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Walking with the book of nature

A workshop that helps us “read” the sacred text of nature

By Andrea Prazmowski

In a world focused on “doing” and “achieving,” this workshop invites participants to come and sit under a tree and simply be with God.

Many theologians consider nature to be another of the sacred texts offered to us to reveal the Word of God and guide us in our relationships with our Creator, with each other, and with all of creation. Making time to slow down and be present to the gifts of nature helps us “read” this sacred text and cultivate a deeper relationship

with the more-than-human world—a relationship of presence and reciprocity.

Ideally, this workshop takes place outdoors. The workshop is intended for six to 25 people. For a larger group you may need a co-facilitator and make two circles during circle-sharing.

Recommended time: 90 minutes

PREPARATION

Scout out a location: a quiet green-space with a number of trees, a forested area with trails, or a place with gardens and pathways. There should be space for the whole group to gather in a circle and room for people to spread out for solo reflection. It’s best if you find a location with washroom facilities.

Research any concerns about the area (e.g., poison ivy, ticks) and take the necessary precautions. You might consult a local naturalists club or hiking group. Don't let these potential challenges dissuade you from meeting outside—simply be aware and be prepared.

Remind participants to dress appropriately, and plan to go ahead rain or shine, as long as conditions are not severe. In case of rain you will need to make sure that the printed materials are also suitably attired.

MATERIALS

- copies of *More Voices* OR copies of the hymn “O Beautiful Gaia”
- prepared “invitations” and materials for your chosen reflection stations (see descriptions below)
- camp stools or blankets. Ask participants to bring some and bring extra yourself for those who forget.
- insect repellent

WELCOME (5 mins)

Begin by acknowledging the territory where you gather and the traditional peoples of the land.

Inform the group that the workshop is 90 minutes long and where the washrooms are located.

Opening prayer:

Creator and Life-giver, Maker of every element and cell, each drop of water and every breath of air. All was created, and all was pronounced to be “good”—sun and moon, land and waters, the flyers and crawlers, the swimmers, the four-legged and the two-legged.

We gather today as one family in creation—not simply one human family, but one Earth community—interwoven, interdependent, all in relationship with you. As we reflect upon and seek to deepen our relationship with all life, may we be brought closer to you.

Amen.

GETTING STARTED (10 mins)

Invite participants to close their eyes and go on a memory journey:

“Bring to mind a tree that has been

significant to you, that you felt connected to in some way. This tree may have been in your life for years; it may be one you encountered only briefly. Explore your memory of it. If no tree comes to mind, then think of another plant or a specific place in nature that has been important to you.

“Now, in your mind’s eye, see that memory as clearly as possible. Picture what season it is. Fill in details as much as you can, like colours, sounds, and textures. How did you interact with that tree or that place? Picture yourself there now. Recall the feeling you associate with those images and that memory...and pause there...And then, when you are ready, open your eyes.”

Invite participants to pair up and share their memories. The first person should speak for about a minute, uninterrupted, and the second listen with undivided attention. Then switch. Ask them to listen carefully to the other person’s story and notice phrases that stand out.

Come into a circle and invite people to share a phrase or short sentence from their partner’s story that particularly touched them. You’re not asking for a retelling, but simply a few words that lingered in the listener’s memory.

—Adapted from M. Amos Clifford, Founder, Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs

GOING DEEPER (10 mins)

Guided meditation

This meditation is meant to bring participants into the present moment so that they can visualize themselves connected to both earth and heavens. Guide this at a slow, measured pace, leaving pauses between phrases.

“Stand in a way that is comfortable. If it is not comfortable to stand for 10 minutes, feel free to sit, with your feet firmly on the ground. I invite you to close your eyes for the duration of this meditation.

“First, reach your arms overhead and gently stretch them up to the sky. Now let your hands rest gently at your sides. Next, feel your feet firmly on the ground, and feel the ground supporting you and holding you.

“Now, breathe a few slow, deep breaths at your own pace. Notice where you can feel your breath moving in and out. Notice where there is movement of muscle and bones that goes along with inhaling and exhaling. Just watch your breath for another minute, without the need to change anything.

“Next, bring your attention to your feet and the earth beneath your feet. Imagine there are roots growing from the bottoms of your feet, reaching down into the earth. Reaching through soil, moving around rocks and boulders. Reaching deep into the earth to seek out the nutrients and good energy of the earth.

“Imagine those roots weaving in and among the rich life of the soil, touching other roots, moving past underground waters, drawing the energy back up your roots. Picture the gifts of the earth travelling back up those roots to your feet, connecting your body with earth’s gifts.

“Now, bring your attention to the air and the skies above, to the heavens, to the place of sunlight and moonlight and starlight...of winds and rain and the shifting shapes of clouds. Picture the gifts of the sky as they fall gently upon you and the earth. Feel the sun and breeze. Breathe in that life-giving breath...and exhale.

“Like a tree, imagine that your body is a bridge between earth and sun... between heavens and earth. Picture the gifts of earth and the gifts of sky meeting and joining within you, pulsing their energies with each heartbeat.

“Within you the gifts of earth and sky meet and flow. Within every being the energies of earth and sky meet and flow. Within all life, the energies of earth and sky meet and flow.

“Now rest in that image for another few breaths...and when you are ready, open your eyes.”

REFLECTION AND

EXPLORATION (30–40 mins)

Choose from the invitations below. Set up three to four stations for individual reflection OR choose two to three options for the whole group to do at the same time. For the group

reflections, simply read out the invitation and invite people to spread out to find a place for their reflection, and then call them back after 15–20 minutes and offer the next invitation.

If you set up stations, try to set them far enough apart to provide a sense of privacy while people reflect. For each station, set up a table, stool, or blanket with copies of the invitation and the materials.

Option 1: Postcard to a tree

Materials: card stock paper (postcard sized), pens, coloured markers or pencils, a basket

Write a postcard to the tree, plant, or place you thought about at the beginning of the workshop. What would you like to say to that tree/plant/place? You might choose to decorate the front of the postcard in some way.

When you're finished, you may decide to leave the card in the basket for others to read. If there are completed postcards when you arrive, compose your own before reading what others have written.

Option 2: Gratitude mandala

Wander for a few minutes and gather a selection of found items. Then find a place to compose them into any arrangement you wish—perhaps in the form of a circle, but feel free to choose whatever shape you wish. No need to rush; take time with each item and notice the look and shape, the feel and scent. As you build your mandala, reflect on what gifts the more-than-human world offers you, and let this act of creation become a prayer. Leave your creation in place for any being who might pass by.

Option 3: Breathe with a tree

While we exhale carbon dioxide and breathe deeply, the trees exhale oxygen and inhale carbon dioxide. Find a tree nearby, stand with it, perhaps touching the tree or leaning upon it, and take the time to breathe together with this tree. Continue for up to 10 minutes.

Option 4: Getting acquainted

Materials: paper and pencils

Find a tree or a plant that calls to you, and simply “make its acquaintance.” Take 10–15 minutes to observe and listen. Sometimes it is easier to really see something when we take time to draw it; help yourself to paper and pencils if you would like to observe in this way. Notice the details. What story might this tree or plant have to tell? What message or teaching might it have for you? In the spirit of friendship, what can you offer in return?

Option 5: Water journey

If there is a pond, stream, or fountain, place this station there, along with some small cups and pebbles. Otherwise, provide one or more large bowls of water along with the cups and pebbles.

Take time to be with the water. Lower your hands very slowly, and notice the feel of the water against your skin. Move your hands in the water and notice the sensation. Play with the water in whatever way you choose.

Pour some water over your hands, and bless your hands for all they do. Then take a small cup and fill it with water, and slowly wander the land, offering drops of water and blessings wherever you choose.

Let the surface of the water settle, and then bring to mind a body of water you would like to bless. Drop a pebble in the water and hold that body of water in your prayers until the ripples subside.

CLOSING (20–25 mins)

Story sharing

Come together in a circle to share stories from the reflection time. First invite people to share in pairs anything they would like from their reflection time. Then come together in the full circle for sharing, passing a talking piece.

Closing song

Distribute the words to “O Beautiful Gaia.” If this hymn is not familiar, you can speak the words as a poem. Before you begin, invite people to notice the pattern of the hymn and to think of a phrase from their reflection time that would fit into the pattern (e.g., “Bird calling from treetop, O Gaia calling us home” or “Water rippling blessings, O Gaia calling us home”).

Sing or read together two verses as they were written, and then invite people to contribute a new phrase, and everyone can sing the new lines together. Continue as long as you wish, adding new verses to the song.

Closing prayer:

Creator, we thank you for all our relations—for all the gifts they offer, for the words they speak and the songs they bring, and all the ways they call us home to you.

We give thanks that we share our path with all other beings in creation, and we seek to listen humbly to their teachings and to follow them. Amen.

Andrea Prazmowski is a member of Kitchissippi United Church in Ottawa. Through Forest Therapy Ottawa, she offers wellness walks on forested trails to help deepen the connection between humans and the more-than-human world.

