

Presence With Living Earth

Weekly Meditations

There is a deep reciprocity and relatedness at the heart of the universe that has become veiled by patterns of separation in the human-earth relationship. We offer these weekly meditations in “Presence with Living Earth” as an opening into this deeper reality. We invite you to read in a slow and reflective way, as opposed to reading for information. Allow the words and images to impress themselves into the life of the soul as you take them into contemplation.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 1 (January 6)

On this winter day, Gunilla Norris speaks of our deepest nature:

“Within each of us there is a silence,
a silence as vast as the universe . . .
When we experience that silence, we remember
who we are, creatures of the stars,
created from time and space, created from silence . . .
Silence is our deepest nature, our home,
our common ground, our peace . . .”

~ Gunilla Norris, *Shared Silence*

Presence With Living Earth, Week 2 (January 13)

This week, Thomas Merton reflects on being part of the weather:

“Our mentioning of the weather – our perfunctory observations on what kind of day it is, are perhaps not idle. Perhaps we have a deep and legitimate need to know in our entire being what the day is like, to *see it* and *feel it*, to know how the sky is grey, paler in the south, with patches of blue in the southwest, with snow on the ground, the thermometer at 18, and cold wind making your ears ache. I have a real need to know these things because I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place, and a day in which I have not shared truly in all this is no day at all. It is certainly part of my life of prayer.”

Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, 46

Presence With Living Earth, Week 3 (January 20)

Listen, with Mary Oliver, to a snowy night:

Snowy Night

Last night, an owl
in the blue dark
tossed
an indeterminate number

of carefully shaped sounds into
the world, in which,
a quarter of a mile away, I happened
to be standing.

I couldn't tell
which one it was –
the barred or the great-horned
ship of the air –

it was that distant. But, anyway,
aren't there moments
that are better than knowing something,
and sweeter? Snow was falling,

so much like stars
filling the dark trees
that one could easily imagine
its reason for being was nothing more

than prettiness. I suppose
if this were someone else's story
they would have insisted on knowing
whatever is knowable – would have hurried

over the fields
to name it – the owl, I mean.
But it's mine, this poem of the night,
and I just stood there, listening and holding out

my hands to the soft glitter
falling through the air. I love this world,
but not for its answers.
And I wish good luck to the owl,

whatever its name –
and I wish great welcome to the snow,
whatever its severe and comfortless
and beautiful meaning.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 4 (January 27)

This week, I invite you to consider these thoughts on mirroring by Andreas Weber:

“Only in the mirror of other life can we understand our own lives. Only in the eyes of the other can we become ourselves. We need the real presence of the most unknown: the owl’s mute regard, the silent newt’s gaze. Only *it* can unlock the depths in ourselves that otherwise would be sealed forever. We need the experience of an inside unfolding in front of us, displaying itself as a fragile body. We need other organisms because they are what we are, but with this cunning twist: they are that hidden part of us which we cannot see because we exist *through* this part and we see *with* it. Viewed in this light, other beings are the blind spot of our self-understanding, its invisible center, which is the source of all vision.”

“In the animals our inwardness stands before us in an unknown shape. If we lose them, we do not just lose precious, fascinating creatures. We lose ourselves. We renounce something profound about our condition of being in the world. We forsake ways of being creative, ways of giving birth. Each species we lose today is the permanent loss of a manner of expression of a living cosmos. After it is gone, reality will never be able to express the same gesture...”

“It is the presence of other beings, the gift of their being here, bestowed upon us and not created through our powers, that grants inexhaustibility – and through this, hope. Their presence is that which does not comply with human measure and which does not obey our power. It adamantly ignores human logics and planning. Their presence is a miracle – a free treasure whose value we can barely imagine. An undeserved, unearned gift that falls from above. An embodiment of grace.”

Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling and the Metamorphosis of Science*, 30, 32, 33

Presence With Living Earth, Week 5 (February 3)

We continue this week with Andreas Weber's thoughts on "inscape":

"The external world, experienced in a mode of necessary imaginative connection, does not remain something which is only extended and material. It becomes a topography of meaning. To describe this interior dimension of lived reality, poets, not biologists, have invented the most apt terms. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke proposed the German designation *Weltinnenraum*, which could be translated as "interior space of the world," or "world inscape." *Inscape* is a concept another poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, used in the second half of the 19th century. For Hopkins, a deeply sensitive Jesuit priest, inscape was that which had form and meaningful expression at the same time. The *world inscape* is that dimension of the world which is not only spatial, but also filled with felt meaning. This space is the realm of poetry – but also of poiesis, of creation. It is the realm of organisms."

Andreas Weber, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling and the Metamorphosis of Science*, 107

Presence With Living Earth, Week 6 (February 10)

This week Thomas Berry speaks of intimacy with Earth:

"Our most urgent need at the present time is for a reorientation of the human venture toward an intimate experience of the world around us. If we would go back to our primary experience of any natural phenomena – on seeing the stars scattered across the heavens at night, on looking out over the ocean at dawn, on seeing the colors of the oaks and maples and poplars in autumn, on hearing a mockingbird sing in the evening, or breathing the fragrance of the honeysuckle while journeying through a southern lowland – we would recognize that our immediate response to any of these experiences is a moment akin to ecstasy. There is wonder and reverence and inner fulfillment in some overwhelming mystery. We experience a vast new dimension to our own existence.

Our rediscovery of the mystique of Earth is a primary requirement if we are ever to establish a viable rapport between humans and the Earth community. Only in

this context will we overcome the arrogance that sets us apart from all other components of the planet and establishes a mood of conquest rather than of admiration. To assume that conquest and use are our primary relations with the natural world is ultimate disaster not only for ourselves but also for the multitude of other living forms on the planet.

To lessen the grandeur of the outer world is to limit the fulfillment available to our inner world. For the stars in the night sky over our cities to be blocked from view by particle and light pollution is not simply the loss of a passing visual experience, it is a loss of soul. This is especially a loss for children, for it is from the stars, the planets, and the moon in the heavens as well as from the flowers, birds, forests, and woodland creatures of Earth that some of their most profound inner experiences originate. To devastate any aspect of the natural world is to distort the sublime experiences that provide fulfillment to the human mode of being.

We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world.”

Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 132-133

Presence With Living Earth, Week 7 (February 17)

Come walk with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee:

“I have always loved to walk early in the morning, to sense the Earth at the beginning of a day, to feel Her pulse, Her beauty and magic, before thoughts and demands clutter my day. Waking early, I have a hot cup of tea, meditate in silence, and then, as soon as the first light comes, I walk down the hill to the road beside the wetlands where I live. Sometimes the frost is sparkling around me, sometimes the water is clouded with fog, an egret appearing white against the reeds. This is another time of silent meditation, walking, breathing, feeling the Earth. I try to be as empty as possible, just to be present in the half-light, aware of what is around me. Prayer, meditation, presence, awareness – these are just words for a practice that immerses me in a mystery we call nature. Here the sacred speaks to me in its own language, and I try to listen.

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee with Hilary Hart, *Spiritual Ecology: 10 Practices to Reawaken the Sacred in Everyday Life*, 1.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 8 (February 24)

This week, Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks of Native American language of animacy:

“When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa* – to *be* a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise – become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. *This* is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 55

Presence With Living Earth, Week 9 (March 3)

This week, we listen to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s wisdom of the living world that surrounds us:

“I have heard our elders give advice like ‘You should go among the standing people’ or ‘Go spend some time with those Beaver people.’ They remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world. We Americans are reluctant to learn a foreign language of our own species, let alone another species. But imagine the possibilities. Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 58

Presence With Living Earth, Week 10 (March 10)

This week, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee helps us remember the sacredness of the Earth:

“While there may be a growing awareness that the world forms a single living being – what has been called the Gaia principle – we don’t really understand that this being is also nourished by its soul, the *anima mundi* – or that we are a part of it, part of a much larger living, sacred being. Sadly we remain cut off, isolated from this spiritual dimension of life itself. We have forgotten how to nourish or be nourished by the soul of the world.

And while there is a growing ecological movement that reminds us that we are guardians of the planet...this guardianship is interpreted as looking after our physical environment and its myriad inhabitants, rarely addressing our inherent responsibility of the sacred within creation. Instead, in only relating to our planet from a physical perspective, much of the ecological movement perpetuates the concept of the earth as something solely physical, without sacredness or soul, and so reinforces the divorce of matter from spirit.”

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, “The Call of the Earth,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, 248-249.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 11 (March 17)

This week, John O’Donahue speaks to us of Nature as prayer:

“Celtic wisdom was deeply aware that Nature had a mind and spirit of its own. Mountains have great souls full of memory. A mountain watches over a landscape and lures its mind toward the horizon. Streams and rivers never rest; they are relentless nomads who claim neither shape nor place. Stones and fields inhabit a Zen-like stillness and seem immune to all desire. Nature is always wrapped in seamless prayer. Unlike us, Nature does not seem to suffer the separation or distance that thought brings. Nature never seems cut off from her own presence. She lives all the time in the embrace of her own unity. Perhaps unknown to us, she sympathizes with our relentless dislocation and distraction. She certainly knows how to calm our turbulent minds when we trust our selves into the silence and stillness of her embrace. Amongst Nature we come to remember the wisdom of our own inner nature. Nature has not pushed itself out into exile. She remains there, always home in the same place. Nature stays in the womb of the Divine of one pulse-beat with the Divine Heart. This is why there is a

great healing in the wild. When you go out into Nature, you bring your clay body back to its native realm. A day in the mountains or by the ocean helps your body unclench. You recover your deeper rhythm. The tight agendas, tasks and worries fall away and you begin to realize the magnitude and magic of being here. In a wild place you are actually *in* the middle of the great prayer. In our distracted longing, we hunger to partake in the sublime Eucharist of Nature.

John O'Donahue, *Eternal Echoes*, 201-202

Presence With Living Earth, Week 12 (March 24)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of moving beyond our human confinement:

“As we recover our awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects, a new interior experience awakens within the human. The barriers disappear. An enlargement of soul takes place. The excitement evoked by natural phenomena is renewed. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and feel of the natural world about us – the surging sea, the sound of the wind, the brooding forests. All this could be continued in a never-ending list of experiences that have been lost to large segments of the human community in recent centuries – not because the phenomena do not surround us constantly, but because we have become locked into ourselves, as though large segments of the human mind have been paralyzed.”

Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 18

Presence With Living Earth, Week 13 (March 31)

Listen, with Mary Oliver:

Such Singing in the Wild Branches

It was spring
and I finally heard him
among the first leaves--
then I saw him clutching the limb

in an island of shade
with his red-brown feathers

all trim and neat for the new year.

First, I stood still

and thought of nothing.

Then I began to listen.

Then I was filled with gladness--
and that's when it happened,

when I seemed to float,
to be, myself, a wing or a tree--
and I began to understand
what the bird was saying,

and the sands in the glass
stopped
for a pure white moment
while gravity sprinkled upward

like rain, rising,
and in fact
it became difficult to tell just what it was that was singing--
it was the thrush for sure, but it seemed

not a single thrush, but himself, and all his brothers,
and also the trees around them,
as well as the gliding, long-tailed clouds
in the perfect blue sky---all of them

were singing.
And, of course, so it seemed,
so was I.
Such soft and solemn and perfect music doesn't last

For more than a few moments.
It's one of those magical places wise people
like to talk about.
One of the things they say about it, that is true,

is that, once you've been there,
you're there forever.
Listen, everyone has a chance.
Is it spring, is it morning?

Are there trees near you,
and does your own soul need comforting?
Quick, then—open the door and fly on your heavy feet; the song
may already be drifting away.

Mary Oliver, *Owls and Other Fantasies*

Presence With Living Earth, Week 14 (April 7)

This week, Kathleen Raine invites us into the possibility of incarnation:

Mandala

The center of the mandala is everywhere
Wherever the eye falls
The mystery begins to unfold; it is there,
The growing-point of love, the ever-opening rose
Perceived as light on leaf or shadow under,
And in the brooding heart the wings stir
Of the bird whose flight is through a thousand skies.

The center of the mandala is the secret
We have always known;
Sometimes a hazel-nut in the palm of the hand,
Sometimes it covers the whole sky,
Or rains down on a city
Making strange places all familiar
Because the light that touches them is all our own.

The center of the mandala is possibility
Of incarnation, seed of the tree
About whose beams the myriad stars turn,
I the infinity where all selves converge
Into the perennial circle of the sun.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 15 (April 14)

This week, Wendell Berry beckons us to presence:

What We Need is Here

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here

Presence With Living Earth, Week 16 (April 21)

This week, we are guided by Mary Oliver's invocation to "teach the children":

"Teach the children. We don't matter so much, but the children do. Show them daisies and the pale hepatica. Teach them the taste of sassafras and wintergreen. The lives of the blue sailors, mallow, sunbursts, the moccasin flowers. And the frisky ones – rosemary, oregano. Give them peppermint to put in their pockets as they go to school. Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them upstream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms.

Attention is the beginning of devotion.

Mary Oliver, *Upstream*.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 17 (April 28)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of *sympathetic presence* in the life of a child:

“The life of the child...has always been *organized* around a real abiding world of beauty, wonder, and the intimacy of living processes....the wind, frogs, butterflies...not a manufactured electronic world of virtual reality.

The child has a natural bond of intimacy with the natural world, a remarkable sense of identification with all living things.”

“The long term survival of our children...will actually depend on a new relationship between the natural and the human worlds. Children need to develop within a whole cosmology of the sun, moon, stars; they need to awaken to a world to *relate* to as a communion of subjects, not to *use* as a collection of objects. Relationships are the primary context of existence, and children need to see us practice a *sympathetic presence* to the earth, as a means for being in a mutually enhancing relationship to it.”

Thomas Berry quoted in Carolyn Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*, 96, 98.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 18 (May 5)

This week, we go back more than 100 years to these words of wisdom from Arnold Gesell on the child’s living relationship with the natural world:

“People study nature in the schools, and when they get out they cannot find her.’ Such an accusation would be undeserved if nature study began in the primary-school period in first-hand, rapturous contact with living, growing things.

There’s nothing new under the sun, but to childhood all is novelty. The most commonplace things teem with novelty. Childhood endows all nature, both animate and inanimate, with motive and character; with fantastic self-illusion, even sticks and stones are made to symbolize thought and feeling. Nature becomes a playground of the imagination, and out of this joyous, naïve contact with life spring the deeper sentiments of reverence.

The child naturally has animistic feeling for facts. The wind and the rain become the friends of childhood. The raindrops dance like brownies as they patter on the stones outside, or softly fall to give the thirsty flowers drink. The wind howls and

sings and whistles, or chases the grasses over the meadow... We miss our opportunities. We give perfunctory instruction indoors when nature is teaching the same lesson far better out-of-doors.

They are ready likewise to hear the marvelous truths about the sun, to indulge their imagination in the immensity of its great distance from the Earth and yet to know that the sun touches their lives at every point. His study of the sun opens up hours of fascinating thoughts about light and darkness, night and day, month and year, sunset and sunrise...

Children feel the wonder and beauty of life; they are in love with it and hold intimate communion with its humblest expression. Nature is reluctant to give them up and still holds them by the hand to let them share her secrets with the birds and flowers. Self-consciousness has not yet broken the spell, and a child feels himself a part of one great, triumphant burst of life. All the world's akin. The wind talks to him, the flowers bloom and hide for him, the sun sends a shadow playmate to him, and he does not question why. This quick imagination interprets the messages of sight, sound, and touch, which greet him everywhere in the purity of his contact with life and fortify his faith in it.

The child who stands on tiptoe to peep cautiously into a new-found birds nest, who feels the velvety softness of growing things beneath his feet as he hunts out the tiny wildflowers in the spring, who sows his own garden seed and waits to see the first young green push its way through the dark, moist soil, is building up a reverence for life, a sense of kinship with it, which will uphold him in his later and deeper understanding of its meaning.

The child who in nature study holds some frail bit of life in his hands and reverently watches its beautiful unfoldment will appreciate and champion its sacredness.”

Arnold Gesell, “Nature Study” (1912).

Presence With Living Earth, Week 19 (May 12)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of a truly human intimacy with the Earth:

“Our relationship with the earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with the earth and with the entire natural world is needed. Our children should be

properly introduced to the world in which they live, to the trees and grasses and flowers, to the birds and the insects and the various animals that roam over the land, to the entire range of natural phenomena.

Such intimacy with the universe we find with the Omaha Indians. When a child is born, the Omaha declare its newborn presence to the entire universe. First they address the sun, the moon, the stars, and every being that moves in the heavens, declaring: “Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore! Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the first hill.” Then to the atmospheric world, to the winds, clouds, rain, mist and all that moves in the air. Then to the hills, valleys, rivers, lakes, trees, and grasses. Finally, “Ye birds, great and small, that dwell in the forest. Ye insects that creep among the grasses and burrow in the ground, I bid ye all to hear me. Consent ye all, we implore! Make its path smooth. Then shall it travel beyond the four hills.”

This is an entrancing ritual for introducing a child to the world into which the child has been born. In our own thinking we are coming back to this once more out of our new mode of understanding the universe.”

Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 13-14.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 20 (May 19)

This week, Thomas Berry invites us into the realm of the *anima*, the soul:

“Recovery of Western civilization from its present addiction to use, as our primary relation to each other and to the world about us, must begin with the discovery of the world within, the world of the *psyche* as designated by the Greeks, a word translated by the term *anima* in the Latin world or by the term *soul* in the English world..

This interior world of the *psyche* – the *anima*, the soul, the spirit, or the mind – provides the basis for that interior presence that we experience with each other throughout the world of the living. Simply in their physical dimensions, things cannot occupy the same space while remaining their individual selves. This mutual indwelling in the same psychic space is a distinctive capacity of the transmaterial dimension of any living being. Not only can two psychic forms be present to each other in the same psychic space but an unlimited number of forms can be present. Indeed the entire universe can be present, for as Thomas Aquinas tells us, “The mind in a certain manner is all things.” Even so, this inner

presence, while distinct from, is not separate from, the outer experience. This capacity for indwelling each other, while remaining distinct from each other, is a capacity of soul or mind or the realm of the psyche. In this integral realm of both the inner and the outer realms is where we discover our fulfillment.”

Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 39-40

Presence With Living Earth, Week 21 (May 26)

This week, Sharon Blackie invites us into an imagination of two ways of entering a small wood:

“Imagine that you are entering a small wood on a Sunday morning in late spring; you’ve come here to walk. You have an immediate sense of wellbeing. How peaceful, you think, as you look around you; how pretty. The trees are lovely and the birdsong is beautiful. There are ferns under the trees, and bluebells. You turn your attention to them briefly and tell yourself how attractive they are. You check your watch as you set off down the graveled track; you have half an hour for your walk before you have to head back home. You keep to the path; it rained last night and you don’t want to get your shoes muddy. You shove your hands into your pockets; you keep your eyes straight ahead, mostly, but every now and again you look around you and tell yourself how nice it is to be away from the crowds and the traffic fumes.

After you’ve been walking for a few minutes, you start to think about other things. You can’t help yourself; something in your head just takes over. You’ve been to mindfulness classes but it never seems to stick, and most of the time mindfulness seems a bit boring, to be honest. You hum the same notes of a tune over and over. You replay an argument you had with your husband yesterday...Suddenly someone else appears on the path ahead of you, walking towards you; you jump, and realize that you haven’t taken in anything around you for the past several minutes. This is ridiculous, you think to yourself; I’m supposed to be walking through a wood, and you try to turn off the voices in your head. You begin to feel a little anxious, because you can’t. Your mobile phone buzzes, and though you briefly sigh for the impossibility of ever being truly lost in the world, you’re really quite relieved to have the distraction of a text.

Suddenly, a large black bird (is it a crow, you wonder, vaguely? Maybe a raven...) flies across your path, right in front of your face. It settles on a low branch, looks you right in the eye and squawks. For a fleeting moment

something in your head cracks open a fraction and you glimpse it – a sense of wonder, a sense that the bird is in some way interacting with you – but then you shake your head and tell yourself not to be so silly: it's just a bird, for heaven's sake; you're making things up – and all at once the feeling is gone. The bird flies off. You hurry on along the path, and leave the wood feeling vaguely dissatisfied, looking at your watch and your heart sinking as you realize how little of the weekend is left, and then it'll be Monday and you'll have to face the commuting crowds and five more days doing a job you hate before the weekend comes around again, and you have the chance to relax and take a nice walk in the woods.

Take two. Imagine that you are entering a small wood on a Sunday morning in the late spring; you've come here to walk. If you brought a mobile phone with you, it is on mute: there's a time and a place for gadgets, and your attention is on what is actually here, right now in this moment, yourself and the wood. You close your eyes and listen. Rooks chattering high up in the canopy; the warning call of a smaller bird – three sharp notes in succession. A few trees away, another bird replies. News of your arrival is spreading through the wood.

The air is scented with bluebells, and you breathe in deeply. You are breathing in bluebells, you think, and you smile, because that means the bluebells are a part of you now – or are you a part of them? There are nettles under the trees and you have always loved nettles, ever since you heard the story of 'The Wild Swans' as a child, about the girl who had to pick nettles with her bare hands, and spin them into shirts to save her brothers who had been transformed into swans by a wicked stepmother. You bought a ball of nettle yarn which you found by accident in a wool shop you happened upon, a few weeks ago. You're not quite sure what you'll do with it, but you like to finger it, and remember that old story which even now pulls at your heart. It tells you that there's magic in the profoundly mundane. You can't see a nettle now, or a swan, without thinking of the girl in the story, locked into silence for all of the years it took her to complete her task. Love and endurance overcoming malice and injustice, and the wild magic of plants – and the one brother who had the unfinished shirt – the brother with one arm and one white wing, neither wholly man nor entirely bird.

But a nettle is a nettle as well as a set of associations: its growing tips make a fine and nutritious soup, and its fresh or dried leaves make a delicious tea. You don't need to pick them here; there are plenty back in the wild edges of your garden, and in the city park.

You step off the path and into the trees. You'd never get lost; in any place the first thing you do is orient yourself in the world, as if there's some internal

compass inside you, just as you imagine migrating birds must have. Your own personal True North. And besides, like Hansel and Gretel, you've laid down a trail of imaginary breadcrumbs. Left a bit at the baby birch, right by the rock that looks like a giant tortoise. You touch everything, gently, as you walk. You are aware that under your feet the trees and plants are communicating and interacting with each other through a vast underground web of fungi which connect them. You once read that resources are shared through this network – carbon, water and nutrients. This isn't just a wood; it's a living, communicating ecosystem, and you are not in it but part of it. There is bluebell inside you. The rocks scattered through the wood are the protruding bones of the earth; the stream over there a vein, carrying its blood.

The stone in that small clearing – a beautiful stone, multiple shades of grey and brown, covered in ivy and moss – looks as if it has a face: head tipped back, two closed eyes and an open mouth, as if it's telling a story. You decide to call it the Story Stone, and next time you pass through the woods you'll remember it, and acknowledge it. You might even sit down and tell it a story yourself, some time. When there's no one else around to think you're crazy. Everything around you is vivid; all of your senses are fully engaged, and you feel at home in this wood. It knows you. You speak to the trees and stones each time you visit; they know your voice, and you watch the trees push out new branches and the lichens creep slowly across the stones, little by little, each year.

It starts to drizzle, and you lift your face to the water that brings this place – and you – life. It feels soft and clean. Suddenly, a crow flies across your path, right in front of your face. She settles on a low branch, looks you right in the eye and squawks. You stop, look right back at the crow and listen. *Crow*, you say, and *Hello*, and a whole other world opens up inside you, layering the richness of its symbols and images on top of the physical world around you. Badb and the Morrigan: all those powerful crow-goddesses in the old myths. Crow represents hidden knowledge, messages from the Otherworld; often it's a Trickster. Clever birds. Crows and humans have always lived together; is it any surprise that there are so many stories about them? You don't know what the crow is saying to you, but you know she is saying something. You know that she is counting you in.

You stand respectfully, drinking in the blue-black beauty of glossy feathers until the crow flies away again and then you walk on. And when you leave the wood to go home sometime later, you carry bluebell in your lungs and crow in your ears.”

Sharon Blackie, *The Enchanted Life: Unlocking the Magic of the Everyday*, 4-7

Presence With Living Earth, Week 22 (June 2)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of the source of our Great Self:

“The deep inner tendencies to dance and sing, the need to feel the wind in the summer evenings, to see the animals as they roam over the land: these awaken to us our personal identity and guide us in our fulfillment. Through what is seen in these surroundings we come to the knowledge of the unseen world of beauty beyond imagination, of intimacy with the numinous presence enfolding the entire universe. In the outer world of the universe we discover our complete self, our Great Self. This experience is what attracts a child running over the fields, touching everything, screaming with delight when first chasing a butterfly or playing with a young animal. In all these activities the child is discovering its own being.”

Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 158-159

Presence With Living Earth, Week 23 (June 9)

Come with Mary Oliver, sing the song of the sun:

The Sun

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful

than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone—
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,

like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you ever felt for anything
such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure

that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed—
or have you too
turned from this world—

or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?

Mary Oliver

New and Selected Poems, Volume 1, 1992

Presence With Living Earth, Week 24 (June 17)

This week, I invite you to listen to a 15 minute podcast by Adam Loftin & Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee entitled “Sanctuaries of Silence,” which beautifully echoes the Center’s eco-contemplative practice of Deep Listening in Silence: <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/sanctuaries-of-silence-podcast/>

The podcast brings us deep into the sounds of the forest with acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton who speaks these words about Silence:

“Silence is the poetics of space – what it means to be in a place. The whole topography of the surrounding landscape is revealed to me and the many layers of the echo that come toward me and I think to myself, ‘I know exactly where I am.’

Silence is of the essence of something, but the presence of everything. When I speak of Silence, I mean Silence from noise pollution of modern life... Silence is the presence of time undisturbed. It can be felt within the chest. It nurtures our nature. And Silence is on the verge of extinction...

The land is speaking. When I listen, I have to be quiet. I become very peaceful. I think that what I enjoy most about listening is that I disappear.”

David Haskell also offers “Five Practices for Listening to the Language of Birds”: <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/five-practices-for-listening-to-the-language-of-birds/>

Presence With Living Earth, Week 25 (June 24)

This week, Thomas Berry invites us to deepen our capacity for subjective communion:

“One of the great achievements of humanity during the early period of awakened consciousness was its capacity for subjective communion with the totality of things and with each particular thing. Each fragment of matter had its own subjectivity, its own interiority, its own spirit presence. It was to this spirit presence that humans addressed themselves. So with the trees and flowers, birds and animals, so with the wind and the sea and the stars, so with the sun and the moon. In all things there was a self, a subjectivity, a center; humans communed with this center with a profound intimacy.

That contemplation whereby humans sink deep into the subjectivity of their own beings is a primary way of experiencing the totality of things and of so constituting a truly functional world order. This is the order of interior communion, not the order of external manipulation or compulsion. Each aspect of reality is discovered in a mutual in-dwelling which is the supreme art of life. Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else, nor can anything truly be the other without first acquiring a capacity for interior presence

to itself. These come together in some mysterious way. Thus the deepening of the personal center becomes the deepening of the capacity for communion. Since all things gravitate toward each other, a person has only to permit the inner movements of his own being to establish his universal presence to all the earth.

Thomas Berry, “Contemplation and World Order”, 10.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 26 (July 1)

This week, I invite you to awaken to dawn and dusk, guided by these words from James Finley:

“The sun came up this morning. Now there is a grace. Where would the day be without it? But did we pause, even for an instant to behold the rising sun’s truly real, truly precious nature? Perhaps we did, for sunrise sometimes has so much divinity in it that it is almost impossible not to catch at least a glimpse of the divinity it manifests. The sun will set tonight. Now there is a grace. Where would the night be without it? But will we pause, even for an instant, to behold the truly real, truly precious nature of day’s end? Perhaps we will, for a sunset is sometimes so fraught with divinity we cannot help but to be grazed at least slightly by it’s inherent holiness. But are we spending this day in the sustained grace of a wakeful, grateful groundedness in the sun’s arc across the sky? Will we spend this evening’s hours in a sustained, underlying sense of gratitude and reverence for the divinity of night? Probably not. Here is the riddle we need now to explore – the riddle of our ignorance in which, though awakened again and again, we forget again and again the divinity to which we are awakened.”

James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*, 27-28

Presence With Living Earth, Week 27 (July 8)

This week, James Finley gives us a picture of the focused and unfocused aspects of eco-contemplative beholding, the totality-manifested-in-each-thing, each thing-manifesting-the-totally nature of the contemplatively realized, real world:

“You are walking along the beach, being present to the totality of the experience of simply being at the primordial meeting place of land and sea, when a shell at your feet catches your eye. Stopping, you stoop down, pick it up, and holding it in the palm of your hand, all else falls away as you become, for one sustained

moment, utterly absorbed in the shell's delicate beauty. Then, you look up to see the countless shells stretched out before you, one with the whole scene of sky, shoreline, birds, the one wave that is in this precise instant washing up over your bare feet. Then, looking down, you see once again the shell in your hand, being the one shell that it alone uniquely is in this just-the-way-it-is, present-moment totality. So it is that the now focused, now unfocused aspects of awareness, work together, like a great bellows of the eyes, fanning the flames of enlightenment, deepening the contemplative awareness of the totality-in-each-thing, each-thing-in-the-totality nature of reality."

James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*, 75

Presence With Living Earth, Week 28 (July 15)

This week, James Finley invites us into the self-transformative nature of eco-contemplative experience in which we discover ourselves to be subsisting in boundlessness:

" Like diamonds on sunlit water, like children running down a hill, the uncircumscribable richness of what simply is delights in effortlessly crossing all boundaries with which we might attempt to hem it in....

Is it possible that I could learn to surrender to this boundlessness and, in surrendering to it, learn to live by this boundlessness, day by day in everything I do and say? And if I make this surrender, what will happen to my customary sense of myself that is perpetuated in my ongoing maintenance of my boundaries?"

James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart*, 135-136

Presence With Living Earth, Week 29 (July 22)

This week, Nan Shepherd invites us into another way of seeing:

"I put my fingers in the water and found it cold. I listened to the waterfall until I no longer heard it. I let me eyes travel from shore to shore very slowly and was amazed at the width of the water. How could I have foreseen so large a loch...And a second time I let my eyes travel over the surface, slowly, from shore to shore, beginning at my feet and ending against the precipice. There is no way like that for savouring the extent of a water surface.

This changing of focus in the eye, moving the eye itself when looking at things that do not move, deepens one's sense of outer reality. Then static things may be caught in the very act of becoming. By so simple a matter, too, as altering the position of one's head, a different kind of world may be made to appear. Lay the head down, or better still, face away from what you look at, and bend with straddled legs till you see your world upside down. How new it has become! From the close by sprigs of heather to the most distant fold of the land, each detail stands erect in its own validity. In no other way have I seen of my own unaided sight that the earth is round. As I watch, it arches its back, and each layer of landscape bristles – though *bristles* is a word of too much commotion for it. Details are no longer part of a grouping in a picture of which I am the focal point, the focal point is everywhere. Nothing has reference to me, the looker. This is how the earth must see itself.

So I looked slowly across the Coire Loch, and began to understand that haste can do nothing with these hills. I knew when I had looked for a long time that I had hardly begun to see.”

Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 10-11

Presence With Living Earth, Week 30 (July 29)

This week, Nan Shepherd reflects on walking with a hill companion:

“The presence of another person does not detract from, but enhances, the silence, if the other is the right sort of hill companion. The perfect hill companion is the one whose identity is for the time being merged in that of the mountains, as you feel your own to be. Then such speech as arises in part of a common life and cannot be alien. To ‘make conversation’, however, is ruinous, to speak may be superfluous... I have walked myself with brilliant young people whose talk, entertaining, witty and incessant, yet left me weary and dispirited, because the hill did not speak. This does not imply that the only good talk on a hill is about the hill. All sorts of themes may be lit up from within by contact with it, as they are by contact with another mind, and so discussion may be salted. Yet to listen is better than to speak.

The talking tribe, I find, want sensation from the mountain – not in Keat's sense. Beginners, not unnaturally, do the same – I did myself. They want the startling view, the horrid pinnacle – sips of beer and tea instead of milk. Yet often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one

visits a friend with no intention but to be with him.”

Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 14-15

Presence With Living Earth, Week 31 (August 5)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks to us of intimate presence:

“While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe. The various phenomena of nature are not spirit presences. We no longer read the book of the universe. We have extensive contact with the natural world through photographs and television presentations. But as Saint Augustine remarked long ago, a picture of food does not nourish us. Our world of human meaning is no longer coordinated with the meaning of our surroundings. We have disengaged from that profound interaction with our environment that is inherent in our nature. Our children no longer learn how to read the great Book of Nature from their own direct experience or how to interact creatively with the seasonal transformations of the planet.”

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 15

Presence With Living Earth, Week 32 (August 12)

This week, Robert Sardello invites us to move beyond a spectator role:

“In ordinary sensing, perceiving and thinking, everything around us exists “outside” and “over there.” We are spectators to ourselves and to the world. But in Silence everything displays its depth, and we find that we are part of everything around us...We discover that each thing of the world lives deeply within us. But more, we discover that each of us, in the region of the soul, lives deeply within the soul of the world and the crossing point is the centering heart.”

Robert Sardello, *Silence*

Presence With Living Earth, Week 33 (August 19)

This week's poem, "Words" by Wendell Berry, speaks to our practice of presence and journaling:

1.

What is one to make of a life given
to putting things into words,
saying them, writing them down?
Is there a world beyond words?
There is. But don't start, don't
go on about the tree unqualified,
standing in light that shines
to time's end beyond its summoning
name. Don't praise the speechless
starlight, the unspeakable dawn.
Just stop.

2.

Well, we *can* stop
for a while, if we try hard enough,
if we are lucky. We can sit still,
keep silent, let the phoebe, the sycamore,
the river, the stone call themselves
by whatever they call themselves, their own
sounds, their own silence, and thus
may know for a moment the nearness
of the world, its vastness,
its vast variousness, far and near,
which only silence knows. And then
we must call all things by name
out of the silence again to be with us,
or die of namelessness.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 34 (August 26)

This week, we listen as Black Elk speaks:

“The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”

Presence With Living Earth, Week 35 (September 2)

This week we ask, with Wendell Berry, what it means “to know”:

“The human necessity is not just to know, but also to cherish and protect the things that are known, and to know the things that can be known only by cherishing. If we are to protect the world’s multitude of places and creatures, then we must know them, not just conceptually but imaginatively as well. They must be pictured in the mind and in memory; they must be known with affection, ‘by heart,’ so that in seeing or remembering them the heart may be said to ‘sing,’ to make a music peculiar to its recognition of each particular place or creature that it knows well To know imaginatively is to know intimately, particularly, precisely, gratefully, reverently, and with affection.”

Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 137-38

Presence with Living Earth, Week 36 (September 9)

With Martin Buber, consider the meaning of *relation*:

I CONSIDER A TREE.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law – of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over and against me and has to do with me, as I with it – only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of relation: relation is mutual.

The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience. But do you wish, through seeming to succeed in it with yourself, once again to disintegrate that which cannot be disintegrated? I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 7-8.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 37 (September 16)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of the pathos of modern schooling:

“Schooling now fulfills a role in our society that is similar to the role of initiation ceremonies in earlier tribal societies. In those societies the essential mystery communicated to the youthful initiates was the story of the universe in its awesome and numinous aspects. The capacity for communing with and absorbing into their own beings these deeper powers of the natural world was bestowed on them. The pathos in our own situation is that our secular society does not see the numinous quality or the deeper psychic powers associated with its own story, while the religious society rejects the story because it is presented only in its physical aspect. The remedy for this is to establish a deeper understanding of the spiritual dynamics of the universe as revealed through our own empirical insight into the mysteries of its functioning.

That can now be done with a clarity never before available to us. Empirical inquiry into the universe reveals that from its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere. The human is seen as an addendum or an intrusion and thus finds no real place in the story of the universe. In reality the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe itself, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness.”

Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 131.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 38 (September 23)

This week, Sharon Blackie reflects on aliveness:

“If the world is alive, if nature has consciousness, then I am not just some singular, solitary being plonked on a lump of inert matter surrounded by inert space in an inert universe. Everything around me is alive – there is no such thing as ‘inert’. I am standing in the midst of an aliveness, and that aliveness deserves my attention, my respect, my care. It deserves my awe and my reverence. The stars are no longer cold, unknowable objects, scattered shining but ultimately lifeless across the vast empty distances of black space: they are active participants in their own journeys of becoming. The insects and birds and animals are singing themselves into being; this autumn land is dreaming and I am part of that

dreaming. That beautiful emerald-bodied dragonfly over there by the beehive is no longer a soulless creature, capable only of mechanically carrying out the simplest of genetically preprogrammed tasks. It has its own purpose and path. It is a participant in the unfolding of the world, just as I am; a unique expression of the prodigious, indiscriminately varied life of the cosmos, no more and no less than I am. I see a dragonfly; what does it 'see' when it sees me? There are patterns and webs and weavings – lines of becoming all around me that I cannot ever begin to imagine I understand. The world is *alive*, and in the infinite extravagance of its multi-faceted aliveness it is full of mystery again.”

Sharon Blackie, *The Enchanted Life*, 68-69

Presence With Living Earth, Week 39 (September 30)

This week, Thomas Berry speaks of what is lost as we initiate children into an economic order:

“We initiate our children into an economic order based on exploitation of the natural life systems of the planet. To achieve this attitude we must first make our children unfeeling in their relation with the natural world. . . . Yet if we observe our children closely in their early years we see how they are instinctively attracted to profound experiences of the natural world.”

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 15-16.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 40 (October 7)

This week, Martin Mueller invites us into the practice of cumulative attentiveness.

“Human communities become indigenous to their particular local Earth tongues through the practice of long and cumulative attentiveness. As a community becomes more sensitive and receptive to the land’s patterned speech, further voices rise from the land, and the conversation gradually grows more involved, more reciprocal. Thought itself grows richer with birdsong, with river voices, with mountain endurance, with metaphors gleaned from migrating fish, changing weather patterns, and seasonal flux. Laws, institutions, traditions are shaped that honor and defend the land’s complexity. Technologies are crafted that do not rip humans out of the finely woven loops of participation that compose the

biosphere. ‘Technologies of inhabitation’ could even aid humans in lending their creativity to weaving those loops further. Through such accumulating degrees of participation, humans gradually learn to incorporate themselves inside the depth of the metamorphic terrain. Just as the land successively becomes more articulate, and just as different places begin to speak more lucidly with different voices, the presence of humans becomes more meaningful, eloquent, and integrated.”

Martin Mueller, *Being Salmon, Being Human*, 207

Presence With Living Earth, Week 41 (October 14)

This week, Martin Mueller invites us to turn to the interiority of the lifeworld:

“As we rediscover the biosphere in its myriad qualitative aspects, we liberate ourselves from the futile attempt to capture the tragedy of ecocide in quantities alone – in cold statistics, cold graphs, cold language. To try to know this Earth more truthfully becomes tantamount to letting ourselves be drawn more deeply inside. It becomes tantamount to *turning inward*: To really sense, feel, and intuit into this planet’s entanglements on the scale of our directly felt lifeworld. To touch the whirling interiority of this world with our sensitive skin, to smell it through our discerning noses, to see it through our acutely alert eyes. To ‘live in its presence and drink the vital heat of existence in the very heart of reality,’ as Catholic philosopher and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin puts it. Turning inward: reaffirming this most concrete and experiential scale to reclaim something more than rationality. Turning inward: practicing an alertness to the real that can overcome at last the century-old exile of the embodied mind.”

Martin Mueller, *Being Salmon, Being Human*, 256-257

Presence With Living Earth, Week 42 (October 21)

This week, Douglas Christie invites us into a practice of “continuous awareness”.

“This intuition of the world as alive and vibrant and mysterious is something woven into the imaginative life of every child. Yet it is easily lost and once lost can only be reacquired through a renewal of the imagination and spirit...it is so easy to fall back into habits of inattention and torpor, to lose one’s hold on the fragile thread of awareness that allows the world to be taken in and experienced

as sacred. Writers working to see and express the natural world are not unaware of this challenge. Joseph Wood Krutch, that eloquent chronicler of the deserts of the American Southwest, once noted: “It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things that is alone truly living...the faculty of wonder tires easily...Really to see something once or twice a week is almost inevitably to have to try to make oneself a poet.” This plaintive remark reflects what is surely one of the most fundamental concerns among contemporary writers regarding the practical question of what it is to see and know the world, namely the ephemeral character of awareness itself. To cultivate and sustain the kind of “continuous awareness” that Krutch describes as “alone truly living” is immensely difficult. It requires disciplined practice. It means somehow learning to turn one’s entire being toward the world with genuine regard, working to keep alive in ourselves that fundamental sense of openness and attention to the world we call wonder.

Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, 10.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 43 (October 28)

This week, Douglas Christie invites us to move beyond indifference:

“The deepening capacity to gaze and savor alters the experience of what it is to move through the world, reordering the usual position of subject and object so that all is encountered as alive, all is taken in as part of a single conversation...

For the contemplative who is awake to the world in this way, aware that ‘something is always happening,’ it is not possible to live indifferently or carelessly. The world can never disappear from view, never become merely a backdrop to the unfolding human drama.”

Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, 56.

Presence with Living Earth, Week 44 (November 4)

This week, Douglas Christie speaks of the gift of tears:

“What would it mean to include mourning as part of a contemplative spiritual practice oriented toward deepening our sense of reciprocity and feeling for the

natural world?...This is particularly important when grappling with the question of how to overcome a deeply ingrained habit of seeing the natural world as an object, a thing somehow detached from our own lives. Contemplative awareness, in the sense that I am using the term here, entails a more involved, intersubjective way of knowing, in which the boundaries between the self and the other are experienced as porous and fluid. Tears, born of grief, often signal the first spark of such awareness. To weep is to make oneself vulnerable to the other, to relinquish the illusion of detachment and control. Learning to apprehend the world in this way can open up a completely different and more encompassing ecological awareness.”

Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, 71.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 45 (November 11)

This week, Douglas Christie invites us to find the golden thread of childhood:

“The simple awareness of the goodness and beauty of the living world seems to lodge itself in the mind most deeply in childhood – in that time of innocence and purity before a mature consciousness of the self emerges, a consciousness that inevitably brings with it an awareness of one’s own divided self and of the profound ambiguity and brokenness of existence. I do not think it is a coincidence that reflections on paradise so often arise from memories of this cherished, mysterious place. Here, in memory at least, one lives in the wild world fully and unambiguously, with feelings of tenderness and regard for other living beings whose rightness and truth are unquestioned. That this feeling somehow becomes more elusive as time proceeds is one of the great sources of sadness we carry into our adult lives. What meaning we attach to such memory and to the residual feeling of being alive in the world that continues to pulse within us is a question that I think deserves our most careful attention. For here one senses a kind of golden thread that can perhaps open one to the world again – not in that same childlike simplicity, but in the form of a second childhood, no less valuable and maybe even more so. “

Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, 337.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 46 (November 18)

This week, Arthur Zajonc invites us to enter into a practice of reverence:

“The native peoples of all continents live within a tradition that fosters an awareness of the sacred being of nature and therefore a reverence for her. Our environmental groups largely lack the consciousness of the Earth as Mother; we have much to learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters in this regard. In deepening our relationship to nature by moving from wonder and awe to reverence, we meet nature not as a physical mechanism but as a moral and spiritual agent. While science will protest that we are merely projecting our moral inclinations onto nature, we can inwardly sense the emptiness of that assertion. Every civilization except ours has understood that we are not the only moral agents in the universe. Our survival depends on setting aside such self-centeredness and acknowledging the agential or “being” character of the world around us. It is then possible to feel true reverence toward nature, our fellow human beings, and towards those beings or Being who have always been active within her.

In our meditative practice we can cultivate the above change in consciousness. For example, consider a mountain pond surrounded by stone and trees. Birds wing across the pond, and an occasional fish breaks its surface. The blue sky and white clouds are reflected in its depths. Sitting with such an image, we can recognize at least four stages on the path of reverence.

We first meet the pond with *wonder*. Before the sublime we are astonished by what we experience, we are awed and quietly amazed, joy spreads through us, and we are simultaneously energized and settled inwardly.

Wonder can change to *reverence* when we ponder the force or agency that lies behind the phenomenon beheld. As in a work of art, we recognize the wisdom and beauty that are reflected in the form, colors, sounds, and movements of the mountain pond. How did these come into existence? What wise and generous agency created them? No longer and “It,” that which is before us becomes a “Thou,” in Martin Buber’s language.

In the third stage we find ourselves drawn more and more and more deeply into the scene of the pond and mountain. We resound with the interior tones and currents of that which is before us. Its own harmonious nature sounds also in us. We *participate* in the pond, sensing its watery nature; we live partly in the hard stone that rises up on all sides, we open into the infinite reaches of the sky. Our

own sense of autonomy and identity blurs and we identify increasingly with the other.

The final stage is *self-surrender*. The universal, protean aspect of our own nature is capable of becoming all things, and in the final fourth stage we do exactly this. Subject-object consciousness disappears and a non-dual form of awareness takes its place. We know from within because we are the object itself.

Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, 56-57.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 47 (November 25))

In these words from Thomas Merton, we recognize our own call to a practice of presence:

“There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plans at all. There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have a meaning? There must be a time when the man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed; when the man of resolutions puts his resolutions aside as if they had all been broken, and he learns a different wisdom: distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill.”

Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*, 460.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 48 (December 2)

Thomas Berry speaks to us this week of intimacy of relationship and soul-loss:

“These qualities that we identify with the human are also qualities that we observe throughout the natural world. Even at the level of the elements we observe self-organizing capacities, also the capacity for intimate relationships. These reveal astounding psychic abilities. These are so impressive that we must consider that modes of consciousness exist throughout the universe in a vast number of qualitatively diverse manifestations. Above all we discover that every being has its own spontaneities that arise from the depths of its own being. These spontaneities express the inner value of each being in such a manner that we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of

objects.

Precisely in this intimate relationship with the entire universe we overcome the mental fixation of our times expressed in the radical division we make between the human and the other-than-human. This fixation that I have described as the unfeeling relation of the human to the natural world is healed at its deepest roots as soon as we perceive that the entire universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily objects to be exploited. This communion experience is, I believe, universal. It can be observed in the immediate reaction of almost anyone who simply looks at the ocean at dawn or sunset or at the heavens at night with all the stars ablaze, or who enters a wilderness area with its foreboding as well as its entrancing aspects.

In every phase of our imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional lives we are profoundly dependent on this larger context of the surrounding world. There is no inner life without outer experience. The tragedy in the elimination of the primordial forests is not the economic but the soul-loss that is involved. For we are depriving our imagination, our emotions, and even our intellect of that overwhelming experience communicated by the wilderness. For children to live only in contact with concrete and steel and wires and wheels and machines and computers and plastics, to seldom experience any primordial reality or even to see the stars at night, is a soul deprivation that diminishes the deepest of their human experiences.”

Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 82.

Presence With Living Earth, 49 (December 9)

This week, Parker Palmer invites us to truly *see*:

I've been thinking about how easy it is to *look* but not *see*, missing a lot in the process. For example, we “look” at another person and find only the reflection of our own biases, needs, and fears — rather than truly “seeing” the being we're with.

It's also easy to look at the world around us and find only banality, corruption, and violence — rather than also seeing the good that's there, the “hidden wholeness” (as Thomas Merton called it) that lies beneath the broken surface.

Here's a poem I wrote after a walk in the winter woods, where the reflections in a very quiet, partially frozen stream allowed me to see much more than I could

when I was merely looking around.

For me, this poem is a reminder to still my mind and to practice “soft eyes” so I can see the beauty — and the potential for beauty — that’s in human nature as well as the natural world.

Today I’m heading out for another walk in the winter woods. Given the world we live in right now, it’s time for a refresher course in seeing, truly seeing!

“The Winter Woods”

by Parker Palmer

The winter woods beside a solemn
river are twice seen—
once as they pierce the brittle air,
once as they dance in grace beneath the stream.

In air these trees stand rough and raw,
branch angular in stark design—
in water shimmer constantly,
disconnect as in a dream,
shadowy but more alive
than what stands stiff and cold before our eyes.

Our eyes at peace are solemn streams
and twice the world itself is seen—
once as it is outside our heads,
hard frozen now and winter-dead,
once as it undulates and shines
beneath the silent waters of our minds.

When rivers churn or cloud with ice
the world is not seen twice—
yet still is there beneath
the blinded surface of the stream,
livelier and lovelier than we can comprehend
and waiting, always waiting, to be seen.

Parker Palmer, “Seeing Beneath the Broken Surface”

<https://onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-seeing-beneath-the-broken-surface/>

Presence With Living Earth, Week 50 (December 16)

This week, we journey with Pablo Neruda into stillness:

Keeping Quiet

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still
for once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for a second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.

Life is what it is about...

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves

and of threatening ourselves with
death.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

Presence With Living Earth, Week 51 (December 23)

Wishing you Pax Gaia today:

The experiences that we have spoken of as we look up at the starry sky at night, and as, in the morning, we see the landscape revealed as the sun dawns over the Earth – these experiences reveal a physical world but also a more profound world that cannot be bought with money, cannot be manufactured with technology, cannot be listed on the stock market, cannot be made in the chemical laboratory, cannot be reproduced with all our genetic engineering – cannot be sent by e-mail. These experiences require only that we follow the deepest feelings of the human soul.

What we look for is no longer the Pax Romana, the peace among humans, but the Pax Gaia, the peace of Earth and every being on the Earth. This is the original and final peace, the peace granted by whatever power it is that brings our world into being. Within the universe, the planet Earth with all its wonders is the place for the meeting of the divine and the human.

Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 138-139

Presence With Living Earth, Week 52 (December 30)

This week, Patricia Fagnoli invites us into the slowed-down season:

Winter Grace

If you have seen the snow
under the lamppost
piled up like a white beaver hat on the picnic table
or somewhere slowly falling
into the brook
to be swallowed by water,
then you have seen beauty

and know it for its transience.
And if you have gone out in the snow
for only the pleasure
of walking barely protected
from the galaxies,
the flakes settling on your parka
like the dust from just-born stars,
the cold waking you
as if from long sleeping,
then you can understand
how, more often than not,
truth is found in silence,
how the natural world comes to you
if you go out to meet it,
its icy ditches filled with dead weeds,
its vacant birdhouses, and dens
full of the sleeping.
But this is the slowed-down season
held fast by darkness
and if no one comes to keep you company
then keep watch over your own solitude.
In that stillness, you will learn
with your whole body
the significance of cold
and the night,
which is otherwise always eluding you.

Patricia Fagnoli, *Winter*