

## Wisdom Circles June 2012

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE AS PART OF NATURE?

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

“The living tradition which we share draws from many sources [including] Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

---from the Purposes and Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Transformation Worship Theme for the Summer of 2012 is Nature and Ecology. Unitarian Universalism has been a faith with a strong inspiration from the natural world since at least the early part the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Transcendentalist movement of that time. Transcendentalism was a movement within Unitarianism which rejected truth from only one source, the Christian Bible, and claimed that divine revelation could also, or even especially, be found in one’s relationship with the natural world. The Transcendentalists spent time in nature as part of their spiritual practice and nurtured nature mysticism, based on experiences of connection, and even oneness, with nature.

“Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the *common sense!* *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*”

— Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*

Ever since, nature has been spiritual inspiration for Unitarians and Universalists. As scientific discoveries followed one after the other, our religious forebears embraced science as a source of truth. Some, the Humanists, felt that science disproved the existence of a God, while others, known as Scientific or Naturalist Theists, felt that the discoveries of science pointed to the nature of divine reality. However that was interpreted, the insight was clear. Human beings are an inherent part of nature.

In the past several decades, technological advances have made human beings, especially Americans, spend more time interacting with electronic media and less and less time interacting with the natural world. Former San Diego Union Tribune reporter Richard Louv thinks that’s a problem. In his 2005 book, *Last Child In The Woods* he notes that children suffer more and more from ills such as obesity, attention deficit disorder, and depression. Louv believes that many of these problems can be attributed to what he calls Nature Deficit Disorder. In his second book, *The Nature Principle*, Louv states that adults and children suffer more and more from Nature Deficit Disorder. He quotes studies that show that time in nature helps slow age related memory loss, improves

learning, prevents depression or helps with it and enhances creativity among many other benefits. Nature is such a powerful enhancer of physical and mental well being that Louv calls spending time in nature Vitamin N. Louv writes:

“Taken to its extreme, a denatured life is a dehumanized life. As the American naturalist and writer Henry Beston put it, ‘When the wind in the grass is no longer a part of the human spirit, a part of very flesh and bone, man becomes, as it were, a kind of cosmic outlaw.’....the more high tech we become, the more nature we need.”

Systems thinker and Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy in her work helps people face their pain, hopelessness and apathy by imaginatively understanding our deep connection to the earth and all its creatures. She believes that when we deny how much we are a part of the natural world and deny our feelings of grief and rage at what is being done to the planet, we grow numb and begin to die to our full human experience.

I think it’s true. The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need. And unless we directly experience our intimate connection with the natural world, we won’t be able to act to save the ability of earth to sustain humans and other higher species.

Love,

Rev. Arvid

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

This month's spiritual exercise begins where last month exercise left off. Last month you spent a significant amount of time making direct contact with the grandeur and magnificence of nature. You took some time apart to do that. This month we are asking you to find ways to put a little bit of direct contact with nature in smaller and more routine ways, but to do it every day. Below are some suggestions. I'm sure that many of you already do some of the things suggested. What we're suggesting for this month is that you *add* one or two small things each day. We are so lucky here in San Diego to live in a climate where being outdoors is comfortable year around. So here are the suggestions:

- Have your hot beverage in the morning outside rather than inside. Notice the weather, temperature, animal and plant life, the smells and sounds of the natural world.
- Do your exercise routine outdoors if you can. Try doing it without headphones and electronic devices and notice the sights, sounds and smells of the natural world.
- Take your work break outdoors
- Eat a meal outdoors.
- If you have pets and/or plants, pay particular attention to them. What is life like for these other life forms?
- Spend more time in parks, forests, deserts and other wild and semi-wild places.

Right before your Wisdom Circle meeting, take stock and notice if there have been any subtle changes in your life and well-being since you started doing these things.

Remember---subtle is significant!

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The UU author and family therapist Mary Pipher's first suggestion to troubled families she works with is to schedule a weekly fun activity outdoors. She came to this practice because she noted that everybody's favorite family memories from childhood seemed to be something that happened outdoors. Is this true for you? How did your family of origin relate to the outdoors? How about your current family?
2. One definition of spirituality is that spirituality is our relationship to the unseen sources of our existence. Another definition is contact with a life or consciousness beyond us. How does nature fit into your spiritual life? In what ways has your experience of the natural world help you find a response to the "Big Questions"---What does my life mean? Why am I here? Why do I have to die? How should I live?

## WORDS OF WISDOM

D. H. Lawrence: "I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. There is not any part of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surfaces of the water."

Thomas Berry: "If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants."

Rabindranath Tagore: "Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven."

Donald Williams: "For those who have seen the Earth from space, and for the hundreds and perhaps thousands more who will, the experience most certainly changes your perspective. The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us."

Rachel Carson: "Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life."

A. Eustace Haydon: "The Humanist rarely loses the feeling of at-homeness in the universe. The Humanist is conscious of being an earth-child. There is a mystic glow in this sense of belonging. Memories of one's long ancestry still linger in muscle and nerve, in brain and germ cell. On moonlit nights, in the renewal of life in the

springtime, before the glory of a sunset, in moments of swift insight, people feel the community of their own physical being with the body of mother earth. Rooted in millions of years of planetary history, the earthling has a secure feeling of being at home, and a consciousness of pride and dignity as a bearer of the heritage of the ages.”

Walt Whitman: “Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men [sic] -- go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers or families -- re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body.”

Thich Nhat Hanh: “People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”

Henry David Thoreau: “If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.”

Rabindranath Tagore: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.”

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Here are the two books by Richard Louv:

Last Child In The Woods  
The Nature Principle

Here are audio links to some radio interviews from the PBS program  
On Being:

<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2012/restoring-the-senses/>  
This is an interview with an Armenian Orthodox priest on the  
spirituality of gardening.

<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2012/inner-landscape-of-beauty/>  
A Celtic sensibility

<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2011/wild-love-for-world/>  
Hear from Joanna Macy herself

Explore the following readings in Singing the Living Tradition published by the  
Unitarian Universalist Association. (Our hymnal)

- # 440 by Phillip Hewett
- #465 by Wendell Barry
- #478 by U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program
- #551 by From the Ute Indians of North America
- #552 by Nancy Wood
- #553 by Nancy Wood
- # 554 by Thich Nhat Hanh
- #570 by Barbara Deming

Listening to Nature: How to Deepen Your Awareness of Nature, Joseph Cornell,  
photographs by John Hendrickson, Dawn Publications, 1987

Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue,  
Edited by  
Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, Beacon Press, 1992

Finding Home, Edited by Orion Magazine, Beacon Press, 1992

Walden: Lessons for the New Millenium, Henry David Thoreau and Bill McKibben, Beacon Press, 1997

Sauntering: A Soul Journey in the Woods with Thoreau as My Guide, Tom Owen-Towle, Bald Eagle Mountain Press, 1996

Thoreau As A Spiritual Guide: A Companion to Walden for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion, Barry M. Andrews, Skinner House Books, 2000

The poetry of Mary Oliver

Earth Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems and Invocations for Honoring the Earth, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991

Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution--and How It Can Renew America, by [Thomas L. Friedman](#); Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2008