

Quaking Climate: Spiritual Resources for Connecting with and Restoring Earth

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When my last book, *Listening at Lookout Creek: Nature in Spiritual Practice* came out, my editor asked whether I had ideas for promoting it, which is not a topic that most authors tend to have a lot of ideas about. Would I like someone at the press to write a blog post about the book, she asked. Or maybe I would like to write a blog post myself. Or, maybe I'd like to write a Listicle. A Listicle! I thought. I had never heard of a Listicle. But it sounded like popsicle and I was intrigued. A listicle it turns out is just a fancy name for a list – a top ten or top five or whatever number of this or that. I decided to give it a go and wrote one, based on the book's theme, called "10 Tips for Getting Your Kids Outdoors." And surprisingly I really enjoyed this little exercise. And so I thought I would try it here today.

A Listicle of Spiritual Resources for Connecting with and Restoring Earth

It is just a beginning, and not at all complete – though I hope it will be a jump start, if you will, for what will amount to a generative day of spiritual reflection about the tenuous place in which we find ourselves in relation to each other, and to Earth and its beings. The list is based on my work teaching students at MSU, as well as my research and community work with spiritually oriented environmental groups. It is also based on my own life experience growing up

on West Michigan's Lakeshore and now, as a parent of three teenagers. And it is written with bias, with the strong conviction that, in the words of Rachel Carson, it is "in these difficult times we need more than ever to keep alive those arts from which [we] derive inspiration and courage and consolation—in a word, strength of spirit."

Five Spiritual Resources for Connecting with and Restoring Earth

First, are spiritual histories that narrate human beings' relationships with nature, especially those stories that have been neglected or suppressed by more dominant systems of thought.

I know Richard Tucker is hard at work doing this in relation to the Quaker tradition – and I am so glad that he is because it is such an important task. Western philosophy and theology on the whole have been ambivalent at best and silent and demeaning at worst when it comes to narrating the connection between people and the rest of nature. Christianity in particular has not always proven to be a helpful source for promoting Earth care. Quite the opposite Western Christianity's history of colonization and domination of peoples and nature in God's name makes one wonder whether it, or any other religion with a colonizing destructive past is redeemable in terms of its ability now to function as a genuine Earth faith. Central to many of these critiques is the idea that Christianity, especially since the sixteenth-century European scientific revolution and Protestant Reformation, has perpetuated a hyper-human centered view of creation and an individualistic and otherworldly understanding of salvation. This makes the task of retrieving more restorative narratives of the human relationship to nature that much more difficult.

Still, we know from the work of environmental scholars over the past six decades that there are resources of deep wisdom and insight about the nature-human relation that reside in

spiritual traditions that have been ignored. We must work hard in this time of growing planetary uncertainty and volatility to recover and reveal these narratives, particularly where they can shed light on the mounting problems of environmental injustice and suffering.

One example is the spiritual narrative of land partnership found in the Hebrew Bible. Despite rich roots in historical traditions of spirituality and ethics, the notion of partnership between human and nonhuman creatures was for many centuries largely lost within the Christian tradition. This may have been an inadvertent oversight, perhaps resulting from the fact that figures who held such a view, such as Francis of Assisi, were marginalized in Christianity, both in his day and historically, despite his patron saint status among contemporary environmentalists. But there may also be deeper theological reasons at play with partnership's neglect within Western Christianity and culture. Traditional Christianity has long been suspicious, for example, of theological viewpoints that blur or dissolve distinctions between Creator and creation, heavenly and earthly, grace and nature, and human and nonhuman. As ecotheologians have pointed out, the idea that human beings are created uniquely in God's image to act as divine-like stewards or caretakers—and, on some interpretations (Gen. 1:26), to have dominion—of Earth has served as the predominant environmental metaphor in Western Christianity. The notion that human and nonhuman beings are created equally by God to live together in mutual and reciprocal partnership, on the other hand, calls into question traditionally held beliefs about the fundamental nature of individuals, other kinds, and the divine.

More recently, and with the rise of environmentalism, feminist philosophers and theologians have retrieved and recontoured theological metaphors of partnership. These thinkers, for example, have expanded upon notions of partnership to refer to the types of relationships

between women and men and the Earth that are created when people join with, rather than dominate, others in a shared struggle for justice and equality. A Christian spirituality and ethic of partnership in particular also involves the idea that religious communities have a particular role to play in the formation, and ongoing evaluation, of norms that constitute “good” forms of land partnership, including the norms of justice, peace, equality, and simplicity (Van Wieren 2013).

Second, contemplative practices, particularly when performed outdoors, have a special capacity for connecting us with nature.

That it takes sustained practice to cultivate a deep connection with the natural world is not a new insight. Thoreau famously wrote about walking in the woods as one such practice. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests silent sitting meditation followed by full body prostration on the ground in a process he calls “Touching the Earth.” Aldo Leopold heralded the “primitive arts” of canoeing and pack travel. Others have touted the special power of activities such as hiking, bird watching, climbing, fly-fishing, and surfing. Add gardening and restoration work. Rachel Carson suggested exploring the seashore.

Now that I have children, I find myself wondering what it is more particularly about performing meditative practices outdoors that gives them their special power. Is it simply that they provide a sense of connection and affiliation with other beings? Or perhaps it is that they heighten a sense of meaning and purpose, the belief that there is an underlying unity or universal order or organization to the world. Maybe it is nature’s beauty, its sensuousness that pulls practitioners in. Yet again, it could be the infinite variety and richness, the complexity and diversity, the wonder of it all.

That it is an art to learn to sit completely still is not an idea that I have to sell on Quakers. And traditionally it has been the world's spiritual traditions that have taught people to sit in silence, whether in worship, prayer, meditation or other ritual activities. Yet in our secular, technological world few of us learn this skill. Most of us, I have come to think, are scared to death of silence.

In one of my undergraduate courses, I show a silent film clip of Earth from space. The video pans out from Earth's surface, to Earth as a blue ball in space, to the thin blue line of the universe. It is only two minutes long, though the silence feels like an eternity. Students are visibly uncomfortable. After ten seconds, they begin to fidget. After thirty seconds, they start shifting in their seats and rustle their feet. At a minute and a half, they can barely stand it. When the video is finished I never know quite what to say. Should I admonish them for not being able to sit quietly, unplugged and phoneless, for a mere two minutes? Should I ask them to reflect on their experience and how they felt just sitting there? Perhaps I should make it a more frequent class exercise and test them at the end of the term on their capacity to sit in silence for say two, five, or ten minutes.

Instead I have them go on a walk. First we read Thoreau's 1862 essay, "Walking," where he writes that he *cannot preserve his health and spirits unless he spends four hours a day at least — and it is commonly more than that — sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all wordly engagements*. Students are shocked by the idea of walking in the woods for that long; but it also intrigues them. Next class period, I tell them, find someplace quiet outdoors and go on your own kind of Thoreauvian walk-about. It doesn't have to be four hours, but try fifteen minutes. Go alone. Leave your I-thingies at home. Then write

an essay about how you felt on the walk, what you thought about, what you noticed. Despite coming from wildly different backgrounds and experiences, I have never, over the past ten years teaching, received a negative comment about this exercise. Remarkably, every student appears to understand, at some level, the benefit of being silent, outdoors, if even for a little while.

It is silence, I suspect, that is the passageway between us humans and the rest of the wild world. It runs so deep in our consciousness, this need to be silent in order to commune with, participate in, the larger community of life, that even layers upon layers of modernization cannot completely squelch it from our inherent makeups as ecological beings. My students, somehow, miraculously get this, feel it, despite the fact that many of them write that they have never, ever, taken a walk alone, in silence, in the woods. As stunning as this may sound, I don't think that they are that different from most young people growing up in today's hyper-insulated, hi-tech age. Richard Louv calls it "nature-deficit disorder," Robert Michael Pyle, the "extinction of experience." Today's youth – we ourselves – will only learn to *desire* silence with the aid of particular practices that reveal to us just how alive it can make us feel (Van Wieren 2019).

Third, contemplative practices that connect us with nature are often interconnected with moral concern for Earth and its beings, which leads to restorative, regenerative actions.

There is a sensory dimension involved in nature-based spiritual experience that, in turn, can form a gateway for the formation of a sense of recognition, awareness, attentiveness, respect, and over time even love and care in relation to the natural world. Studies from various disciplines increasingly show that the emotional basis for affection and care in relation to nature begins in childhood. In this stage in human development one's sensory world is wide open and

oriented to stimulation by the diversity and richness of the natural world. Moral values are shaped integrally by the myriad sensory stimuli of the outer world. “Trace the history of a river, or a raindrop, as John Muir would have done,” says nature writer Gretel Ehrlich, and you will also be tracing “the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body” (cited in Van Wieren 2012).

A sense of loving perception of nature also may be accompanied by the understanding that Earth and its beings are in some sense sacred, worthy of being valued for their own sake as well as for their interconnected and interdependent character. From this perspective the Earth with all its life is taken, as philosopher Roger Gottlieb writes, “as an ultimate truth,” a sacred, holy truth. “As more familiar mystical experiences might alter our attitudes toward death, our fear of the unknown, or our petty insecurities, realization of our kinship with the earth confirms the need to question any unquestioned trashing of what surrounds us.” Perceiving Earth as sacred has the potential for motivating ethical action in response to nature, particularly when land and its beings are unjustifiably or unquestionably damaged or destroyed. In nature-based spiritual experience, the “earth is not just being polluted,” writes Gottlieb, “it is being desecrated.” “Something more than useful, more than physically pleasing, something holy is being torn to bits for what are too often the more trivial, thoughtless, or downright cruel of reasons” (Gottlieb 1999: 157).

As numerous nature writers attest, environmentally oriented virtue or character is often born through the course of nature’s embrace. The person who spends significant time contemplating the intricacies, rhythms, changes, beauties, sufferings, and patterns of a particular forest or woodlot or wetland or backyard or park comes to know that place and its beings from

the inside out; it becomes part of her and she part of it. Lessons are learned about balance and integrity, patience and attentiveness, the relation between suffering that is inevitable and suffering that does not have to be. Human hubris and shortsightedness are juxtaposed with evolutionary historical time; the joys and travails of human life become intimations of Earth's seasons.

Fourth, spiritual communities may serve as a source for connecting with and restoring Earth.

Community is a value that is shared by the majority of the world's spiritual traditions. Yet, it is also one that is fraught with difficulty, as justice-oriented thinkers have noted. Communities can be exclusionary and unwelcoming, homogenizing and oppressive, narrow-minded and intolerant. They can be seed-beds for propagating injustice and violence, hatred and fear, isolation and distress.

At the same time, we have models of spiritual communities that show us that it does not have to be like this. One way that I have come to think about the possibilities for religious communities to engage in positive environmental change is through the idea of restorative communities of place. Restorative communities of place are a form of social and ecological relations which work to reconnect groups of people and landscapes in particular locales. Regenerative activities can take on a variety of forms, including restorative design of places of worship -- as here, in this beautiful building -- sustainable forestry and farming techniques -- as is the case with numerous faith-based farms that I have worked with -- and ecological restoration projects -- where religious communities partner with local restoration initiatives, or initiate them on their own natural lands.

Though community life as we now experience it often has many boundaries, restorative communities of place hint at what differentiation without exclusion may look like. Many community-based restoration projects that I have worked with, for instance, attempt to represent and involve the spectrum of residents living within the land area or watershed. This is not to say that restorative communities transcend the realities of struggle and difficulty involved with the attempt to cross and open social and ecological borders. Quite the opposite, the attempt to cooperatively cohabit particular landscapes with other people and creatures often accentuates differences in cultural attitudes regarding notions of ideal and damaged land. In the midst of such differences, restorative communities of place “engage the challenge of building a community of place that includes each creature and every human neighbor,” as one restoration author states.

Restorative communities of place involve ways for people to celebrate its unique cultural and ecological components, as well as the cycles of the place’s seasons and processes of healing and renewal. Visual art, religious liturgies, song, dance, music, theater, communal festivals all are utilized in forming a place’s cultural identity in relation to the restoration of the natural landscape. One restoration project that I worked with in Vintondale, Pennsylvania, a former mining town with a heavily polluted watershed utilizes its restored wetlands and park area to host an annual community day and celebration. A Lutheran liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota, St. Olaf College, brings prayer and liturgy out into fields of 150 acres of prairie that has been restored to the campus’ formerly farmed surrounding natural lands. Benedictine restorationists in Madison, Wisconsin, include prayer, poetry reading, and a meal in their seasonal workdays, adding a celebratory, festive dimension to their ecological work. Celebration within restorative communities of place involves both a purifying and healing aspect as well as a

renewing and fulfilling one. It acknowledges the intrinsic ambivalence and challenges involved in attempting to live in community with other human and nonhuman beings, as well as the deep values of communion, beauty, and even love that may be born where people become fully engaged with and enlivened by the larger community of life (Van Wieren 2013).

Fifth, and finally, is the spiritual resource of children to help us to connect with and restore Earth.

This may be an idea that catches you a bit off guard. But you are not alone. Children have been an overlooked source of insight and guidance in environmental and religious thought, as well as academia and halls of decision making more broadly. This is too bad, for children, with their beginner minds, to use a Buddhist term, have a “wide open” approach to both connecting with nature and recognizing when something is not right.

Studies by psychiatrists Robert Coles, as well as Edward Robinson and Edward Hoffman, have documented the surprising frequency of spiritual experiences occurring in nature during childhood. Rachel Carson and butterfly biologist, Robert Michael Pyle also emphasized an aesthetic and spiritual dimension of children’s relationship to the natural world, suggesting a child’s world is fresh and new and open to experiences of beauty, wonder, and delight, as well as mystery, surprise, and a sense of kinship with non-human organisms. More recently, the psychologist Louise Chawla and educator David Sobel (2008) reported children’s spiritual sensibilities were fostered by experiences in nature. Sobel found that childhood encounters with the natural world can lead to a transcendent condition in which, for some children, “the borders between the natural world and ourselves break down.”

Several years ago, social ecologist, Stephen Kellert and I conducted a study of the origins of children's aesthetic and spiritual values in their experience of the natural world. We found that children who spent two or more hours a week outdoors articulated an aesthetic sense of beauty, pattern and order, wonder and discovery, and expressed spiritual attributes such as feelings of solace and peacefulness, commonality and connection, happiness and feeling at one with and at home in nature, a power greater than oneself, and a sense of divine presence or mystery. One child told us that "Nature provides places where you can go when you want to be alone and you can go to places that no one else knows about if you don't want to be near them."

Another said "One time at school at recess...being in nature helped when I was feeling sad. There's this huge tree that is half shady and half warm and sunny. I just like that place a lot."

And another: "I like to look under the leaves to see if there's a worm or a toad. I feel good because I found it, and it's like I'm not the only person" (Van Wieren and Kellert 2011)

Children, it turns, out, have a lot to teach us about connecting with Earth – much, much more than most of us give credit. Particularly in the place on Earth in which we find ourselves, think of them as divine guides, leading us into sacred territory.

I end with two quotes by Rachel Carson.

"We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination

that assures the preservation of the earth.”

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.”

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