

Earth Hope: A Franciscan education ministry

Rich Heffern | Dec. 17, 2010 Eco Catholic

Earth Hope is another project sponsored, developed and sustained by U.S. women religious. Earth Hope director Franciscan Sr. Marya Grathwohl introduces us to Earth Hope.

“Does hope ever feel small to you?” I scan almost 20 pairs of eyes looking out at me through food tray slots, narrow openings in metal cell doors. I am facing two tiers of those doors. Behind them, men are kneeling on the floors of their solitary confinement cells. The open slots enable them to see and hear me. A few eyes blink. I think I catch some nods. I swallow, take a deep breath.

It is midafternoon. All day I’d been talking with groups of prisoners, visiting six different cell blocks. In each block the officer/program director introduces me as the founder of Earth Hope and sponsor of the



popular Earth Hope Cosmology class, held every week in the jail.

Encircled by the first group of inmates, I catch the merest flicker of a response when they hear the word hope. I immediately abandon my prepared outline and plunge into talking about hope. I ask them to think about other things that started out very small and eventually became huge. Like the Universe. I quote my friend, Drew Dellinger: “In the beginning, the Universe was tinier than a tear, more minuscule than a molecule.” Does hope ever feel that small in your life?” I ask.

Muscular young men laden with tattoos nod slowly. Some grimace. I engage them in telling the miraculous story of the expanding Universe. “So, split seconds after that small beginning, then what happened?” They know more than I’d expected. They have questions, “How does this fit with the Bible? What do you believe? Can you help me share this story with my daughter? She could use some hope.” As I turn to go, they stand, and clap and clap and clap.

How did an Earth Hope program get into a California county jail and Rikers Island Jail, in New York? In August 2006, Cece Gannon participated as an adult moderator in Camp Earth Hope, a retreat for high school students based on the Universe Story and held at San Benito Monastery in Dayton, Wyo.. An educator, therapist

and long time volunteer in California's Sonoma County jail, she grasped the healing and liberating potential of the Universe story for prisoners. Together we designed a 13 week syllabus. Each class included listening to world music, guided imagery, study of a era of the Story, personal reflection and collaborative work on art panels that would depict that era.

Within weeks of the first class the program is at capacity. Cece asks for feedback. She gets statements like: "I come because for two hours I don't feel locked up ... I'm in this class because I'm learning good stuff about myself .. It makes me think I can do something different and good with my life." Two years later when Sr. Mary Nerney, CND, Rikers Island volunteer and counselor, learned about the program, she launched it there for women.

I thank the men in solitary for their attention. I wish them well. They reach their hands through the food tray slots and clap.

Initiated in 1999 by me, Franciscan Sr. Marya Grathwohl, Earth Hope programs inspire people to envision and humbly participate in a flourishing planet and just, compassionate human communities. We offer retreats, camping experiences in Wyoming and Montana, and workshops. We educate for transition from fossil fuel dependency to resilient local community.

Earth Hope collaborates with Rim Country Land Institute in Montana to provide prairie programs that help connect youth with the wonders of wild nature. Fourth graders sit in circles to listen to the prairie: I hear wind; I hear a meadowlark; I hear silence.

Invariably they are fascinated by holes in the ground: who made them? Then they examine tracks, bones and other evidence to try to find out. Some learn to face fear. Of cactus: "Look at me, teacher! I can walk out on the prairie by myself now." Of a mountain lion: there are tracks by a small waterhole. The naturalist talks about how to behave in lion country. The lion shows itself as the bus of children is leaving. "I realized I was lucky to get to see it and not be frightened," the boy wrote of his experience.

During the annual Earth Hope retreat for adults or private retreats scheduled at the convenience of participants, people count the stars. If they can; they observe how mountain wildflowers grow; study the birds of the air; hear the divine voice in a gentle breeze in cottonwood trees by the Little Tongue River; learn the story of life's emergence by dating rocks in the Big Horn Mountains; contemplate the Universe as sacred scripture; recapture passionate love for Earth and Earth community.

To learn more or to contact us, please visit www.earth-hope.org [1].

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