



Walking on Sacred Soil: In Memory of Thomas Berry

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Intimacy with the planet in its wonder and beauty and the full depth of its meaning is what enables an integral human relationship with the planet to function. (Berry, *The Great Work*, xi)

The late, great eco-theologian Thomas Berry, along with other Earth scholars—native teachers, deep ecologists, eco-psychologists, and eco-spiritual beings—has brought us into deep awareness that we are part of a greater whole, a universe that is ever-expanding and forever creative. These voices for Earth have made us deeply sensitive to the sacredness of our earth community and our urgent need to reestablish a respectful relationship with all beings so that we can move into a just and sustainable way of being on the planet.

Berry reinforced the conviction that indigenous cultures and mystics have held for eons: what happens to nonhumans happens to humans. What happens to our outer world happens to our inner world. What happens to Earth affects all of us. By our very nature, we are connected and in spiritual relationship with all that is. Our bodies are part of the Earth body. There is no separation.

The English language limits our ability to conceptualize fully this belief, and it affects our full understanding of it. Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan woman brought up in traditional ways, explains,

In the Okanagan language, the word for bodies actually contains the word for land and, as such, there is a deep understanding that what we do to Earth, we literally do to ourselves.... Every time I say that word and I refer to myself, I realize that I am from the land and that my body is the land. (67)

Alas, mainstream Western society mistakenly views nature as separate from our inner nature, and experiences of feeling connected with the natural world have become profound rather than an ordinary way of walking in the world. As spiritual directors, retreat leaders,

workshop facilitators, and educators, we often have the unique opportunity to bring people out onto the land in a sacred manner, suggest spiritual practices that connect them more fully to Spirit through nature, and help them experience nature in a sacred way. We are the ones who are called to this work.

This article offers a series of intentional walks that provide a direct experience of the sacred in all of life. The article weaves the wisdom of Thomas Berry and others with practical ideas for walking the land in an intentional and mindful way. It offers ideas for guiding participants (individually or in groups) to connect more fully with nature and more fully with themselves and Spirit.

The Sacred

In a 1993 keynote presentation, Thomas Berry said, “We will recover our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves and our role in the universe.” He quoted Saint Thomas Aquinas, who believed that “the entire universe participates and manifests the Divine more than any single being. We become sacred by our participation in the sacred dimensions of the universe itself.” (Berry, “The Wild,” 1). He continued:

The landscape that encloses us, the river that flows to the west of us, the birds that sing in the cloister outside this building, the trees that blossom there; all these were brought into being during ... this past 65 million years. If this has been a period of wildness beyond compare, it has also been the supreme lyric period of this Earth. The human, perhaps, could only have appeared in such a period of grandeur. For the inner life of the human depends immediately on the outer world. Only if the human imagination is activated by the flight of the great soaring birds in the heavens, by the blossoming flowers of Earth, by the awesome sight of the sea, by the lightning and thunder of the great storms that break through the heat of sound; only then will the deep inner experiences be evoked within the human soul. (6)

Indeed, Berry found his own spiritual direction and inspiration for his life’s work as a young child within



nature. He walked into an ordinary meadow as an innocent and returned from that meadow having had a profound experience of the “powers of life itself” and having received an image that would propel his life’s work as an eco-theologian. In that moment, he was inspired (or “in-spirit”), and for the rest of his life he reciprocated by giving back to Earth.

The field was covered with white lilies rising about the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky.... As the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life. (*The Great Work*, 12–13)

The Call of the Wild

Like Berry, many of us find our inspiration within the natural world. Being quiet and still on the land provides great nourishment for our souls and allows us to more easily hear Spirit’s whisper. We are able to perceive ourselves more fully and make sense of the world around us when we see ourselves as part of the circle of life. Identifying with nature’s cycles can ease our suffering and bring perspective to a chaotic world.

It is not surprising that retreat centers, whether they are Earth-inspired or not, are located in beautiful locations where nature abounds, in order to enhance the deep inner work about which Berry speaks. As John Davis suggests, “Psyche and nature are essentially expressions of the same whole and flow as expressions of the same ground of being.... As such, how we care for our planet and how we care for ourselves are identical.... Our deepest environmental sentiments are essentially spiritual.”

Berry believes that “our hope for the future is for a new dawn, an Ecozoic Era, when humans will be present to the Earth in a mutually-enhancing manner” and that we need “to greet this new era as Danté greeted Beatrice after his long journey through the Inferno and the Purgatorio, with bowed head and a soul soon to experience its entire

being caught up in the love that moves the sun and all the other stars” (“The Wild,” 7).

At this critical time in history, we are called toward caring radically for our planet and toward reframing the way we experience it. With the possibility of a new “Ecozoic Era,” we must quickly move into ways of being that embody reverence for all living things and celebrate our interconnectedness with all of life. We are called to cultivate spiritual attitudes such as mindfulness, awe, gratitude, attention, openness, reciprocity, and deep listening in response to nature. This time invites us to pay attention to how our living landscape, which includes both our inner and outer worlds, unfolds in the moment. We are invited to feel our interconnectedness and to cultivate spiritual practices and attitudes that support our awareness of who we are in relation to all of life. We are invited to awaken our senses, expand our awareness, and walk with reverence on our planet.

Walking on Sacred Soil

I have guided intentional walks for more than a decade. It always amazes me how the simple act of walking in nature with intention and reverence can move participants in profound ways and change their relationship to nature, to themselves, and to Spirit. In my years of sharing and participating in these walks, as participants have wandered on the Earth, I have seen Spirit come through in quiet, contemplative ways. I have seen extraordinary events show up in very ordinary ways and ordinary life express itself as very extraordinary.

The seven intentional walks presented in this article have the potential to reframe the walker’s relationship within nature. The walks can serve to guide us as we slowly get to know the world around us in an *intentional* way, in which we pay *attention* to those *qualities of being* and *attitudes* that support our mutually enhancing relationship with the natural world. The walks provide a predictable structure that helps walkers to cultivate spiritual attitudes while relating to the world around them. These walks can be portals to a more conscious knowing of who we are within nature.

The purpose of these intentional walks is to deepen our relationship with the natural world and the interconnectedness of all life. In order to receive the most benefit from these walks, it is important that we *slow down* our regular



pace and come from a place of calmness while walking. In these walks, we are building relationship with Earth. As in any relationship, developing intimacy requires that we take the time to truly *be* with our Earth relations and that we carve out time for our walks. As we walk, we take in with all of our senses the living landscape around us.

The walks can be experienced as a spiritual practice alone or as part of a group. They may be used individually or embedded into longer retreat experiences. They have been used in courses as ways to experience eco-spirituality.

Regardless of how these walks are offered, framing each experience as a contemplative ritual is essential. The walks are experienced in *silence* and in a contemplative manner. When thoughts arise, they are allowed to float by. Walkers are asked to merely *be* with the natural world in a way that is honoring and respectful.

Walking with Sacredness

In order to frame a walk as a sacred and contained experience and to help retreat participants or students integrate the walks, I suggest the following structure:

As the walker arrives at the threshold of where the experience is to begin, it is important to ground or center oneself, and then set the intention for the walk. Begin with a prayer or an offering and end the walk in a mindful way, such as with a bow, a statement of gratitude, a poem, or by standing in silence. In this way, the walker marks the beginning and ending of the experience and distinguishes this as a sacred experience rather than a simple walk. If you are working with participants in a retreat-like setting, ask them to integrate the walk in some way. For example, they might use their journals to reflect on their experiences or use creative expression to capture the essence of their experiences, or you may wish to sit with the experience and do nothing for a short time.

The Walks

Descriptions of each walk in this section will be followed by comments and suggestions for walking in groups.

Walk 1: Bowing to Spirit

This walk is inspired by the walking meditation of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn and is really very simple. You only do four things:

1. Breathe naturally.
2. Walk slowly and focus on breathing.
3. Take in the natural world around with appreciation.
4. Periodically stop and open awareness to surroundings.

Find a place to walk where you feel comfortable and where you will not be interrupted. As you begin your walk, start with the *intention* of being in relationship with, or part of, the natural world and of showing respect toward other beings. Begin with a prayer or gesture that marks the beginning of your walk. Walk mindfully and slowly enough so that you can feel the ground beneath your feet. Notice your breath as you walk, and take in the natural world around you. Without thinking, expand your awareness to the living landscape. If thoughts come, just let them pass through.

Every few minutes, or whenever you are inspired, stop and look around. Notice what is in that place, in that moment. Look up, down, all around, and just take it all in. Notice the sounds of the living landscape and the scents, tastes, and textures. Feel free to touch or to get close to the ground. Just take it in for a moment. Then continue to walk.

Walk, breathe, and just take note, taking in the beauty of the natural world through all of your senses. Walk for thirty minutes, and do so with expanded awareness and appreciation for the beings with which you share the land.

End the walk with a prayer or an expression of gratitude.

Guiding Walk 1: When I take students or retreat participants on this walk, I carry a bell with me. I begin the walk with a prayer or poem, ask participants to expand each of their senses, and then we walk together in silence and with a soft focus. Before we walk, I remind them to be aware that we are a human community walking in relationship to one another and the natural world. I also remind them to be aware of their own being within the circle of their living landscape. Periodically I ring the bell, and the walkers stop where they are and expand their awareness.

The stillness that this walk evokes is profound. Once, while leading a group of more than a hundred people, we arrived quietly at the edge of a pond to see two ducks sitting there. We literally had to wait until the ducks moved into the pond before we could proceed down the



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path. We were struck by our ability to blend with our surroundings.

Walk 2: Sensing Spirit

This walk comes out of the Franciscan tradition; it is an adaptation of two of the spiritual exercises known as the Soul's Journey into God, first described by Saint Bonaventure, a contemporary of Meister Eckert, who believed that there is no distinction between inner and outer reflections of God (see Judy, 71). This walk requires that the aspirant contemplate Spirit's "footprint" in the universe through the five senses.

The *intention* for this walk is to open our awareness and through our senses more fully contemplate God through nature. It requires that we pay attention to the ordinary with a sense of curiosity and awe.

Judy fully describes this walk in his book *Christian Meditation and Inner Healing*. Here is a synopsis: As you begin, ground yourself and set the intention for the walk. Walk for twenty to thirty minutes. Pay attention to each of your senses as you walk. Notice any sounds, sights, smells, textures, or tastes. Pay attention to how the wind, the sun, the trees, and Earth feel on your skin. Notice the temperature. Consider how Spirit is reflected fully through each of your senses. Consider how nature speaks to you about your spiritual journey.

Fully take in the universe through your senses, and ask yourself what it tells you about God. Ponder this question as you pause before a tree, a rock, or a flower. Take your time. Consider what you are beginning to under-

stand about your own nature and the nature of journey through the natural world. Shift your awareness from the sensory world to your inner journey and then back and forth from one to the other. "Really *see*. Really *touch*. Really *smell*. Really *hear*. Revel in your senses. Treasure them. Look for the footprints of God in your senses.... Ponder the question for yourself, what does it say about God that we are given these senses for perceiving the creation. Enjoy" (Judy, 73).

At the end of the walk, eat an apple or drink a cup of tea with the same consciousness that you had on the walk. Savor the taste.

End with gratitude and appreciation for Creator's bounty.

Guiding Walk 2: One of the things that I appreciate about this walk is how our invitation to walk with openness moves right into a sensuous experience of food. I suggest that this walk be completed prior to a meal. Participants can eat the first five minutes of their meal in silence with the intention of being fully open to the sense of taste.

Walk 3: Photographing with Reverence

Many years ago, I went on a private one-day retreat. I happened to have my camera with me. During one particular walk, I decided to take photos in a very contemplative way and discovered that photographing nature, when done in a sacred manner, brought me closer to the natural world. It was a divine way to be in relationship, both literally and figuratively, to Earth's inhabitants. It



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captured the essence of wonder, opened my imagination, and brought me closer to Spirit.

The *intention* for this walk is to connect with the natural world with reverence, appreciation, and deep respect and to notice how Spirit shines through all beings.

Find a place to walk that is safe and beautiful. As you begin this walk, ground yourself and set the intention for the walk.

Walk quietly within the landscape with your camera. Refrain from taking photos for a few minutes; just walk quietly, noticing all that surrounds you. When one of nature's creatures or a particular landscape captures your attention, take the photo slowly and with consciousness. Follow your instincts: you might be guided to places through your intuition. As you take the picture, intentionally consider how you might do this with respect, reverence, and appreciation for the being whose photo you are taking. Experience the Spirit that flows through the landscape and the beauty, ordinariness, extraordinariness, and essence of the being whose photo you are taking. Look closely and notice detail. Appreciate the uniqueness of each being within the natural world. Notice your emotions as you reverently connect with nature, and explore how this connection informs your connection to God.

When you come to the end of your walk, offer a prayer of gratitude for what you have taken in on this day. Write about this experience in a reflective way.

Guiding Walk 3: This is a lovely walk to facilitate during a silent retreat. Find a place with a lot of color, variety, and texture, and encourage participants to go slowly, to

use soft focus, and to really see deeply and from all angles as they photograph. Encourage them to notice the being whose spirit they are capturing.

Walk 4: Childlike Wonder

Children have a natural relationship with nature. They approach the natural world with a sense of play, curiosity, and joy and can teach us much about the spiritual quality of wonder. As Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat say, "Wonder begins in the senses, comes alive in the imagination, and flourishes in adoration of the Divine. It arises from our natural curiosity about the grand adventure of life."

This walk, adapted from walks by James Endredy and Mark Coleman, evokes our sense of wonder by allowing ourselves to fully embody our childlike ways of being. The *intention* for this walk is to develop intimacy within the natural world by engaging with our habitat in a spirit of innocence, play, and natural curiosity. During the walk, we will approach beings in the natural world with the same respect and curiosity that we would feel if these were people we would like to know. When we meet new people, we naturally approach them with curiosity, wishing to find out who they are and how they experience the world. In the same manner, through this walk, we greet Willow, Salamander, or Rock with the same sense of curiosity, as though meeting this being for the very first time.

Find a place to walk that is safe and beautiful. As you begin this walk, ground yourself and set the intention for the walk.



Spend the first fifteen minutes of the walk with the intention of walking with the curiosity of a young child, meeting others with a sense of curiosity and a beginner's mind. Imagine that you have entered a new landscape for the very first time, as does the heroine in *The Secret Garden* when she first encounters the hidden garden.

Walk slowly and notice everything. Enjoy what arrives on the scene without judgment or interpretation. Really engage with other creatures. Notice how you respond when another being—Spider, Bird, Cat, or Gecko—crosses your path. Enjoy the presence of others that you might initially fear, perhaps Spider or Snake. Just notice, knowing that each is another being who is sharing a habitat with you. Notice where these creatures live, whom they are with, and how they respond. Get to know them as inhabitants in our ecosystem.

Once you have spent sufficient time walking with this intention, shift to walking naturally in the living landscape, with the intention of being in relationship, not guiding or leading but merely seeing who you are in the natural world. See who arrives on the scene. Notice who flies over and how you feel as you wander into different ecosystems. Notice patterns in nature. Observe from perspectives that you may not have previously considered.

Guiding Walk 4: This is best done where there is much to explore. Flower or vegetable gardens make lovely habitats to wander through. Allow walkers to freely wander over the landscape and then return to their origination point. They are likely to be smiling fully when they return.

Walk 5: All My Relations

What do you notice as you walk softly on the land? Most of us notice great beauty or interesting beings in nature. We hear isolated voices and often try to identify them. But how often do we notice two or three creatures at the same time or how they relate to one another? The purpose of this walk is to consciously pay attention to the relationships that exist in our natural world. We wish to begin to notice how the wind moves the trees and how the light descends onto the land at a particular time of day.

As we expand our awareness to other beings—for example, how the birds communicate to one another across the air—we also begin to notice how our presence communicates with other creatures.

The *intention* for this walk is to notice relationships in

the natural world. Begin by allowing your attention to be drawn to an item of interest, beauty, curiosity, or whatever attracts you. Gaze at it for a while. Now, expand your vision to notice the relationship of this being to other parts of its habitat. Perhaps you are observing a plant and notice that it is facing the sun, and perhaps a hummingbird is perched on an iris stem that is standing close to the bee balm. Perhaps you hear the wings of a large bird of prey and notice its shadow flying over the land.

Continue to expand your awareness to include yourself in this habitat. Is there anything watching you as you are noticing other beings? If there is, merely greet it with curiosity.

Spend the next thirty to forty-five minutes with the intention of walking with this expanded sense of awareness and noticing relationships in nature. Let go of “thinking about this intention” and merely notice it.

End this walk with a gesture of gratitude.

Guiding Walk 5: This walk also works simply as a “sitting in nature” experience. It is quite powerful and allows participants to notice themselves within the greater habitat.

Walk 6: Nature Quest (Four to Eight Hours)

Spending a long period of time in silence within the natural world can help us to recognize the ways that our inner and outer landscapes work together within the greater universe. For mystics everywhere, the two landscapes are connected; there is no separation.

This sixth intentional walk provides the context for listening to self and nature and for recognizing how self and nature are part of the same whole. It requires four to eight hours of silent and solitary wandering.

Find a place in nature where you feel safe and supported, where you can wander for a large part of a day. A retreat center might be ideal.

Begin this walk by grounding yourself and setting an *intention* for exploring your connection with Gaia (the Greek version of “Mother Nature”) and also for recognizing how your inner and outer landscapes mirror one another. Set a personal intention about your life at this time, and say a prayer asking Spirit to reveal what you need to know through nature.

Walk without a particular goal in mind; instead follow your own intuition about where you might like to wander. Listen to your felt sense. During this day, release any



"Wake Up! Save the Earth! Wake Up, Love the Earth and All of Her Magical Creatures!" — Liora G. Davis



attachment to outcome and just be—be one with nature and the world around you. When you are so moved, sit in silence or exploration. *Let the place find you.* Use your intuition or felt sense to find places to linger that *feel* right for you. Open to your intuition as you discover what Spirit reveals to you through nature.

As you walk, be aware of the natural movement of the world around you and also of what is moving inside you. Notice any synchronicities that emerge, any animals that come your way, and how both you and the animal respond to one another. Notice what moves you and what you are drawn to. Follow your instincts. Also, notice what you do, think, or feel as synchronicities emerge.

Follow your instincts. Wander on the land, see what calls you; spend time noticing your surroundings *and, at the same time*, focusing inward. Consider how what calls you reflects your personal journey.

After the walk, take at least thirty minutes to consider what you have learned on this extended walk and how Spirit has responded to your prayer.

End this reflection with a gesture of gratitude.

Guiding Walk 6: This walk is ideal for silent retreats. As the facilitator, you may wish to create a safe environment by checking in with each walker before and after the walk. You might guide walkers to pose a question about themselves at the beginning of the walk and notice what emerges on the walk that relates to the question. Encourage walkers to suspend judgment, and encourage reflection after the experience. Allow for an extended period for integration. If this walk is part of a longer retreat, consider timing it so that the experience can unfold over days or weeks.

Walk 7: Gratitude

Many years ago, I was privileged to hear poet and author Maya Angelou at a Common Boundary conference. Many of us knew about the difficulties of her early life, so it came as no surprise when an audience member asked her how she got from where she was in those early, painful years to where she is now, a renowned spiritual voice. I will never forget her words. She said that for every step of her journey, she found something for which she was grateful. The spiritual practice of gratitude changed her life.

Expressing gratitude is a way to praise Creator. It is the blessing way and it fuels our relationships with other Earth

beings. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat believe that we should express appreciation to everything and everyone that we encounter, because by blessing others, we are blessed.

Many of us never consider thanking the other-than-human world, not knowing how to begin to relate to it. For example, in Tim Radford's video *Anasazi: Hisatsinom, the Ancient Ones*, a Puebloan Creation story is told. It speaks of people spending time in the underworld during a cycle of Earth destruction. The story explains, "Those with one heart with the creator were saved, protected in the underground world by the Ant People. They taught us to be industrious and showed us the proper way of life: respect, harmony, and love." The narrator of this video expresses his gratitude toward the Ant People and a sense of respect for what they had given to humanity.

When I sat next to a Puebloan man at a ceremonial dance in New Mexico, USA, I witnessed a touching example of how this attitude of appreciation and respect toward nonhuman beings can express itself. The man was eating fry bread, and when he looked down, he noticed the Ant People. He immediately began sharing his fry bread with them.

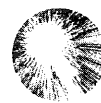
What would it mean to our lives if we saw the Ant People as valued participants in this beautiful world, a world where all beings—Humans, Spiders, Ants, Bats, Horses, Dogs, Fish, Oak, Pine, and all of God's creatures—were treated with respect and honor?

The *intention* for this walk is to express gratitude for creation, for the teaching of Earth, for all its inhabitants, and for the Creator.

Find a place to walk that is comfortable for you. As you begin this walk, ground yourself and set the intention for the walk.

For the first fifteen minutes, notice all that is around you, and find a way to express the gratitude you feel, for example, "Thank you, Lake, for helping me to deepen into a sense of calm. Thank you, Tree, for your example of rootedness, and thank you, Ant, for your example of working collaboratively in community. Thank you, Sun, for the warmth that you have given me on this cold day," and so on.

Continue the walk, keeping in mind that our fellow Earth creatures are not people but nevertheless possess qualities that we might appreciate and learn from. For example, what do Rock, Tree, Insect, and other beings contribute to your understanding of life? Capture the feelings you have as you practice gratitude for these things, and



keep the feelings alive for the remainder of the walk.

Guiding Walk 7: This walk can take place in a number of locations, such as along a path, within a medicine wheel, on the cosmic walk, on a Twelve-Step path, or as a daily prayer practice of sitting in one place for long periods of time. It can be a most humbling experience, one that has contributed to my personal sense of interconnectedness to all of life and to God.

From time to time, participants may feel uncomfortable thanking an animal or a tree. Instead, they may be more comfortable thanking Creator for the lessons they have learned through the natural world. Either expression can be powerful and valid.

Being As Blessing

The next time you are out in a natural setting, whether in your backyard or a national forest, simply allow yourself to be part of the living landscape. Instead of asking what nature or the wilderness can do for us, or even what we can do to help the natural world, merely ask, Who am I in this family of living beings? How am I part of the natural world? How is the natural world part of me?

Set your intention to just *be* within the natural world, reframing the way you consider nature and becoming more intimate with the living landscape. Begin to have a more direct relationship with our fellow Earth creatures—Tree, Moth, Rose, Snake, and Mountain—not to anthropomorphize them but rather to appreciate them for their uniqueness.

Ultimately, our connection with nature is simply about *being*, being human in a more-than-human world, slowing down to the rhythm of the landscape, and quieting the chatter. It requires radical respect and appreciation for all that is, and it requires humbleness as I notice that I am merely one small being within Spirit's vast community of living beings. Feeling part of the natural world requires that we step outside of our homes and offices and take in the air and sky, that we be with the trees, flowers, and stars without distraction. It requires that as we walk down the street, we begin to truly enjoy our Earth relations and see how Spirit lives in all of creation.

When you finish reading this article, go outside, take a deep breath, and slowly look around at all there is. As you notice Tree, Ant, Bluebird, and Squirrel, notice who is noticing you. There is nothing to do. Just take note of

the aliveness around you—and perhaps the love coursing through your veins.

I have learned to appreciate the way that Spirit expresses divinity in all of God's creatures and I feel the love in my heart. I take one more look at the lake, hold my hand up to the sun, and express my deep gratitude to God and to the spirit of the lake ... to the spirit of the land and the animals and for a wonderful week on the lake. Tears stream down my face as I say good-bye to my relations. (From my journal, 2007) ■

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