Opinion
EarthBeat



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August 30, 2024

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I love seasons within the Catholic Church. They are an opportunity to bracket off time and energy to focus on a particular aspect of our Christian faith.

I can still recall when I was a Cistercian novice many years ago, my novice mistress invited me to believe I would receive on Christmas whatever grace I received during the Advent season. Somewhere along the process of faithfully praying, the prayer was answered, even if not in the way I expected.

The Season of Creation is a special season when we can bring special attention to renew our relationship with God our Creator and all of creation with the worldwide Christian family. While the Season of Creation has not (yet) been adopted officially as a liturgical season, a growing momentum across the Christian faithful has emerged to embrace this time between Sept. 1 (the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation) and October 4 (the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi), as a privileged time to experience the grace of ecological conversion through prayer and action.

As someone who has been part of the global ecumenical coordination of the Season of Creation since that committee's inception in 2015, I can attest this Season can only be Spirit-led. What else would explain how something that started as a simple website and a few Skype calls (yes, before Zoom!) has grown into a worldwide celebration celebrated in so many languages and countries. (See here a recent booklet of the Season of Creation 2024 prayer translated into 50 South Asian languages.)

We can trust if we live this time deeply we will receive a grace, perhaps of ecological conversion, for not just ourselves but our world. But it requires living with intentionality and care.

An Invitation: a Season of Creation Nature Therapy Walk

This weekly series is an invitation to help us live together the Season with care. To do so, I am going to invite you to go on a Season of Creation nature therapy walk with me.

As shared in a recent essay, I have recently undergone training as a forest therapy guide through the Association of Forest and Nature Therapy (ANFT). Inspired by the

Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, the approach of ANFT is a heart-based "Relational Forest Therapy," which focuses on rebuilding relationships with the more-than-human world as a foundation for healing people and the planet. The guiding motto is that “the forest is the therapist and the guide opens the doors."

I have found that forest therapy and contemplation have a lot of similarities. On a forest or nature therapy walk, the goal is not a traditional hike in the woods to get to a particular destination or to learn the name and genus of a tree. I love doing both, especially having worked as a park ranger (best job ever). However, the intention of the forest therapy walk is to deepen one’s relationship with the more-than-human world and in the process rediscover a part of ourselves that feels more in tune with all that is around us.

As someone committed to living the tenants of Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" and the process of ecological conversion, this practice of forest therapy has deepened my own capacity for listening to the voice of creation.

I have spent hours meditating in nature, especially when I was living in the Cistercian monastery where contemplating Creation was a part of the daily rhythm of life. However, forest therapy has provided some structure, integrated with some of my own practices of *lectio divina* (meditative reading) and contemplation, to help me deepen in my relationship with creation.

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In forest therapy we use a series of “invitations” to guide people into a deeper relationship with the more-than-human world. The beauty of invitations is that they are simple, they connect us with our senses, and they are open-ended enough to allow nature and our own inner spirit to guide us. They are also called invitations consciously, as they are not exercises or activities. One is encouraged to follow one’s own body in responding to the invitations, and to modify them as one sees fit. There is no right or wrong way to do the invitations.

This Week’s Invitation: 'Pleasures of Presence'

Over the five weeks of the Season of Creation, I will invite us to experiment with an invitation each week. These invitations will incorporate the frame of ecological conversion as well as the theme of this year’s Season of Creation: to hope and act with creation.

The first invitation in our journey together is what is called "Pleasures of Presence."

We will bring awareness to the joy of connecting with our present moment experience through our senses and the four elements, and give thanks. In a traditional forest therapy walk this is done sitting or standing for about 10 to 15 minutes while outside. For our walk together, you can do this inside or it can be done as you go about your daily routine.

The invitation is to begin bringing more attention to our physical bodies through our senses. If you do this in a 15-minute concentrated period or you find moments throughout your day when you connect with the elements, it is all wonderful. You already received an A!

There are three basic steps for this invitation: 1) bringing attention to our physical senses (touch, smell, hear, taste, see); 2) savoring when you experience pleasure; and 3) giving thanks. For the purpose of the example below, I am inviting us to specifically meditate with the elements, as part of our ecological conversion journey.

Joy and gratitude are key qualities of the heart to cultivate in this journey of hope and action, as it reminds us that God’s love is sustaining us despite whatever challenges we might be facing. Gratitude allows us to realize and express how blessed we are through others, through creation and through God. Gratefulness also helps us see how interdependent we are with all creation.



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Let’s begin. Take a moment just to connect with your breath.

Earth Notice the ground beneath your feet. What does it feel like to feel supported by the earth? What are the ways that Sister Mother Earth has and continues to support you? Give thanks if you feel called. For fun, if you imagined roots coming out of your feet and sinking down into this earth, what might they encounter? Say hello to all of those creatures.

Air What sensations do you feel on your skin? Hold your hands out and feel the air running through your fingers. I wonder what that feels like? If you are outside, perhaps bring your attention to what smells are present. What is it like to tilt your head back — can you catch any scent of the breeze? What would our lives be like without Sister Air? Can we give thanks for how God intimately sustains us with our breath, in every moment?

Fire I wonder where you can notice how the element of fire is sustaining you right now. Perhaps the energy fueling your computer. Or the sunshine powering the process of photosynthesis of all the plants. If you are reflecting on this in daily life, as you cook or heat up food, notice the fire needed to make your meal. Notice any smells present. As you eat the food and feel it digesting in your body, offer thanks for the element of fire.

Water Imagine the number of times today you have interacted with water. If you drink a glass of water, notice the feeling as it goes down your throat. What does it taste like? Where did it come from? When you wash your hands today, take a moment to actually feel the sensation of the water on your skin. Notice any pleasurable sensation of this gift of water. Offer thanks to Sister Water if you feel called.

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As we enter this beautiful Season of Creation, can you spend a few minutes each day praying with creation through this invitation? Whether every time you brush your teeth or you feel the earth beneath you, see if you can shift your attention, even for a moment, to experience how creation is holding you, inviting you to rest and give thanks.

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