**

Background: The following reflection draws upon an ancient Christian spiritual practice (from St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises) called Examen: A daily practice used by Christians to reflect on their day with this question. "Where is / was God in this?"

1. Place yourself in God's presence. Give thanks for God's great love for you.
2. Pray for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.
3. Review your day — recall specific moments and your feelings at the time.
4. Reflect on what you did, said, or thought in those instances. Were you drawing closer to God, or further away?
5. Look toward tomorrow — think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God's plan. Be specific, and conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

### **Adaptation for Observing a Local Stream:**

As we observe the natural world - a stream, a forest, any landscape - and our human impact upon it, we can ask ourselves these questions (with a pause between for quiet reflection):

1. What do I see and where do I see or how do I experience God in this?
2. Where or how does it seem that God is absent or that God's healing is needed? (e.g. brokenness or degradation in the environment that calls for restoration)
3. How can I contribute to God's plan for this place?

### **DEVELOPING WATERSHED EYES / WATERSHED LITERACY:**

It can be daunting to hear about how our actions are damaging our watershed, but it comes with a powerful spiritual lesson: we are all connected. Pope Francis' encyclical, for example, affirms that "everything is connected," and the 7th core principle of the Unitarian Universalist

faith is respect for the interconnected web of existence of which we are all a part. And nothing illustrates that interdependence more powerfully than water. As the Christian farmer Wendell Berry has said: "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you." We as faith communities can bring the wisdom of that insight, that recognition of interconnection, to the larger environmental movements in which we participate.

For example, in the fight to ban fracking (yay -- we banned fracking in Maryland!) one of the compromises proposed by the other side was that each county could decide by referendum if they wanted to frack; but anyone who understands water understands why that didn't make sense; the water certainly doesn't know when it's leaving one county and coming to pollute our waterways here.

For better or worse, we are all connected. And that's the promise, too, in this, that a recognition of our interconnection can bring us together across congregations, all of us who share this watershed, to work together in new ways.

#### **Water in Spiritual Teachings -**

**Qur'an 21:30** We have made from water every living thing.

**Qur'an 16:65** And God sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless: in this, behold, there is a message indeed for people who listen.

#### **Qualities or actions do they illustrate (w/ body movement)**

What qualities do you hear in these scriptures?

- *See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. -- Isaiah 43:16-21*
- *You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. -- Psalm 104:10-13*
- Samaritan woman: *Give me a drink.... Where do you get that living water? Jesus: The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. -- John 4:7-15*

These are just a few of the over 700 times that the word water appears in the Bible! References to Water and Living Waters in the Bible signify overflowing, abundance, flourishing life, purification, and transformation of the heart.

#### **Most major religions hold water as sacred and all the Abrahamic faiths water is a central element in their ritual life:**

Baptism – ritual of entering the Christian church

Mikvah – a ritual bath of purification in the Jewish faith

Ablution – ritual of washing in preparation for prayer

**Song: I've Got Peace Like a River** (to illustrate some of these qualities)

*I've got Peace like a River (repeat 3x) in my soul.  
(hands flow to left and right like a flowing stream)  
I've got Joy like a Fountain (repeat 3x) in my soul.  
(hands together then reach up and out with arms like a fountain)  
I've got Love like an Ocean (repeat 3x) in my soul.  
(hands do a rolling motion around each other like rolling waves)*

**At a Stream or Creek:**

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:** (upstream / downstream communities)

- Watershed version of the "Golden Rule" *Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you. (poet, farmer Wendell Berry)*
- *Let justice roll down like waters (Amos 5:24)* What rolls down our streams and rivers?
- Who lives upstream from us? Downstream from us?

**Reflect on the wildlife with whom we share this beautiful earth**

**From Ba'Hai:**

Nature can, for example, inspire deep insights into the concept of unity in diversity. "Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and color. This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature...Let us look...at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson..." ~ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks

**From Hebrew Bible:**

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you.

Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

In God's hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all humankind." ~Job 12:7

**Attributed to Native American Chief Seattle:**

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things are connected.

**Buddhism:** "The Earth is our mother, nourishing and protecting us in every moment—giving us air to breathe, fresh water to drink, food to eat and healing herbs to cure us when we are sick. Every breath we inhale contains our planet's nitrogen, oxygen, water vapor and trace elements. When we breathe with mindfulness, we can experience our interbeing with the Earth's delicate atmosphere, with all the plants, and even with the sun, whose light makes possible the miracle



of photosynthesis. With every breath we can experience communion. With every breath we can savor the wonders of life." ~ Thich Nhat Hahn

**Trash Reflection:**

Reflect on the meaning of *oikos* - the root word meaning house from which come the words ecology, economy, ecumenical. Seeing trash, how can we take better care of this House of God - the earth and its waters? Perhaps trash is a sign spiritual and social brokenness. How do we see/ witness this? (It also contributes to diminished community pride, diminished beauty of neighborhood, and increased crime rate, just to name a few.)

**Closing Prayer:** (From Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov.)

"Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love."

**Body Prayer** -- Stand with feet slightly apart. Reach down saying "We are rooted 'like trees planted by streams of water" (Psalm 1), AND/OR "We are rooted and grounded in love." (Ephes. 3:17), and then reach up toward the sun, source of light for life saying "We praise God, Creator of all the universe," and then arms stretch out toward one another, saying "We give thanks for this community and the whole community of Creation."

**OPTIONAL Sending forth Song:** *The Trees of the Field Shall Clap their Hands* (based upon Isaiah 5:12)

You/we shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace,  
The mountains and the hills will break forth before you.  
You/we'll go out with joy and be led forth peace, and the trees will clap their hands.

The trees of the field will clap their hands (clap 4x) - Repeat 3x  
and you/we'll go out with joy.

**OR**

**Repeat the opening chant: "mah norah hamakom hazeh"** (how awesome is this place)

It's not just this physical space that is awesome but also the sacred gathering we created together and the sanctuary of this circle of folks, walking and listening together. How awesome is *this* place, the place where we meet together to care for Creation.

Please join me to close our time together by singing again: Mah nora hamakom hazeh.